

The Phoenix Command

by Ferenc

The Second War is in a stalemate. After drastic reforms, the Ministry has only just managed to keep pace with the Dark Lord's followers.

Scrimgeour is still firmly in the Ministry's chief seat, yet an unrelenting obsession and almost unlimited authority have transformed him into a relentless tyrant.

Against a background of Wizarding society's slow decent into anarchy, small bands of Aurors try to stop the flood of Death Eaters and their vile allies. One such band of Aurors —the Order of the Phoenix commanded by Harry Potter— is sent on a confidential mission as the armies of the Ministry and Lord Voldemort meet...

Up the Hill

Chapter 1 of 6

The Second War is in a stalemate. After drastic reforms, the Ministry has only just managed to keep pace with the Dark Lord's followers.

Scrimgeour is still firmly in the Ministry's chief seat, yet an unrelenting obsession and almost unlimited authority have transformed him into a relentless tyrant.

Against a background of Wizarding society's slow decent into anarchy, small bands of Aurors try to stop the flood of Death Eaters and their vile allies. One such band of Aurors —the Order of the Phoenix commanded by Harry Potter— is sent on a confidential mission as the armies of the Ministry and Lord Voldemort meet...

Chapter one: Up the Hill

Rubble and carnage hid the ground from Harry's sight. He tried to ignore the corpses littering the soft green underground. He was deafened by screams, blinded by red and green flashes of light. Despite the cold, sweat stung his eyes. His muscles burned, and his body ached.

Blood and mud flecked his long black robes. And now two more of the loathsome hooded creatures were moving in on him with murder in their eyes. One was holding his wand high, the other low. They were working together well. In almost perfect unison they waved their wands to curse him. Pure instinct immediately took over; Harry nimbly retreated a pace, dropped into a half crouch and lunged forward, dodging both curses. With a swift flick of his wand, he cast a jinx; the first hooded figure went down. The other, now recognizing his opponent, ripped off his mask and tried to Apparate away. A second later he was lying on the ground, a stupefied expression on his face.

Glancing down the hill, Harry could make out his fellow Order of the Phoenix members, embroiled in the greater fight on the plain below. Both sides had formed a line and were peppering each other with spells from a distance. Harry swiftly wondered if the defending creatures would lose their patience and rush down to fight the Aurors one-on-one.

A grin began to spread across his face. He raised his wand and returned to the dueling.

Hermione looked up and saw Harry on the hill above, not far from the first buildings of the small village, savagely attacking a group of defenders, his wand ablaze with spells.

She cursed his bloody impatience.

But for the moment he would have to look after himself. The Order had some serious resistance to overcome before they could get to him.

Here in the boiling cauldron of the main battlefield, bloody conflict stretched out on either side. Aurors on her left shot spells at the nearly invisible defenders of the small village; some had found cover behind fallen trees, others just kept moving. The cacophonous, roaring din was endless; the echoes of spells, jinxes and curses rebounded everywhere. For a fleeting moment she thought she saw Draco's slick blonde hair, but her vision was blurred by another bright green spell before she could make sure. She almost shouted in frustration as an Auror not two feet away from her took a green flash right in the chest. They could not keep this up much longer. The Death Eaters were casting spell after spell from their secure positions.

Hermione looked around for instructions, but she heard Ron's familiar voice before she could see him.

'Up the hill! Pair up!' Ron roared, 'Luna, Neville, take the rear! Ready? Run as fast as you can!'

In pairs of two, the Order made their way up the hill.

A brief hiatus in the dueling allowed Harry to check again on the progress of his friends. They were climbing and stumbling towards him about halfway up the hill.

He turned back and surveyed the massive concrete-walled building topping the rise. In better times it had been a small but wealthy bank, proudly overlooking the rest of the village. There was a way to go before they reached its massive wooden door, and several score more of the enemy to overcome. Filling his lungs with frigid air, he felt again the intensity of life that came when death was this close.

Hermione arrived, panting, the rest of the Order close behind. 'Took your time,' Harry commented dryly. 'Thought I'd have to storm the place alone.'

Ron, who was walking just behind Hermione, jabbed a thumb at the chaos below. 'Weren't keen on letting us through.'

Luna, Neville, Ginny and Draco joined them too. Stumbling and out of breath, they leaned on their knees. Draco had lost all pretence of elegance; he must have fallen a few times because his robes were covered with mud, and he looked extremely annoyed. The rest of the Order members formed a defensive ring around their officers. Noticing Neville had taken a pernicious-looking head wound, Luna conjured a field dressing with her wand and went to staunch the blood.

'What now, Harry?' Ron asked gruffly.

'What do you think, longarse? A break to pick flowers?' Draco sneered while glaring at him. 'We get up there and do our job.'

'How?'

Luna, having finished with Neville, was staring at the leaden sky, her hand cupped above her eyes.

'Frontal assault,' Harry replied before Draco could answer. He penetrated Malfoy's cold, grey eyes with his bright green ones. 'You have a better plan?'

'We could use brooms.'

'Not an option,' Harry replied.

'Even so, it's open ground, uphill. We'll have casualties.'

'And since when do you care, Malfoy?' Ron asked sarcastically.

'Draco has a point,' Harry said. 'Luna, what's your opinion?'

'Hmmm?' Her attention remained fixed on the heavy clouds.

'*Wake up*, Luna! I said...'

'See that?' She pointed skyward.

A black dot was descending through the gloom. No details were obvious from this distance, but they all guessed what it was.

'That's why we can't use brooms,' Harry remarked. 'Still, if it comes this way it might come in handy.'

Hermione was doubtful. 'Maybe. You know how willful they can be. Best to take cover.'

'Where?' Draco wanted to know, scanning the naked terrain.

The dot grew in size.

'It's moving quite fast, you know,' Luna observed dreamily.

By this time the bulky body and massive serrated wings were clearly visible. There was no doubt now. Huge and ungainly, the dragon swooped over the battle still raging on the plain. Combatants froze and stared upwards. Some scattered from its shadow. It carried on heedless in an ever-sharper descent, aimed squarely at the rise where Harry and the Order were gathered.

He squinted at it. 'Can anybody make out the handler?'

They shook their heads.

The living projectile came at them unerringly. Its vast, slaverling jaws gaped, revealing rows of yellow teeth the size of Harry's glasses. Slitty green eyes flashed. A rider sat stiffly on its back, tiny compared to his charge.

Harry estimated it to be no more than three flaps of its powerful wings away.

'Too low,' Luna whispered.

Neville bellowed, '*On your bellies!*'

They all flattened. Rolling on his back, Harry had a fleeting view of grey leathery skin and enormous clawed feet passing overhead. He almost believed he could stretch and touch the thing.

Then the dragon belched a mighty gout of dazzling orange flame.

For a fraction of a second, Harry was blinded by the intensity of light. Blinking through the haze, he expected to see the dragon smash into the ground. Instead he caught sight of it soaring aloft at what seemed an impossibly acute angle. Further up the hillside, the scene was transformed. The defending Death Eaters and some attackers, ignited by the blazing suspiration, had been turned into shrieking fireballs or were already dead in smoldering heaps. Here and there, the earth itself burned and bubbled.

'Somebody should remind the dragonmasters whose side they're on,' Ron grumbled

'But this one eased our burden.' Draco nodded at the large wooden doors. They were well alight.

Harry looked a moment longer at the now quietly burning little heaps that once were men, then scrambled to his feet, clutched his wand and yelled, 'Follow me!'

They all started running behind their captain. Oddly enough, they met no resistance.

When Harry reached the smoking doors, he found them damaged enough to offer no real obstacle ... one was hanging crookedly, fit to fall. He also noticed a pole holding a charred sign bearing the crudely painted words *Death's lair*.

Ginny ran to Harry's side. She noticed the sign and swiped at it contemptuously with her wand, blasting it in a thousand small pieces.

Ron, Hermione, Neville and the others caught up with them. Harry blasted the doors open, and they poured through the opening. They found themselves in a spacious hall with a huge dome shaped roof. To the right there was a long hallway leading to the offices of the bank employees and the stairs to the second storey, the once tidy desks and separating glass walls now all smashed and broken to pieces. On his left there were three elevators, the middle one broken open halfway. Ahead and well back of the building was the huge round entrance of the bank's main vault, with a balcony of sorts on top.

Lined up in front of the vault were at least twice as many Death Eaters as Order members. They seemed to be guarding it. For a moment both groups just looked at each other, wands drawn. Then Harry gave the order to charge, favouring close combat over the long distance exchange of spells. In the intense wand-to-wand that followed, the Order's discipline proved superior. With nowhere to run, desperation fuelled the enemy, and they fought savagely, but in moments their numbers were drastically depleted. The Order's casualties were much lighter, even though the Death Eaters used their favorite killing curses with great enthusiasm. But they were weak; most curses gave no more than a small gash or, in some cases, no more than a bruise. At length, the few remaining defenders were driven back to bunch in front of the vault. Harry led the onslaught against them, shoulder to shoulder with Ginny, Ron and Neville. Finishing off the final protector, Harry spun and gazed around the hall.

They needed to get inside that vault.

'Ron! Get that damned door open!'

Ron hurried away, barking orders. Most of the Order aimed at the door and started to pound it with their spells.

In the meantime Harry walked over to one of the stunned masked bodies. Lifting the white mask, he found out why the Death Eater's curses had so little effect. These dark wizards were no more than teens; some could not have been more than fourteen years old. And with the dissipating magic at that... It was almost admirable they put up any fight at all.

Harry looked up, just in time to see the vault's massive steel door give with a loud report and explode inwards.

A trio of defenders were waiting for them. One leapt forward, killing the Order member closest to the vault's entrance. Draco, who stood right behind him, decapitated the creature with a well placed Sectumsempra curse. He immediately flicked his wand at the other defender, but the Death Eater blocked the jinx and raised his wand for another attempt. There was a loud bang, and a part of the wall behind Draco exploded; but the masked defender's guard was down, and he received a killing curse right in the chest. The distraction, however, left Draco open to the third defender. He pointed his wand straight at the youngest Malfoy, ready to deliver the killing curse.

A grey jinx exploded hard into the Death Eater's chest. He gave a throaty rasp, dropped his wand and fell headlong.

Draco's nod was all Ron could expect in the way of thanks. Harry looked down at the fallen Order member. He was lying on his back; eyes spread wide open, a surprised expression on his young face. Kneeling next to the body, Harry took the wand from the still-warm left hand and ripped the red Phoenix emblem from the body's robes. Rising, he waved his wand, and the body vanished in a puff of black smoke. Harry nodded to the other Order members while putting the wand and torn Phoenix emblem in an inside pocket of his robes. The others, who had been watching solemnly, started moving again. The often-performed little ceremony had taken less than five seconds.

The Order flowed into the large vault. Before them was an open central staircase. Left and right stood rows of closets, all empty. Harry got an eerie feeling, as if he had been here before. It reminded him of the Department of Mysteries, so many years ago.

Only this time he knew what he was doing.

'Ron! Take half the Order and clear this floor,' Harry ordered. 'The rest with me!'

Ron's troopers spread right and left. Harry led his party up the stairs, to the upper level. They slew another pair of defenders before Harry turned his attention to this floor's layout. They were on a long landing with a number of doors. Most were open, revealing apparently empty rooms. He sent Draco and Seamus to search them. They soon reappeared, shaking their heads. At the furthest end of the landing was the only closed door. They approached stealthily and positioned themselves outside. Sounds of combat from the ground floor were already dying down. Shortly, the only noises were the distant, muffled shouts of the battle on the plain and the stifled panting of the members of the Order catching their breath as they clustered on the landing.

Harry glanced from Seamus to Draco, then nodded for Hermione to act. She pointed her wand at the door and whispered *Alohomora*. It sprang open with a loud click, and they threw themselves in, wands raised.

A Death Eater hefting an unusually long wand confronted them. He went down under manifold jinxes before doing any harm.

The room was far larger than they expected. At its far end stood two more figures, shielding something. Both men unmasked, one was unknown to Harry. The other was Antonin Dolohov.

He came forward, his wand raised in front of him. *Petrificus Totalis*, Harry thought while waving his wand at the unknown Death Eater. His arms and legs snapped together. The Order spread out to engage one of The Dark Lord's most feared Death Eaters.

'No!' Hermione yelled. '*Mine*!'

Harry understood. 'Leave them!' he barked.

The rest of the Order lowered their wands.

Dolohov and Hermione squared up. For a moment they stood silently, listening to their fervent heartbeats, regarding each other with expressions of vehement loathing.

Then the air rang to the peal of their colliding spells.

Hermione set to the duel with precision and determination, blocking every jinx, curse and enchantment her opponent delivered. Minutes passed before Hermione took the offensive. 'EXPPELLIARMUS!' she yelled. Dolohov's wand went flying her way, and Hermione caught it with a fluidity born of long experience. She aimed Dolohov's own wand straight at his heart.

'Now you'll pay', she said in a hoarse whisper only he could hear.

Suddenly Dolohov's eyes widened with recollection.

'You! You're that girl who...'

'Avada Kedavra!'

Glaring over the trembling wand, Hermione saw her foe sink to his knees, topple forward and remain motionless. The curse was not powerful enough to kill him, not with the dissipating magic. But Antonin Dolohov would be nothing more than a vegetable from now on.

Hermione's entire body trembled. Ginny and Neville hurried over to assist her.

Harry looked at what the last two Death Eaters were so desperately guarding.

He was facing some sort of altar. Like others he'd seen in Muggle churches, the altar was quite plain. It was nothing but a high table covered by a white cloth, embroidered with a black Dark Mark, and with lead candleholders on each end.

But it was the object at the front of the table that interested him. A cylinder, perhaps as long as his forearm and the size of his fist in circumference. It was copper-coloured and inscribed with fading runic symbols. Harry looked over to Hermione. She was in no state to put her four years of Ancient Runes studies into practice. She would have to take a look at it later.

Ginny and Neville came to him. They stared at the cylinder.

Ginny said, 'Is that it, Harry?'

'Yes, it fits his description.'

'Hardly looks worth the cost of so many lives,' Neville remarked.

Harry reached for the cylinder and examined it briefly before slipping it into his belt, hidden beneath his robes. 'I'm just a humble captain. Naturally, our honoured leader didn't explain the details to one so lowly,' Harry said cynically.

'What do we do with this one?' Draco asked, pointing at the still petrified Death Eater.

'Collect the wands and leave him,' Harry ordered, his left hand gently stroking the cylinder hidden beneath his robes. 'He can tell his precious lord exactly who it was that took this from him.'

Why He Fights

Chapter 2 of 6

The Second War is in a stalemate. After drastic reforms, the Ministry has only just managed to keep pace with the Dark Lord's followers.

Scrimgeour is still firmly in the Ministry's chief seat, yet an unrelenting obsession and almost unlimited authority have transformed him into a relentless tyrant.

Against a background of Wizarding society's slow decent into anarchy, small bands of Aurors try to stop the flood of Death Eaters and their vile allies. One such band of Aurors —the Order of the Phoenix commanded by Harry Potter— is sent on a confidential mission as the armies of the Ministry and Lord Voldemort meet...

Chapter two: Why He Fights

Harry led his fellow Phoenix members from the room, leaving Dolohov and the petrified Death Eater behind. Ron was waiting at the foot of the stairs.

'Find it?' he asked eagerly.

Nodding, Harry slapped the cylinder in his belt. 'Now let's get out of here'. Everybody headed for the destroyed vaults exit... all but one.

'So we're just leaving?' Draco asked with a disgusted voice.

Turning slowly, Harry looked at him. 'You've got a problem with that?'

'Yes. Yes, I do. Many of the Death Eaters in this building are not dead yet.'

'Many of those Death Eaters are little more than children. There has been enough killing for today. We've got what we came for.'

Malfoy opened his mouth to say something, but Harry was not in a mood to argue and turned away, striding purposefully out of the building. With a furious look, Draco followed, already brewing on Harry's display of leniency. Quite unlike the other Auror divisions, the Order of the Phoenix had a reputation for being all "noble" and "decent". To Draco it was a display of cowardice. 'We ought to murder the bloody lot of them,' he muttered before hurrying outside to catch up with the others.

They were crowded around Luna. As usual, she was doubling as the Order's Healer, and as Draco arrived she was fixing a deep gash on Ginny's shoulder.

Harry was just asking for a casualty report; most were slightly wounded; only Edgecombe, a young member who had been slain in front of the vault, had died.

There was a moment of silence.

'Things are quieter below,' Ron reported, referring to the fight on the plain. 'It went our way.'

'Really?' Harrys sounded mildly surprised, but he seemed ultimately uninterested.

Luna noticed Draco had a small neck wound. 'Want me to look at that?'

'It's nothing. Later.' To Harry, he added stiffly, 'Shouldn't we be moving?'

'Indeed. Hermione, make sure you have all the Death Eaters' wands. Try not to leave any traces for the Muggles.'

He turned to the four Order members hanging around listening. 'We'll get back to the Thestrals and get ready to fly back to the Ministry.'

They pulled long faces.

'It'll be nightfall soon,' Draco remarked.

'What of it? We can still fly, can't we? Unless, of course, you're frightened of the dark.'

Harry walked over to Ron, hoping that this mission would be over soon and he'd be rid of Malfoy. But before he could say anything a chorus of sound arose, a combination of roars and twittering screeches. It came from the other side of the concrete building. Expecting the worst, Harry set off in that direction. Draco (obviously wanting to prove he was not afraid) and Ron trailed him. Hermione stayed with Luna and the others.

On to the other side of the building, he saw what had made the faintly familiar sound.

'They look spooked,' Ron remarked. 'They shouldn't be cooped up like this. It's just not right.'

Walking over to a massive steel fence, the nearest beast was no more than a wand's length away. Twice the height of a man, it stood rampant, weight borne by powerful back legs, taloned feet half buried in the earth. The chest of its massive body swelled, the brown and grey feathers bristling. Its eagle-like head moved in a jerky, convulsive fashion, and the curved beak clattered nervously. The enormous eyes, jet-black orbs against startlingly white surroundings, were never still. Its ears were pricked and quiveringly alert.

It was obviously agitated, yet its erect pose still maintained a curious nobility.

The herd beyond, numbering upwards of a hundred, was mostly on all fours, backs arched. But here and there pairs stood upright, boxing at each other with spindly arms, wickedly sharp claws extended. Their long, curly tails swished rhythmically. A gust of wind brought with it the fetid odour of the hippogriffs' dung.

'If only Hagrid could see this...' Harry thought.

Ron cleared his throat. 'Why do you reckon they would keep all those hippogriffs here? It must have been one hell of a job catching them all and bringing them out here.'

'I don't know,' Harry confessed. 'But all these creatures here in the middle of nowhere, the cylinder *and* a legion of Death Eaters to guard it; I bet it was something big.'

'All I know,' Draco interjected, 'is that yonder hippogriffs smell bad but taste good.'

'You want to *eat* them?' Ron asked incredulously. 'Who asked you anyway, you bloody carnivore?'

Draco bridled and was about to retaliate.

'Shut up, both of you!' Harry snapped. He was too tired for this. 'Just get rid of those fences and set them free. Remember to make a bow first, and Draco, if you kill one of them you will regret it!'

He moved on. Ron and Draco exchanged murderous glances before they both made a deep bow towards the Hippogriffs.

Getting back to the ruined bank's doors, Harry turned his attention to the scene on the plain. The fighting had stopped, the defenders either dead, unconscious or routed.

The Magical Catastrophe Reversal Department was going to have one hell of a job covering this up. If they would bother.

'It's a bonus to win the battle,' Neville observed, 'seeing as it was only a diversion.'

'They were young, inexperienced and weak. Only a handful of them were real Death Eaters,' Harry said. 'We expected to win. But no loose talk of diversions, not outside the Order. It wouldn't do to let the Aurors know the fight was set up to cover our task.'

Automatically his hand went to the cylinder.

Down below, some Aurors were moving among their fallen comrades, stripping the robes of their emblems and collecting the wands just like Harry had done earlier. Here and there he could see small clouds of black smoke almost immediately carried away by the wind.

In the gathering twilight it was growing much colder. A stinging breeze whipped at Harry's face. He looked out beyond the battlefield to the farther plains, and the more remote, undulating tree-topped hills. It would have been familiar to his forebears. Save for the ever increasing fog.

As he had a thousand times before, Harry silently cursed the Dementors and the Death Eaters for destroying the magic. Their pillaging and murdering that upset the flow of earth energies which fed the magical powers. Most wizards and witches couldn't even Apparate anymore! Even though the Death Eaters themselves were affected as well they continued to destroy almost everything in their path.

Harry thought about the last time he'd seen a pair of Dementors. He had been on his way to a Ministry meeting at the Department of Mysteries. While he was walking through London, he had taken a shortcut through a small and dirty back alley. His attention was drawn to a large abandoned warehouse because there had been waterfalls of what seemed to be steam pouring from the windows. There he had witnessed a horrible scene. Two Dementors, just floating next to each other, quantities of fog hissing out of their cloaked bodies. Their foul breathing only barely audible. And there had been no cold, no sudden terrible memories or the feeling you could never be cheerful again. The Dementors had not even paid any attention to him. They just continued floating there.

With a shock Harry had realized they were breeding.

Because of the fog Dementors produced while breeding, less and less sunlight reached the ground. It had become colder, and the seasons seemed to have forgotten when to change. All the magic must be intertwined or something, for Harry had heard it was much the same in the greater part of Europe.

He stopped thinking of Death Eaters and Dementors for the moment. Instead, he looked at Ron and Hermione, who were in quiet conversation, standing very close to each other. Ron, who had not witnessed Hermione's duel with Dolohov, tried to cheer her up.

Then Draco decided it was time to break in on their little chat.

'How did it feel, Granger? Killing a man with his own wand hardly sounds noble to me.'

He smirked at her. 'Why were you so keen on fighting him, anyway?' He looked at her enquiringly, his eyes staring menacingly.

Hermione did not even look at him. 'Just bugger off, Malfoy. Go bother somebody else with your attention.'

'Was it something he did to you?' Malfoy pushed her further, narrowing his eyes slightly.

'Shut it. Or I will hex you.'

'Tut tut, feeling insubordinate, Granger? Must I remind you that I am not only a senior ministry official, whom you are bound to obey, but that I am also your superior officer in the Order?'

Hermione gave him a threatening look. 'You're only here because Scrimgeour appointed you. As soon as this mission is over you can go back to that stink hole you came from.'

'Be that as it may,' Malfoy replied, 'you will answer my question. Tell me what happened.'

Ron, sitting next to Hermione with bright red ears and pulsating veins, could no longer contain himself.

'What about you, Malfoy?' he spat. 'Your need to prove yourself must be strong indeed! How did it feel? Killing of your old Death Sucking buddies?'

'I don't need to prove anything,' Draco replied, his voice now cold and distant, but his cheeks turned slightly scarlet.

'Really? With all your fellow house members siding with Voldemort (Draco flinched), and you the only Slytherin in the Order? I think you have much to prove.'

Draco's voice was barely a whisper. 'What's your meaning?'

'I just wonder why we need *your* sort in our ranks.'

I should stop this, Harry thought, but it's been building too long. Maybe its time they jinx it out of each other.

'I've earned my position within the Ministry.' Draco pointed at the senior markings on his shoulder. 'I was good enough for that.'

Ron slowly drew his wand.

'*Were* you?' he taunted.

Luna, Seamus and Ginny and several other Order members arrived, drawn by the fuss.

More than one of the members wore a gleeful expression at the prospect of a duel between officers... or in anticipation of Draco losing it.

Insults were now being openly traded, most of them concerning their parentage. To rebut a particular point, Draco gripped a handful of Ron's long red hair, giving it a forceful tug and hissing, 'Say that again, you filthy, sniveling blood traitor.'

Words were about to give way to action. They squared up, wands raised. Hermione looked scared, but did not intervene.

An Order member elbowed through the scrum. 'Captain! *Captain!*'

The interruption wasn't appreciated by the onlookers. There were disappointed groans.

Harry sighed. 'What is it?'

'We've found something you should see.'

'Can't it wait?'

'I don't think so, Captain. Looks important.'

'All right, leave it, you two.'

Draco and Ron didn't move.

'Enough I said!' He raised his voice menacingly. Ron lowered his wand and backed off, reluctant and still radiating hatred. Malfoy gave a mock flick with his wand before doing the same.

Eyeing Draco a moment longer, Harry turned to the Order member. 'This better be good'.

Overdue

Chapter 3 of 6

The Second War is in a stalemate. After drastic reforms, the Ministry has only just managed to keep pace with the Dark Lord's followers.

Scrimgeour is still firmly in the Ministry's chief seat, yet an unrelenting obsession and almost unlimited authority have transformed him into a relentless tyrant.

Against a background of Wizarding society's slow decent into anarchy, small bands of Aurors try to stop the flood of Death Eaters and their vile allies. One such band of Aurors —the Order of the Phoenix commanded by Harry Potter— is sent on a confidential mission as the armies of the Ministry and Lord Voldemort meet...

Bloomer, the Order member that told Harry he had found something, was now guiding Harry back to the bank. Hermione, Ron, Luna and Draco, their curiosity whetted, tagged along behind. Near the Hippogriff's pen he took a sharp left. Once past the bank, they came to a modest house, its left wall blasted completely away.

Inside, Harry found the Creevey brothers, the tips of their wands alight. Dennis was inspecting the contents of a hessian sack. Colin was on his knees and staring down through a lifted trapdoor.

Harry crouched to look at the bag, the others gathering around him. It was filled with what seemed like sand.

'Floo powder,' Hermione said in a hushed tone.

Since Apparition had become all but impossible, the price of Floo powder had increased a tenfold. 'Think of its value!'

'And look here, Harry.' Dennis pointed at the trapdoor.

'What's that? *Lumos!*'

The glow showed a small cellar, just deep enough to stand without bending. Two more sacks lay on its stone floor next to a large number of dusty bottles.

Ron gave a low, appreciative whistle.

'Firewhisky!'

'What say we sample it?' Dennis suggested hopefully.

Ron added his own petition. 'It wouldn't hurt, mate. Don't we deserve that much after pulling off this mission?'

'I don't know...'

Luna looked pensive, but held her tongue.

Hermione eyed the cylinder in Harry's belt and injected a note of caution. 'It wouldn't be wise to keep the Minister waiting too long.'

Harry did not seem to hear. He pulled a bottle of the prime quality liquor, opened the cork with a tap of his wand and took a small sip.

'This Floo powder is worth a small fortune in gold and influence. Think how it would swell Scrimgeour's coffers.'

'Exactly,' Dennis eagerly concurred. 'Look at it from his point of view. Our mission was successfully accomplished, we've achieved victory in battle, and now we've gotten a king's ransom of Floo powder to boot. He'll probably promote you!'

'Dwell on this, Potter,' Draco said, eying the bottles thirstily. 'Once delivered into the Minister's hands, how much of it are we ever likely to see?'

'We, Malfoy?' Harry asked, looking at Draco skeptically. 'Glad to see you're finally coming into the team spirit!'

But Draco's argument had occurred to Harry as well.

'What he doesn't know won't hurt him,' he decided, 'and starting out an hour or two later won't make that much difference. And when he sees what we've brought, even Scrimgeour's going to be satisfied.'

Some endure frustration of their will with grace and forbearance. Others see obstacles in the path of their success as intolerable burdens. The former embody admirable stoicism. The latter are dangerous.

Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour firmly belonged to the second category. And he was growing impatient.

The Aurors he had entrusted with the sacred mission, the Order of the Phoenix, had yet to return. He knew the fight was over and that it went in his favour, but they had not brought him the prize he was after.

When they came, he would have them skinned alive. If they had failed in their task he would inflict a much worse fate.

Scrimgeour paced around the innermost of his private quarters. The chamber, deep below the ministry at London, was constructed of stone. A dozen pillars supported the distant vaulted ceiling. Just enough light was provided by a crackling fire and some torches, for Scrimgeour favoured shadows.

Wall hangings depicted complex ancient symbols. A high-backed wooden chair, ornately carved but not quite a throne, stood next to an iron brazier of glowing coals.

Two features dominated the apartment. One was a solid chunk of white marble, shaped like a long, low table or couch, standing right before the high-backed chair.

The other was a huge, magnificent mirror with an ornate gold frame. The mirror had two clawed feet, which Scrimgeour thought amusing, since back in his Auror days he was known as 'the Lion'. On top, a number of faded inscriptions could just be made out. But Scrimgeour knew them by heart. *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi*

But he did not care for the silly inscriptions. He only cared about what it had showed him these past six months.

A rap at the studded oak door broke his reverie.

'Come.'

Two Aurors herded in a prisoner at wand-point. Chained hand and foot, the man wore the remains of black robes. Around twenty years old, he was swiftly scanning the room, looking for an exit. The Aurors prodded him forward. He walked stiffly, partly due to the manacles, but mostly because of the torturing he received after his capture.

'Ah, my guest has arrived. Greetings.' His polite tone held pure mockery.

The captured Death Eater said nothing.

'Leave us,' Scrimgeour ordered. The Aurors turned and left the apartment, closing the door behind them.

Drawing his wand, Scrimgeour pointed it right at his prisoner's chest. The Death Eater looked up, fear evident in his eyes.

Savoring his captive's distress a moment longer, he looked the Death Eater straight in the eyes. Although Scrimgeour never completely mastered Legilimency, it gave him a certain pleasure to look around in other peoples minds.

'*Legilimens!*' Repeatedly, he saw images of a nice older witch, probably his mother. He sighed. As usual, no coherent thoughts became obvious. Ah, well.

'*Imperio!*'

The Death Eater had no new information to tell. Scrimgeour played with him for another half hour before he got bored and let the creature kill himself. It was amazing to see that while under the Imperius curse most wizards were still able to Apparate. So Scrimgeour made him Apparate inside a volcano. He laughed. *This*, was power.

He waved his wand at the door. It clicked open, and one of the Aurors stepped inside.

'What news of the Order?' Scrimgeour asked.

'None, Minister,' the guard replied, avoiding his gaze.

It wasn't what he wanted to hear. His pleasure in imposing the captured Death Eater's own suicide was already fading. Regal displeasure returned.

He made a silent vow that the Order's deaths would surpass their worst nightmares.

Dennis and Colin Creevey lay stretched out with their backs against a tree, sharing a bottle of Firewhisky. A couple of gnomes slowly advanced on them, attracted by the smell of alcohol. One of the gnomes got too close for Dennis' taste; he lazily gave a small flick with his wand. The gnome was blasted backwards, where it scrambled up and ran away.

'Irritating little bastards,' Colin muttered.

Dennis nodded sagely. 'Yeah, but good for target practice.'

'And stupid,' Colin added as the gnomes approached them once again.

He watched them for a while then decided to blast a handful as well.

They sat drinking, staring dumbly at the plain below them. The gnomes finally got the message and ran away.

A moment passed, and Dennis said, 'Did that really just happen?'

'What?'

'Those gnomes.'

'Gnomes? Irritating little bastards.'

'Yeah, but good for...' A light kick from a boot against his shin interrupted the discourse.

They hadn't noticed the approach of another Order member who was now standing beside them. He stooped, grunted, 'Here,' and handed over another bottle. Swaying slightly, he stumbled off again.

Nearer the remains of the house, Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny sat around a small campfire sharing their own bottle.

'I'll say it one last time,' Harry told them, mildly exasperated. He pointed to the cylinder in his lap. 'This thing was taken from a large group of Aurors by Death Eaters, who killed them all. That's the story.' His voice was growing slurred. 'Scrimgeour just wants it back.'

'But why?' Ginny wondered, taking another swig. 'After all, it's only a message carrier . . . I mean, it's only a message carrier.'

Blinking, she handed the bottle to Ron.

'We know that,' Harry replied. He waved a dismissive, lazy hand. 'Must be an important message.'

Opening another bottle, Ron commented 'I wager this Firewhisky and Floo powder was part of the Auror's charge too.'

Hermione, displaying characteristic correctness even in her present state, again tried reminding Harry of his responsibilities. 'We mustn't linger here too long, Harry! If the Minister...'

'Can't you chirrup a different song?' Harry interrupted testily. 'Mark me; Scrimgeour will welcome us with open arms. You worry overmuch, Herm.'

Hermione lapsed into moody silence. Ron offered her a bottle of the prime liquor. She shook her head. Harry accepted the alcohol and downed an ample draft.

Draco had been vacant-eyed and half drowsing under the Firewhisky's influence. Now he spoke. 'The Mudblood has a point. Incurring the Minister's wrath is never a good idea.'

'Oh, shut it, Malfoy,' retorted Harry, raising the bottle once more. 'We'll be on our way soon. You just go conjure snakes or something.'

Ginny giggled. Harry looked at her from the corner of his eyes. Maybe he should go and sit next to her?

Harry looked in the direction of the bank where most of the Order was taking their ease. Most of them were sprawled before a larger fire. Several were slumped in ungainly postures.

Harry turned back to Draco. But the scene had changed completely.

He was curled on the ground with his eyes closed. All the others were also lying on the ground. Ron was snoring loudly, his head in Hermione's lap. The fire had long been dead. He returned his gaze to the main Order; they too were sleeping, their fire also reduced to ashes.

It was the depth of night. A full panoply of stars dusted the sky. What had seemed to him no more than an instant of time had proved to be an illusion.

He should rouse everyone, organize them and issue orders for the flight back to London. And he would. Certainly he would. But he needed to rest his leaden limbs and clear the muzziness from his brain. A minute or two was all it would take. Just a minute.

His nodding head drooped, chin meeting neck. A warm stupor crept into every fiber of his being. It was so hard to keep his eyes open.

He surrendered to the dark.

The Dream

Chapter 4 of 6

The Second War is in a stalemate. After drastic reforms, the Ministry has only just managed to keep pace with the Dark Lord's followers.

Scrimgeour is still firmly in the Ministry's chief seat, yet an unrelenting obsession and almost unlimited authority have transformed him into a relentless tyrant.

Against a background of Wizarding society's slow decent into anarchy, small bands of Aurors try to stop the flood of Death Eaters and their vile allies. One such band of Aurors—the Order of the Phoenix commanded by Harry Potter—is send on a confidential mission as the armies of the Ministry and Lord Voldemort meet...

Harry opened his eyes.

The sun blazed directly overhead. He lifted a hand to shield himself from the light and, blinking, slowly rose to a standing position. The carpet of lush sward felt springy underfoot.

Before him stood a distant range of softly rolling hills. Above them, pure-white clouds drifted serenely across a sky of flawless blue. The landscape was verdant, uncorrupted. It somehow reminded Harry of Mrs. Weasley's garden.

Off to his right the view was dominated by the brim of an immense forest. On his left a shallow stream flowed down an incline before curving around a bend and out of sight.

It occurred to Harry to wonder, in an abstract sort of way, what had happened to the night. And he had no idea where the others of the Order might be. But these questions did not more than mildly stroke some small corner of his mind.

Then it seemed to him that he could hear other sounds beyond the tumbling water. Sounds resembling voices, laughter, and the faint, rhythmic pounding of a drum. Their source was either in his head or at a brook's destination.

He followed the stream, walking in it, his boots crunching on the shingle washed smooth by its endless polishing. His sloshing descent inspired rustling in the undergrowth on either side as tiny, furtive creatures darted from his path.

A pleasantly warm breeze caressed his face. The air was fresh and clean. It made him feel light-headed.

He reached the point where the rivulet turned. The voices were louder, more distinct, as he rounded the creek.

Before him was the mouth of a small valley. The stream ran on, snaking through a cluster of wooden houses. Most of them looked very unusual. Some of them had the shape of a diamond, balancing on the very tip of its end. Others were oval, and some had shapes that Harry did not even know how to name. Almost all of them seemed to be kept up by magic, like the Weasleys' house.

There were tethered Thestrals, roaming livestock, and strutting fowl.

And wizards.

Wizards, witches, hatchlings. Some carried out chores, and others simply lounged, watching, talking. In the clearing outside the diamond-shaped house, a group of young wizards sparred with wands and staffs, the beating of a hide tambour harmonizing their mock dueling.

No one paid him any particular attention as he entered the settlement. All the wizards he saw bore wands, as was only fitting for their kind, but despite this group being unknown to him, Harry didn't feel threatened. Just curious.

Someone came towards him. She strode with easy confidence and made no move for the wand hanging at her belt. He judged her to be a head shorter than himself, though her flaming crimson headdress, shot through with streaks of gold, made up for the height. Her back was straight, her figure attractive.

She showed no surprise at his presence. Indeed her expression was almost passive or at least as passive as a face so beautiful and active could be. As she neared him, she smiled openly and with warmth. He was aware of a faint stirring in his loins.

'Hello,' she said.

Reflecting on her comeliness, he did not immediately respond. When he replied, it was hesitantly. 'Hello ... yourself.'

'I don't know you.'

'Nor I you.'

She asked, 'What village are you from?'

He told her.

'It means nothing to me. But there are so many.'

Harry glanced at the unfamiliar shapes of the buildings. 'Your village isn't known to me either.' He paused, captivated by her fetching eyes, before adding, 'Aren't you wary of greeting a stranger?'

She looked puzzled. 'Should I be? Is there a dispute between our villages?'

'Not that I know of.'

She flashed her appealing, white smile again. 'Then there is no need for caution. Unless you come with evil intent.'

'No, I come in peace. But would you be as welcoming if I were a troll? Or a goblin? Or a giant of unknown allegiance?'

Her mystified look returned. 'Troll? goblin? giant? What are they?'

'You do not know of goblins?'

She shook her head.

'Or gremlins, dwarfs, elves? Any other races?'

'Other races? No.'

'Or ... Muggles?'

'I don't know what they are, but I'm sure there aren't any.'

'You mean there aren't any non-magic people?'

'I mean that your words are lost on me. You're odd.' She spoke without malice, but laughter ran across her delicate lips.

'And you speak in riddles,' he told her. 'Where are we in England that you do not know of the other races or of Muggles?'

'You must have journeyed a long way, stranger, if your land has a name I've never heard of.'

He was taken aback. 'Are you telling me you don't even know what this country is called?'

'No, I'm telling you it isn't called England. At least, not here. And I've never known another magician who spoke of us sharing it with these ... other races and ... Muggles.'

'You mean there is no war here? There are no Death Eaters or...'

She laughed. 'When was it otherwise?'

Harry furrowed his brow. 'Since before my dad was born, there has always been some dark wizard around,' he muttered. 'Or so I thought.'

'Perhaps you've walked too long in the heat,' she offered gently.

He gazed at the sun, and realization came to him. 'The heat ... No chill wind blows.'

'Why should it? This isn't the cold season.'

'And the fog,' Harry continued, ignoring her answer. 'I haven't seen the fog.'

'What fog?'

'From the Dementors, of course.'

Unexpectedly, she reached out and grasped his hand. 'Come.'

Even in his confusion he was aware that her touch was agreeably warm and soft. He allowed her to lead him.

They followed the downward path of the stream until they left the village behind. Eventually they came to a place where the land fell away, and Harry and the young woman stood on the edge of a granite cliff. Here the stream became a pool, slipping from its far lip as a waterfall, a foamy cascade that plunged to rocks far below in a greater valley. The silver thread of a river emerged from somewhere at the foot of the cliff, slicing across olive plains that stretched endlessly in all directions. Only the tremendous forest to their right curbed the ocean of grassland.

The young woman spread her arms and made an all encompassing gesture. 'There is no one else here, just us magicians,' she said.

Harry looked around himself. No dying trees, no looming slate sky. All he saw was more of the same: luxuriant foliage, an infinity of green, a thriving abundance of life.

Harry experienced a strange emotion. He could not explain why, but he had a nagging sensation that all this was somehow familiar, as though he had seen these wondrous sights and breathed deep of this unsullied air before.

'Is this ... Heaven?' He all but whispered the last word.

'Paradise?' She smiled enigmatically. 'Perhaps. If you choose to make it so.'

The alchemy of sunlight and airborne spray birthed an arcing rainbow. They silently marveled at its multicoloured splendor. And the soothing rush of water was balm to Harry's troubled spirit.

Harry opened his eyes.

Seamus was pissing into the ashes of the fire.

Harry snapped fully awake. Still muzzy from the dream, vision, or whatever it was, it took a moment for Harry to realize that the sun had risen. It was past dawn.

'Merlin's beard!' he cursed, scrambling to his feet.

He checked his belt for the cylinder, then quickly took in the scene. Hermione and Neville were unsteadily exploring wakefulness, but the rest, including the lookouts he'd posted, lounged all over the hill.

From the end of his wand, Harry exploded several purple firecrackers to wake everybody up.

Some startled from the sudden loud noise. Several came alive with wands in their hands, ready for a fight, then cowered on recognizing the source of the noise. Draco was among them, but less inclined to quail at his Commander's rage. He scowled, returning his wand to his belt with deliberate, insolent slowness.

'What ails you, Potter?' he rumbled sullenly.

'What ails me? The new day ails me, you idiot!' He jabbed a thumb skyward. 'The sun climbs and we're still here!'

'And whose fault is that?'

Harry's eyes narrowed dangerously. He moved closer to Draco, near enough to feel his fetid breath against his face.

'*What?*' He hissed.

'You blame us. Yet you're in charge.'

'You'd like to try changing that, wouldn't you?'

The other Order of the Phoenix members were gathering around them. At a distance.

Draco held Harry's gaze. His hand edged to his wand.

'*Harry!*'

Hermione was elbowing the Order members aside, Luna and Ron in tow.

'We don't have time for this,' she said sternly.

Harry and Draco paid her no heed.

'The Minister, Harry,' Ron put in. 'We have to get back to the Ministry. Scrimgeour...'

Mention of his name broke the spell.

'I know, Ron!' Harry barked. He gave Draco a last, contemptuous look and turned away from him.

Sullenly, Draco backed off, directing a venomous glare at Ron by way of compensation.

Harry addressed the Order. 'We'll fly to London immediately. Ron, Neville, Ginny, round up the Thestrals. Make sure all the equipment is secured. Draco, Collin, make sure we don't leave any traces. Luna, Hermione, you two divide the Floo Powder equally among the Thestrals. Move!'

They all dispersed to carry out their orders.

Harry cursed again. They should have reported to Scrimgeour hours ago

They let behind the small village, and the trampled, deserted battlefield beneath it, and headed south-east. The Thestrals could only fly about sixty feet above the surface, for fear of more dragons. Here and there some of the freed Hippogriffs lingered. Some flew with them for a while, as if to give them an honorary escort in thanks of their regained freedom.

Flying beside Harry at the head of the column, Ginny indicated the magnificent animals and said, 'Don't you envy them?'

'What, Hippogriffs?'

'They're freer than us.'

The remark surprised him. It was the first time she'd made any comment, even indirectly, that referred to the situation the Order had been reduced to. But he restricted the temptation to agree with her. These days a wizard or witch did well not to speak too freely. Opinions had a way of reaching unintended ears.

He kept his response to a noncommittal snort.

Ginny regarded him with expression of curiosity and dropped the subject. They flew on in grim silence, maintaining as rapid a pace as they could, scanning the sky and the ground for Death Eater activity.

At midday they reached the outskirts of London. The Thestrals landed and continued on foot. They took a route through an old, partly abandoned industrial area. Nobody had worked here for a long time. Old, abandoned metal production factories and storage halls lined up next to the constricted roads. They could not ride more than two abreast. Most took it single-file. Careful not to be detected, they slowed down to a trot.

Frustrated at the delay, Harry cursed. 'We have to move faster than this!'

'Using any other route means going through Muggle suburbs,' Ginny reminded him. 'We cannot risk detection, not with what we're carrying.'

'Every passing minute is going to sour Scrimgeour's mood.'

'We've got what he wanted and a cargo of Floo Powder as bonus. Doesn't that stand for something?'

'With Scrimgeour? I think you know the answer to that, Ginny.'

'We can say we ran into strong opposition or had trouble finding the cylinder.'

'No matter the story we tell, we aren't there. That's enough.' Harry shivered. Wrapping himself in his Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes Protection Cloak, he glanced over his shoulder. The others were far enough behind to be out of earshot. 'I wouldn't admit this to everybody,' he confided in a hushed tone, 'but Draco was right, blast his eyes. / let this happen.'

Ginny looked cold as well. She shivered slightly, goose bumps appearing on her arms.

'Don't be too hard on yourself. We all...'

'Wait! Ahead!'

Something was coming towards them from the opposite end of the road. Harry could not see it, but he could feel a presence. Something radiating sickness, cold and despair.

Harry held up a hand, halting the column. He squinted, trying to identify the small, black dots that were moving their way.

Down the line, Ron passed his the reins to Hermione and dismounted. He jogged to Harry. 'What is it, mate?' he asked.

'I'm not sure...' Then he recognized the eerie cold feeling. 'Bloody hell!! *Dementors!*'

Floating towards them from the far end of the street was a wall of the black-hooded creatures. More and more came into view.

'Ambush!' Ron yelled.

Other voices were raised along the column. Neville pointed upwards. More Dementors were sweeping in from above. Standing in his saddle, Harry saw more of the creatures pouring in to block their exit.

'Classic trap.' He snarled.

Ginny drew her wand. 'And we walked right into it.'

The penetrating cold became stronger. Their surroundings seemed to become darker. Thestrals reared. Some of them spread their wings in a panicked way.

Everybody drew their wands and turned to face the enemy on every side.

Half befuddled from the alcohol of the night before, the Order were outnumbered with barely room to maneuver. Spreading their arms, the Dementors glided in for the attack.

Harry's mind went blank. He was furiously looking for that happy thought.

He could hear their long, hoarse, rattling breath.

Then the first wave was on them.

Duelling Fear

Chapter 5 of 6

The Second War is in a stalemate. After drastic reforms, the Ministry has only just managed to keep pace with the Dark Lord's followers.

Scrimgeour is still firmly in the Ministry's chief seat, yet an unrelenting obsession and almost unlimited authority have transformed him into a relentless tyrant.

Against a background of Wizarding society's slow decent into anarchy, small bands of Aurors try to stop the flood of Death Eaters and their vile allies. One such band of Aurors—the Order of the Phoenix commanded by Harry Potter—is sent on a confidential mission as the armies of the Ministry and Lord Voldemort meet...

Harry didn't wait to be attacked.

Digging his heels into the flanks of his Thestral, he spurred it towards the leading Dementor. The Thestral shied. Harry kept it firmly on course, reins wrapped tightly around one hand. With the other he brought his wand up, searching furiously for a happy memory.

...Ginny, beaming at him when he was made Captain of the Order...

'*Expecto Patronum!*'

The familiar silver stag erupted from the tip of his wand. It charged straight at the first line of Dementors, visibly knocking them backwards. The creatures uttered horrible, screeching sounds and fled.

On his left Harry saw a large, silver otter jumping towards a wall of Dementors. The creatures screeched and backed off, but Hermione's Patronus continued on its way as if it had not a single care in the world.

On his right Draco seemed to be in trouble. He had produced some feeble silvery wisps of vapour, but the Dementors he was facing continued to advance on him. Falling to his knees and dropping his wand, Draco covered his mouth with both hands, furiously shaking his head. One Dementor crouched down. Just when the Dementor raised its grey and slimy hands to lower its hood, the Otter jumped on its back, his four feet clasped firmly around the Dementors waist. Howling in agony, it tried to get the Patronus off its back. The silver Patronus seemed very bright next to the blackness of the Dementor.

The Patronus continued to hold on. The Dementor spread out its arms, made a terrible scream and imploded. The Patronus, now only clutching empty black robes, let them go and hopped to his next row of victims.

On foot when the attackers swept in, Ron had grabbed his wand and conjured an enormous shining terrier. It uttered a soundless bark before charging into yet another wall of Dementors.

All around, Order members were encouraging their Patronuses. About a third of them had been able to conjure a Patronus, but many, like Draco, had been surprised by the Dementors' sudden appearance.

Neville found himself boxed in. Four Dementors reached at him from the roadside. Six more swooped down on him from above.

Fearful of the Dementors, Neville's panicking Thestral bucked.

A silver stag smacked into the Dementors from the roadside.

Neville turned full attention to the creatures coming from above. Holding his wand aloft, he concentrated. A large eagle burst out from the tip of his wand. The Patronus clashed with the Dementors, returned, and clashed once more.

Suddenly Neville was embraced from behind. Another Dementor he had not seen clasped its arms around him. Caught off guard, Neville and the Dementor fell from the Thestral. His wand was lost. As he rolled from pounding hooves and swishing Dementors' robes, he saw Draco's wand lying on the ground. Struggling to his feet, he reached for it.

The Dementor that had unseated him came in for the kill, feeding on the unnatural darkness as it came.

Neville raised the wand, desperately trying to ignore Bellatrix's cackling laughter that became louder with every inch the Dementors got closer. His eyes rolling, he tried to think of what more he could do. Just as everything seemed to become dark, he saw his eagle crash into the Dementor from above.

Ginny leveled her wand and produced a beautiful shining cheetah. The animal lunged at the Dementors, its silvery claws outstretched.

Working its way down the street, Harry's Patronus kept on deflecting its opponents. Trying to keep his Thestral under control, Harry shouted directions and encouragements to the Order.

Taking a deep breath, Harry took a second to look back. He caught a glimpse of Luna. She'd lost her mount and was in the thick of the ferocious scrum. Waves of Dementors were moving in on her. She could not hold them all off with her Patronus in the shape of a butterfly. It seemed to be absorbed by the mass of Dementors. The butterfly repelled half a dozen Dementors, but another group hovered in to take its place.

Luna stepped back, on the point of collapsing, when Ron's terrier marched right through the crowd of rotten black bodies.

Harry took another moment to look around. From every direction more Dementors were approaching. Only a few Order members were still on their feet. Harry could hear the familiar screaming in his head. The Dementors' blackness filled over him, drowning him. He searched for his Patronus, but it was nowhere in sight. His Thestral now completely panicked and started to run. Harry felt an impact against his back. A clawed hand snaked around his body and dug painfully into his chest. Cold rotting breath prickled the nape of his neck. Now the cold, grey hands were eagerly scrabbling at Harry's belt. Harry saw a speck of light from the corner of his eyes. The Dementor let go of him, but was immediately replaced by another. Avidly, the hands encircled his waist again, probing, searching.

And he realized what the Dementor was after.

The cylinder.

No sooner had the thought occurred than the Dementor reached its goal. With a triumphant intake of rattling breath, it seized the artifact and pulled it free.

As Harry felt the prize being tugged away, it seemed to him that time slowed, became pliable, stretching the following instant to an eternity.

Laggard-paced, as though seen with a dreamer's eye, several things happened at once.

He caught the Thestrals flailing reins and yanked on them with all his might. The steed's head jerked back. A great shudder ran through its body.

Another Dementor slowly rose behind him, arm outstretched, hand open.

An object sailed leisurely over Harry's right shoulder. It turned end over end, its burnished surface briefly flashing reflected sunlight as it descended.

Time's frantic tempo returned.

The Dementor snatched the cylinder from the air.

Harry's Thestral went down.

He hit the ground first, rolling the width of the street. Vision swimming, breath knocked out of him, Harry watched as his Thestral struggled to its feet and galloped off towards the other end of the road, one wing bent in a strange angle.

As if on signal all the Dementors started withdrawing. The ones engaging Hermione, Ginny, Neville, Luna and Ron backed off and began to move away. In a matter of seconds the entire street was deserted again.

Hermione saw Harry loping towards them. 'Come on!' she said.

They rushed to meet him.

'*The Cylinder!*' he raged, half demented.

No further explanation was necessary. It was obvious what had happened.

Harry's face was black with fury. Without a word to any of them, he turned and headed for the rest of the Order. Hermione and Ron exchanged barren glances and followed.

On the street lay half a dozen empty black robes. All the Order members looked pale and sweaty. Draco was still stretched on the ground and being tended to by Luna, but he was awake. Sighting their commander, the Order members moved to him.

'Why did they leave? We were done for,' Dennis asked, but Harry marched past him to Luna, eyes blazing.

'Anybody wounded?' he barked.

'None injured, though the Dementors got very close to some of us.'

Draco, rubbing his head while rising, said, 'Lucky as devils, us.'

Harry glared at him. 'Lucky? Those bastards took the cylinder!'

Palpable shock ran through the Order.

'Thieving little monsters!' Seamus responded indignantly. 'Let's get after 'em!'

The others chorused their approval.

'Think!' Harry bellowed. 'By the time we've cleared this shambles, rounded up the Thestrals...'

'Why not send a small party after them now, and the rest can follow?' Ginny suggested.

'They'd be well outnumbered, and those Dementors can move very fast if they want to. The trail's cold already!'

'But what good is it if we wait until we sort ourselves?' Neville put in. 'Who knows where they've gone?'

There was a moment of silence.

'We should never have entered this street without scouting it first,' Draco grumbled lowly.

'I'm just in the mood for your griping,' Harry told him, his expression like flint. 'If you have something to say about how I'm leading the Order, let's hear it now.'

Draco held up his hands in a placating gesture. 'No, chief.' He turned on an empty grin. 'Not with this mess.'

A tense silence descended. Luna broke in. 'What do you want us to do, Harry?'

'Find as many Thestrals as we can, for a start. We need to get moving.'

The Order melted away.

Hermione remained, looking at him.

'Don't say it,' he told her. 'I know. If we don't get that damn thing back for Scrimgeour, we're as good as dead.'

Rufus Scrimgeour paced around the bench-shaped chunk of marble in his personal chambers, pausing a moment in front of the large mirror every time he passed it. Even here, deep below the ground, he thought he could feel the cold breeze that was sweeping the surface.

The frigid winds and falling temperature were harbingers of the encroaching Death Eaters and their foul allies, ever expanding their hold, tearing the heart from the land, interfering with the balance.

They were eating the world's magic.

Scrimgeour had heard that in the southwest, where Death Eaters used to be the most active and densely concentrated, sorcery worked poorly if at all.

And it was his job, no matter the cost, to stop them.

He brought his mind back to the artifact. It was the key to his ambitions, to victory, and it was slipping out of his grasp.

There was a soft knock on the door, and an attendant stepped forward, making a deep bow.

Slimly build, almost petite, the servant was green-skinned with long, bat like ears. The bold head, large bright eyes and long thin nose were typical of its race.

The servant was new, and Scrimgeour was still uncertain as to whether the creature was predominantly male or female. But that problem was common with house-elves.

'Your Senior Secretary is here, Minister,' he or she announced in a piping, singsong voice. 'He, er, has been waiting for some time.'

'Good. I'll see him now.'

The elf ushered in the visitor, bowed discreetly and left.

Percy Weasley was probably in his mid-thirties, and many considered him too young for such a high post.

The expression behind his horn-rimmed glasses spoke of unease, if not a little apprehension.

There were no opening formalities.

'I can see from your face that they haven't come back,' he said, displeasure barely in check.

'No, Minister.' He failed to meet the Minister's eyes. 'Perhaps they ran into greater opposition than expected.'

'Reports from the battle don't indicate that.'

Percy made no reply.

'What do you propose doing about it?'

'A detachment will be sent with all speed to find out what's happened to them, Minister.'

'Are we dealing with treachery here?'

Percy seemed offended. 'We've never had reason to doubt the loyalty of any member of the Order of the Phoenix,' he replied. Their service records are excellent, and...

'I know that. Do you think I would have sent them on so sensitive a mission if it were otherwise? Do you take me for such a fool?'

Percy's gaze fell to his feet. 'No, Minister.'

"No, Minister",' he mimicked sarcastically. After a tense pause he added, 'Tell me some more about their leader, about Potter.'

Percy produced several sheets of parchment from inside his robes. Scrimgeour noticed that his hands were trembling slightly.

'I've had quite a few dealings with him personally, sir, back when we were both in Hogwarts. He has limited military experience in service of the Ministry, but worked together excessively with the ex-Auror Alastor "Mad-eye" Moody and former Hogwarts Defense Against the Dark Arts Teacher Remus Lupin in a group that called themselves "Dumbledore's Army". They were only pressed into Ministry service after your reforms, sir. He's reasonably bright, received an Outstanding in Defense Against the Dark Arts on his O.W.L.s. Did not finish Hogwarts. As you know, there were rumors of a prophecy related to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named just before he turned of age. However, these stories, which have earned him the nickname of "The Chosen One", turned out to be false. But most of this is familiar to the Minister, of course, sir. He has captained the Order of the Phoenix in its current state for almost a year now, though most of its original members were either captured or killed. This day, the Order seems to consist of most of Potter's friends at Hogwarts, and of course your personal last minute addition of Draco Malfoy, sir.'

Scrimgeour nodded. It all started to come back now.

'How long before the detachment will you send reports back?' he asked.

'About five days, assuming they don't run into problems.'

'Then they must be very careful not to. Very well. I expect The Chosen One to be brought here in five days at most. But be clear, Weasley; what he holds is mine, and I will have it. I want the cylinder above all else. Bringing back the Order of the Phoenix for punishment is secondary. Everything is secondary to the cylinder...including the lives of Potter and his band.'

'Yes, Minister.'

'The lives of those sent after them are also expendable.'

Percy hesitated before replying, 'I understand, sir.'

'Be sure that you do.' He drew his wand and pointed it at his secretary. He glanced at the mirror. 'And lest you forget...'

Percy cried out. Excruciating agony seared through his body. He felt his flesh turned inside out.

Scrimgeour lifted his wand.

Percy's skin was perfectly normal. He felt no pain.

Dumbly, he stared at the Minister.

'If you or any of my subordinates fail me,' he stated evenly, 'that's just a taste of what you'll get.'

Embarrassment, shame, and above all, fear were stamped on Percy's features.

'Yes, Minister,' he whispered.

His reaction was gratifying. Scrimgeour always enjoyed making a fully trained wizard quake.

'Now leave me,' he ordered.

Percy bowed stiffly and turned to the door.

Once the secretary had left, Scrimgeour sighed. Making for the high-backed chair, he sank into its relative comfort. He was drained. With the natural energy source so depleted, even casting a simple torture curse took considerable effort. Though it was worth it to keep his underlings in line. Sighing again, he turned back to the huge mirror.

In the corridor outside, Percy's upright demeanour deserted him. His nerve was near doing the same. He slumped against a wall, eyes closed, slowly expelling the breath he had been holding. It would not do for him to be seen in this way. He fought to pull himself together.

After a moment he straightened his shoulders and ran the back of his hand across his sweaty brow. Then with measured deliberateness, he resumed his short journey.

The curving passageway took him to an adjacent anteroom. A young officer snapped to attention when he entered.

'As you were, Captain,' the Senior Secretary to the Minister told him.

The officer relaxed, marginally.

'You're to leave immediately,' Percy said.

'How long do we have, sir?'

'Five days, maximum.'

'That's tight, Secretary.'

'It's as long as he'll allow. And let me make myself plain, Zabini. You're to bring back that artifact. If you can return with the Order, he'll settle for their heads. Given your past history with Potter, I imagine you'll have no problem with that.'

'None, sir, but...'

'But what? You'll outnumber them at least three to one. Those seem like good odds to me. Or have I got the wrong wizard for the job?'

'No, sir,' Zabini quickly responded. 'It's just that the Order has some very powerful members. Their success rate is one of the highest of any of the Auror divisions in the Ministry, and...'

'I know that, Captain. It's why I've assigned the best Aurors we have on this mission.'

'I'm not saying it's going to be impossible, sir. Just difficult.'

'Nobody promised you an easy ride.' He stared hard at the officer's earnest face and added, 'The Minister's position is that, as with the Order, the loss rate of the Aurors under your command is ... without limit.'

'Sir?'

'Do I have to spell it out? You will spend as many lives on this mission as may be necessary.'

'I see.' His tone was doubtful, troubled.

'Look at it this way, Zabini. If you return without his prize, he'll have you all put to death anyway. Horribly, knowing him. Weigh that against losing only some of your troopers and your certain promotion. Not to mention evening the score in the grievance you had with Potter. Of course, if you'd prefer me to find someone else...'

'No, sir, that won't be necessary.'

'Anyway, such talk could be pointless. Your quarry may already be dead.'

'The Order of the Phoenix? I doubt it, sir. I'd say they weren't that easy to kill.'

'Then why no word from them? If they're not dead, it's just as unlikely they've been captured. But I think they're too careful for that. So that only leaves betrayal. And there were no grounds to believe any of them might turn out traitors. Not now all of a sudden, anyway.'

'I'm not so sure. Not all of the Aurors are happy with our present situation, as you know, sir.'

'Do you have reason to believe Potter harbored such thoughts?'

'Well, it's Potter, though I claim no knowledge of his thoughts, sir.'

'Then keep your fancies to yourself. That kind of talk is dangerous. Think only of the cylinder. It has the highest priority. I'm relying on you, Zabini. If you fail, we will both suffer Scrimgeour's wrath.'

After the Shadows

Chapter 6 of 6

The Second War is in a stalemate. After drastic reforms, the Ministry has only just managed to keep pace with the Dark Lord's followers.

Scrimgeour is still firmly in the Ministry's chief seat, yet an unrelenting obsession and almost unlimited authority have transformed him into a relentless tyrant.

Against a background of Wizarding society's slow decent into anarchy, small bands of Aurors try to stop the flood of Death Eaters and their vile allies. One such band of Aurors —the Order of the Phoenix commanded by Harry Potter— is send on a confidential mission as the armies of the Ministry and Lord Voldemort meet...

The Order of the Phoenix was ready to move. The only disagreement was where.

'I say we get ourselves back to the Ministry and confess all to Scrimgeour,' Draco argued. A handful of Order members murmured approval. 'We have Floo powder, and that should stand for something. Let's go back and throw ourselves on his mercy.'

'We'd be in for a hard landing,' Ginny said. 'And the Floo powder wasn't what he sent us for.'

'Ginny's right,' Harry agreed. 'The only chance we have is to regain the cylinder.'

'You mean *your* only chance is to regain the cylinder,' Draco said. 'I would rather go back to the Ministry. This is your mess.' His eyes shined with malice. 'After all, I'm just an *observer*. If I explain to Scrimgeour what happened, I'm sure he'll let me live.'

'Maybe he's right,' Ron said carefully. 'Why don't we send one or two of the Order to Scrimgeour to explain what the rest of us are doing?'

Harry shook his head. 'And send them to their deaths? No. All of us and the cylinder or none at all.'

But he had to admit the prospect of losing Malfoy was a tempting one.

'But, Draco, for you I'll make an exception. If you wish to run back to Scrimgeour with your ferret tail between your legs, that's fine by me. You have my permission to leave the Order.'

Draco looked at the hopeful, expectant faces of the other Order members. Head back to the safety of the Ministry and almost certain death, or stay with these self-righteous simpletons? After a moment of hesitation, self-preservation got the upper hand.

'I'll grace you lot with my presence for a little longer,' Draco decided.

Most of the Order members looked disappointed.

'But where do we look?' Ginny wanted to know.

'It has to be the Dementors' homeland,' Ron said.

'All the way to Azkaban?' Draco scoffed. 'That's long odds, Weasel.'

'Can you think of a better idea?'

Draco's resentful silence indicated that he couldn't.

'They could have gone anywhere,' Ginny told her brother.

'True, but we don't know where anywhere is. But Azkaban...we know how to get there.'

Harry smiled thinly. 'Ron's got a point. We might spend our lives combing this countryside for those bastards. Azkaban makes more sense, and if the group that robbed us isn't there now, they might turn up.'

Draco spat, 'Might.'

'If you want to head back to London, go ahead.'

Again, Draco did not take him up on the offer.

'It's settled, then: Azkaban. What do you think, Hermione, four days?'

'About that. Maybe more because of the Thestrals we lost. Five or six of us are going to have to double up.'

'What about splitting into two groups?' proposed Seamus. 'One group...those physically healthy...go ahead to Azkaban. The others...those wounded...can follow at their own pace.'

'No. The wounded would be too vulnerable to attack. I've lost the cylinder, I don't want to lose half the Order as well. We stick together. Now let's get out of here.'

It was late afternoon before they set off on a northeastern bearing. This time Harry did not neglect to send scouts ahead of the main party.

He flew at the head of the column, Ginny beside him.

'What do we do when we get to Azkaban?' she said. 'Would you have us take on the whole army of the Dementors?'

'Only the spirits know, Ginny. I'm making this up as I go along, if you hadn't noticed.' He glanced behind him and added in a conspiratorial tone, 'But don't tell them that.'

'This is all we can do, isn't it, Harry? Make for Azkaban, I mean.'

'Only thing I could think of. Because the way I see it, if we can't get the cylinder back, at least we can have the glory of dying while we try, fighting the Dark Lord.'

'I see it that way too. Though it seems a pity we have to do it for Scrimgeour and a Ministry cause.'

There she goes again, he thought. What does she expect me to say?

He was tempted to speak frankly, but didn't have the chance.

'You've no idea what's in the cylinder?' she wondered. 'You were given no hint as to why it's so important?'

'Like I said, Scrimgeour didn't take me into his confidence,' he replied wryly.

'Yet the Dementors obviously thought it was worth facing a group of Aurors to gain it.'

'You know Dementors. They'll go for any group of wizards. We're just not as powerful as we used to be.'

'So you reckon that they just acted on a venture for feeding?'

'Yes.'

'So with all sorts of travelers crossing these parts, including Muggles who couldn't fight them even if they wanted to, they pick on us, a large group of Aurors trained for combat. All on the off chance we were a very happy lot. Does that seem likely?'

'You're saying they were after the cylinder? But how would they know we had it? Our mission was secret.'

'Perhaps our secret mission wasn't so secret after all, Harry.'

'... and you can slither your way back for all I care!' Harry concluded.

His captain's feelings having been made quite clear, Draco glowered murderously and tugged on his Thestral's reins. The Thestral gracefully cantered back to its place in the column.

'Don't bite my head off,' Ginny ventured, 'but didn't he have a point about stopping to rest?'

'Yes,' Harry grunted, 'and we will. If I give the order now, though, it'll look like his doing.' He scanned the barren terrain through pecks of clouds. He nodded at a rise further behind their route. 'We'll wait till we get over there.'

They had not stopped since setting out, traveling through the night and the new morning. Now the sun was at its highest point, its meager warmth finally dispelling the lingering chill.

Conjuring his Patronus with his wand, he sent it ahead to alert the forward scouts. He immediately felt drained and his arm hurt, as if he had been dueling for hours. Raising a hand, he gestured for the rest of the Order to land on the hill.

As Hermione conjured some portable fires and the Creevey brothers watered the Thestrals, Harry went into a huddle with the other senior Phoenix members.

'We're making decent headway,' he announced, 'but it's time for a decision on our route.' He drew his wand and kneeled. 'The Muggle city ... what was it called?'

'Manchester,' Ron offered.

Harry made a cross in a patch of hardened mud with his wand. 'Manchester was here, in the northern end of the Great Plains, and the nearest hostile Death Eater's foothold to Hogwarts.'

'Not any more,' Draco remarked with dark glee.

Disregarding him, Harry slashed a downward line. 'We've been moving north.' He carved another cross at the line's end. 'To here. We need to turn northeast for Azkaban. But we've got a problem.' To the right and up a little of the second cross, he gouged a circle.

'The Highlands,' Neville said.

'Right. The trolls' homeland. It's smack in the path of the most direct route to Azkaban.'

Draco shrugged his shoulders. 'So?'

'Given how belligerent trolls can be,' Ginny told him, 'we should avoid it.'

'You might want to run from a fight. I don't.'

'We've no need of one, Malfoy,' Harry intervened coolly. 'Why make extra trouble for ourselves?'

'Because going round The Highlands will cost us time.'

'We'll lose a lot more if we get caught up in a fight there, and a group of Aurors flying through their territory is just the thing to start one. No, we will skirt the place. Question is, which way?'

Ginny jabbed her finger at the improvised map. 'The next shortest way would be to head east now, towards Newcastle and the coast. Then we'd make our way north, through or around The Highlands, to Azkaban.'

'I'm not happy about going near Newcastle either,' Harry said. 'I know it's a free port, which means plenty of other races. We're bound to tangle with at least one that has a grudge against wizards. And the forest's infested with creatures.'

'Not to mention that turning east from here takes us closer to Scrimgeour's forces. Surely they will be looking for us,' Hermione said, joining them.

'The advantage of approaching Azkaban from the forest side is that we will have the cover of trees,' Neville put in.

'That's scant return for all the risks we'd run.' Harry employed his wand again, extending the line down beyond the elliptical shape he'd drawn. 'I think we have to carry on North, past the Highlands, then turn northeast.'

'In which case, don't forget this.' Ginny leaned over and used her finger to outline a small cross above the Manchester. *Mort Manors*. A Death Eater settlement, like Death's Lair, but much bigger. Word is that the Death Eaters there are more fanatical than most.'

'Is that possible?' Ron asked dryly of no one in particular.

'We'd have to pass between the two,' Harry granted. 'But it's all flat plains in those parts, so at least we could see trouble coming.'

Ginny studied the markings. 'It's the longest route, Harry.'

'I know, but it's also the safest. Or the least dangerous, anyway. We'll have a couple of hours rest now. I'll tell you when we move out. I need to think.'

After a couple of hours' fitful sleep, the Order resumed their journey.

Flying just below the clouds, to their right they saw the Lake District, its waters seemingly endless. But the scene was askew. What had once been fecund now lacked vitality, and it seemed that much of the colour had washed out of the landscape. In many places the grass was turning yellow and dying in patches. Low growing shrubbery was stunted and brittle. Tree barks were patterned with sickly parasitic growths. A brief fall of light rain was tawny-hued and smelt unwholesome, as though sulphurous.

Dusk saw them arriving at a point roughly parallel with the first mountains of the Highlands. If they flew on at the same rate, Harry reckoned, they could turn east at dawn.

Flying alone at the head of the file, he was preoccupied with weightier thoughts than navigations. He pondered the mystery of the dreams that were afflicting him, and his sense of futility in the face of the odds stacked against them was growing. But what would happen if they didn't find the Dementor raiding party, and the cylinder, was something he tried not to think about.

Melancholy had as cold a grip on him as the chill night air by the time one of the advance scouts appeared. The Order member was approaching at great speed, his mount's nostrils huffing steamy clouds. Reaching the column, he reined in sharply and with a tight turn wheeled the sweating Thestral about.

Harry put out a hand to catch the reins, steadying his ride. 'What is it, Seamus?'

'Village ahead, Harry.'

'Alright. We'll alter course to avoid it.'

'But Captain, it's a magical community, and it looks deserted.'

'Are you sure?'

'Dennis and me have been watching the place, it's just a few houses and there's no sign of movement.'

'All right. Go back to him and wait for us. Don't do anything till we get there.'

'You got it!' Seamus turned his Thestral and flew off.

Harry called Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville and Draco forward and explained the situation.

'Is a magical community something you'd expect to come across in these parts?' Hermione asked.

'Not really,' Ron explained. 'But after the Ministry got all messed up some folks decided to live away from all the troubles.'

'If Seamus reports no activity, we should approach with caution,' Ginny suggested.

'That's my feeling,' Harry agreed. 'It may be a magical community, but that does not mean we will find wizards there. Until we know better, we treat it as hostile. Let's go.'

Ten minutes later they landed near Seamus, who was waiting for them by a large copse. Its trees shed brown leaves, and the bushes were turning autumnal colours, though summer's midpoint was still a phase of the moon away.

Harry had everybody quietly dismount. Luna stayed with the Thestrals. With Seamus in the lead, the Order stealthily entered the grove.

Twenty paces in, they found Dennis, stretched full-length behind a fallen tree, keeping watch.

Enough dappled light from the setting sun penetrated the swaying canopy to show what lay below. Harry saw three modest roundhouses with brick walls and thatched roofs. To the left was a fourth, smaller still, its roof incomplete. Sluggish spring water trickled feebly through churned mud. Some brooms stood neatly lined up against a wall. There were no roads, no lights.

As Harry took it all in, the memory of the dream or vision he'd had came back to him, but in diametric opposition to what he now saw. The magical settlement in his dream had been redolent with light and clean air. This was dark and stifling. The dream was life-affirming. This spoke of death.

He heard Hermione whisper, 'Abandoned, you think?'

'Wouldn't be surprised,' Ron replied in a hushed tone, 'bearing in mind it's close to the Highlands and not that far from a Death Eater settlement.'

'But why leave the brooms?'

Harry roused himself. 'Let's find out. Ron, take a third of the Order and work your way round the other side. Draco, Neville, move another third to the right flank. Ginny and the rest, stay with me. We go in on my signal.'

It took a few minutes for the groups to position themselves. When he was sure all were in place, Harry stood and shot some red sparks from the tip of his wand. The Order drew their wands and began moving down toward the settlement.

They reached level without incident. Around the dwellings the ground was strewn with objects of various kinds. An upended cooking cauldron, broken pottery, some trampled clothes, bones of fowl. Ashes of long-dead fires were heaped in several places.

Harry led his detachment to the nearest roundhouse. He raised a finger to his lips, and pointed with his wand to deploy the group around the shanty. When they were in place, he and Ginny crept to the entrance. It had no door; a piece of tattered sacking served the purpose. Wands up, they positioned themselves.

He nodded. Ginny ripped aside the cloth.

An overpoweringly foul smell hit them like a physical blow. It was mouldy, sickly and unmistakable.

The odour of decaying flesh.

Covering his mouth with his free hand, Harry stepped inside.

The light was poor, but it only took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust.

The house was filled with dead people. They lay three and four deep on makeshift cots. Others completely covered the floor. A pall of corruption hung heavy in the air. Only the scurrying of carrion eaters disturbed the stillness.

Ginny was at Harry's side, palm pressed against her mouth. She tugged at his arm and they backed out. They retreated from the entrance and gulped air as the rest of their group craned for a look inside the house.

Harry moved to the second of the larger roundhouses, Ginny in tow, arriving as Neville emerged ashen-faced. The stench was just as strong. A glance at the interior revealed an identical scene of huddled corpses.

Neville breathed deeply. 'All women and children. Dead for some time.'

'The same over there,' Harry told him.

'No adult wizards?'

'None that I could see.'

'Why not? Where are they?'

'I can't be sure, Neville, but I think this is a dispossessed camp.'

'I've heard Gran talk about those once, just before she died. She said it was an outrage, but what does it mean?'

'When Death Eaters are killed or fail their missions, Voldemort tends to punish their families. Many turn away from the dark side and become refugees, but the Ministry can't handle them all. Or does not want to handle them. Anyway, many are cast out. Some of the dispossessed band together.'

'The Ministry feels it is a waste of resources to help them who betrayed them earlier. The Ministry has been very firm since Scrimgeour took over,' Ginny added.

'They're left to fend for themselves?' Neville asked.

Harry nodded. 'Some justice, isn't it?'

'You're damn right!' Draco said, failing to notice Harry's sarcasm. 'But who killed them? I'd like to send thanks.'

'Would you thank them if it were your parents there, Malfoy?' Ron asked.

Malfoy instantly turned very pale, but before he could respond Harry interrupted.

'I don't know who or what killed them. Mass suicide's not impossible, though, it's been known. Or maybe they...'

'Harry!'

Hermione was standing by the smallest hut, waving him over.

Harry went to her. Ginny, Ron, Draco and some of the others followed.

'Someone is still alive in there.' Hermione pointed at the entrance.

Harry peered into the gloom. 'Get Luna. *Lumos*.'

He entered.

There was just one lonely figure, lying on a bed of filthy rags.

Harry approached and heard strained breathing. He bent over to get a better look. In the poor light from his wand he could just make out the features of an old witch. Her eyes were closed and her face glistened under a film of perspiration.

A soft voice at Harry's back heralded Luna's arrival.

'She's wounded.'

Luna knelt next to the filthy bed. The aged witch opened her eyes. Her lips trembled, as though she were trying to say something. Luna bent to listen. There was a final outrush of breath, like a sigh, and the distinctive sound of the death rattle.

Luna lit the tip of her own wand and held it over the dead witch's body.

'Dear God,' Harry said in a hoarse whisper.

'What is it?' Ron's voice sounded from outside.

'Luna, get out!' Harry snapped. 'Luna, *now*!'

But Luna merely looked surprised at the body. 'What do you think could have done this?' she asked, staring curiously at the long black wounds, the red veins and the skin that seemed partly turned inside out. 'A curse of some sort? But no, that would not leave these kinds of marks. Maybe it was a potion of sorts, but then how...'

Luna's wondering was cut short when Harry bodily picked her up and scrambled to the exit. Outside, he put her down and looked her in the eyes.

'Did you touch her or any of the other dead?' Harry demanded of Luna.

'Me? Any? ... No I didn't.' She seemed surprised at the mere suggestion.

Harry turned to the others. 'Did any of you touch the corpses?'

They shook their heads.

'What's going on, Harry?' Dennis asked.

'They have been murdered. All of them.'

'What? Why murder them if they have already been punished?'

'I don't know, Dennis,' Harry responded. 'These were not just plain murders. These people have been poisoned or something. I want us out of here fast. Burn everything.'

Harry pointed his wand at the nearest house. The straw caught fire immediately. In seconds the interior was an inferno.

The Order dispersed to spread the fire.

Blaise Zabini's boot crunched against something. Looking down, he found he'd trodden on a broken slab of wood displaying part of a crudely painted word.

It read: *Death's La*

He kicked it aside and returned his attention to the destroyed concrete building. His Aurors were sifting through the ruin, rummaging in debris, upending charred desks, disturbing clouds of ash and dust. On his left he saw a couple of wizards trying to lift a huge vault's steel door.

The search had begun before dawn. Now it was early afternoon, and they were no nearer to finding anything of importance, least of all the cylinder. Nor was there any sign of what had happened to the Order of the Phoenix. That much had been obvious from shortly after they arrived, and Zabini had send out parties to scout the surrounding area for clues. None had yet returned.

He paced before the entrance to the building. An unseasonable wind was gusting in from the north, picking up bite as if funneled over the chalky line of far-off mountains. The Captain puffed into his cupped hands.

Vincent Crabbe, one of Zabini's officers, came away from the search and trotted toward him. He shook his head as he approached.

'Nothing?' Zabini said.

'No, sir. Nothing.' A moment of silence. 'And no cylinder neither, sir,' he added.

Zabini rubbed his chin. 'We know none of the Order members were killed in the main battle...there are clear reports of them being seen in the battle line. Potter and his officers are known well enough to be recognized, so we can take that as true.'

'Then you reckon they're still alive, sir?'

'I never really doubted it. I couldn't see a quality band of Aurors losing out to the kind of opposition they met here. The real mystery is what's happened to them.'

Crabbe, a stolid veteran of many duels, was better suited to combat than solving riddles. The best he could do was to remind Zabini of another puzzle. 'What about the empty cellar in the destroyed house, Captain? You think that has anything to do with it?'

'I don't know. But a cleaned-out silo, not even a grain, at a time when you'd expect to find corn down there seems odd. I'd wager the Death Eaters were using it to store something.'

'Food?'

Zabini ignored him. 'What it comes to is that the Order of he Phoenix aren't dead, they're gone. And it looks like they've taken at least one valuable with them.'

Zabini's rivalry with the Order's leader and the long-standing animosity between their respective Houses was widely known.

Crabbe, eyeing his Captain, did not know what else to say, so he kept to a neutral, 'Permission to resume duties, sir.'

The Captain waved him away.

Well beyond mid point, the arching sun continued its inexorable journey across the sky. Half his allotted time used up, Zabini's apprehension was growing. He should be heading back for London in the next couple of hours to meet the deadline ...and quite possibly his death.

A rapid decision had to be made.

There were three options. Finding the cylinder here and returning home in triumph seemed less likely by the minute. That left going back without it and facing Scrimgeour's wrath, or disobeying orders and continuing to look for the Order of the Phoenix.

Cursing the Minister's impatience, he agonized about what to do. His deliberations were interrupted by the appearance of two of the scouts he'd sent earlier.

Dismounting their brooms, (Zabini hated Thestrals, Hippogriffs or any other animals that might function as a mount) they headed towards him. One was a lowly member, the other a junior officer.

Zabini gave them a curt nod.

The junior officer spoke, 'I think we have found something, sir. There is a report of a fight south of here, near London, sir!'

A fragile hope stirred in the Captains breast. 'Go on.'

'The place is littered with remains of Dementors, and there are traces of Thestrals everywhere.'

'Dementors?'

'From the narrow street and the places of the remains it looks like they ambushed somebody.'

'It could have been the Order, but why would the Dementors attack them?' Zabini thought out loud.

'I honestly don't know, sir,' the junior officer responded.

Zabini gave him a threatening look, but immediately relented.

He had made his decision.

'You've done well.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Your scout will lead us to the scene of the fight. Meanwhile, I want you to find yourself a broom ...a fast broom... and carry out a special mission.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Congratulations. You're going to get home earlier than the rest of us. I need you to carry a message to London with all speed. For the Minister.'

'Sir.' This time there was a slight hesitancy in the junior officer's response.

'You're to deliver the message to Senior Secretary Weasley personally. No one else. Is that understood?'

'Yes, sir.'

'The Secretary is to tell Scrimgeour that I have a lead on where the Order of the Phoenix has gone and am in hot pursuit. I'm sure I can catch them and return the item the Minister desires. I beg more time, and will send further message. Repeat that.'

The junior officer paled a little as he recited it. He didn't doubt it wasn't what Scrimgeour would want to hear. But he was disciplined enough, or fearful enough, to obey orders without question.

'Good,' Zabini said, 'Dismissed.'

Gloomy faced, the junior officer walked off to get a fast broom.

Zabini was giving Scrimgeour no choice. It was a dangerous play, and his only change of surviving it lay in recovering the artifact. But he couldn't see another way.

He consoled himself with the thought that the Minister had to be amenable to reason, notwithstanding his dreadful reputation.

Harry flew on at the head of his little convoy. Ginny, who was flying just behind him, stared at his messy black hair as it ruffled in the wind. None spoke of it, but what they had seen at the dispossessed camp, and their perilous situation, hung heavy on the entire Order.

Despite the tired Thestrals, they had made good progress, resting every hour but keeping up a steady pace. Before the day was over, they should have reached a point midway between the Highlands and Mort Manors. Harry's hope was that they'd pass through the corridor without meeting trouble from either disputatious trolls to the East or zealous Death Eaters in the South.

The terrain had begun to change. Plains were giving way to hilly country, with shallow valleys and winding trails. Looking down, Harry noticed that colours seemed even more faded here.

A commotion down the line of Thestrals broke his train of thought. He looked back. Draco and Ron were squabbling loudly.

Harry sighted. 'Keep our heading,' he told Ginny and swung his Thestral out.

In the moment it took to gallop to them, Ron and Draco had come close on hexing each other. They quietened on seeing him.

'Are you two my joint seconds or spoilt first years?'

'It's his fault,' Draco complained. 'He...'

'My fault?' Ron snapped. 'You bastard! I should...'

'Shut it!' Harry ordered. 'Ron! Neville and Seamus need relieving from their scout duties. Take Colin and leave your share of Floo powder with Ginny.'

Ron shot his antagonist a parting scowl and spurred off.

Harry returned his attention to Draco. 'You're pushing me, Malfoy. Much more of this and I'll demote you, senior Obliviator or not.'

'Shouldn't have to work with that idiot,' Draco muttered.

'This isn't a debate, Malfoy. Work with Ron or make your own way home. Your choice.'

With a last penetrating gaze, Harry flew back to the column's prow.

Draco noticed some of the nearby Order members were staring at him. 'We wouldn't be in this mess if we were properly led,' he grumbled sourly.

The Order members looked away.

When Harry reached Ginny, Hermione came forward to join them.

'On this bearing we'll be passing nearer Mort Manors than the Highlands. What's our plan if we meet trouble?'

'Mort Manors was the first all-Death Eater settlement. It's also the most fanatical,' Harry said. 'That makes them unpredictable. Just bear that in mind.'

Ahead of the flying column, and out of sight, Ron and Colin took over as pathfinders. Ron watched as Neville and Seamus, the pair of scouts they had relieved, flew back towards the main party.

Only now was he beginning to calm down from his latest tangle with Malfoy. He goaded his mount, a mite harder than necessary, and concentrated on the ground beyond.

'Know these parts, Ron?' Colin asked. He spoke quietly, as though a raised voice might betray their presence, despite the wilderness in all directions.

'A little. From here on we can expect the terrain to alter quite a bit. Soon we'll have to start maneuvering through the mountains.'

As though on cue, the hills below them changed into rocky mountains. Soon now those mountains would be as high as they were flying. Colin had overheard Harry telling the senior Order members he would fly through the mountains here. 'Lay low and be swift' he had said. Or at least something like that.

Descending, Ron and Colin began to round a blind bend.

'But if the Order keeps to its present course,' Ron continued, 'we shouldn't have anything ...'

Some sort of dark mist stretched across their path.

'... to worry about.'

The dark, unnaturally thick mist hovered motionless in the mountain pass. It was guarded by wizards dressed uniformly in black. They numbered at least a score.

Ron and Colin pulled back on their reins just as the Death Eaters spotted them.

'Oh, bollocks...' Ron groaned.

A great yell went up from the figures near the mist. Waving their wands, all but a handful of the Death Eaters rushed to mount their slick, black brooms. Ron and Collin fought to turn their Thestrals.

Then they were racing away, pursued by a howling posse baying for blood.