CHAPTER TWO

The Scar

For a minute or two Harry didn't move. He lay on his back in the twisted sheets, with his heart going like a drum, and waited for his breath to come back. His scar went on burning under his fingers. It felt as though somebody had pressed a white-hot wire against his forehead and was still holding it there.

He sat up at last. His right hand was clenched round the cross so hard that his knuckles ached, while his left was pressed flat to his scar. He needed his glasses. He would have to let go of one or the other to find them. In the end, rather reluctantly, he let go of the cross. It dropped back against his chest on its cord, still warm.

His glasses were on the bedside table, where he always left them. He put them on, and the room sharpened round him. A dim, misty orange glow was leaking in round the edges of the curtains from the streetlamp outside. Harry touched his scar again. It hurt as much as ever. He switched on the lamp, scrambled out of bed and crossed the

room to his wardrobe. The door had a long mirror fixed inside it. He opened it and peered in.

A thin, pale boy blinked back at him. He was fourteen years old, with untidy black hair that stuck up at the back and very green eyes, which looked puzzled behind his round glasses. Harry leant in until his nose was almost touching the glass, to look at the thin lightning scar on his reflection's forehead. It looked the same as it always did. It was still stinging.

He tried to remember the dream. It was like trying to hold on to mist. The harder he grabbed at it, the faster it seemed to slide away between his fingers. Some of it stayed with him. He had been angry in the dream, as angry as he had ever been with Aunt Marge, or with Dudley, or with any of the people who had hurt him over the years and gotten away with it. Only it had been cold instead of hot this time, heavy and patient, like a stone at the bottom of a river.

Wanting to make people pay was a little boy's anger, though, however cold it felt. Harry was supposed to be growing out of it. He had spent most of his third year learning how. He had been learning to forgive people, instead of simply hating them, which was a great deal harder than it sounded. By the end of the year he had begun to see that there were two quite different kinds of anger. One kind lashed out, like a cornered animal. The other kind was quieter. It knew exactly what was wrong with the world, and it meant to put it right. That kind could change things. One day, Harry thought, it was going to. He wasn't a complete idiot. He knew very well that for now he was only fourteen, stuck in a box room in Surrey without so much as a wand he was allowed to use.

He tried again. Bits of the dream came back to him out of order, like photographs dropped on a floor. There had been a house on a hill. There had been a long, golden room full of candles. He had been

angry with his own father. He had walked all the way up the hill to find him, and his grandparents too, so that he could kill them.

Harry sat down on the edge of the bed and put his face in his hands.

That couldn't be right. His father had died when Harry was a year old, trying to hold Voldemort off, in a house Harry couldn't even remember. There was nothing to hate him for. Yet the hatred in the dream had felt real. It had felt *fair*, which was worse. Afterwards, standing in that golden room with the three of them on the floor, he had felt… Harry didn't want to think about what he had felt. Making them pay for leaving him had tasted sweet, like the first mouthful of something you knew perfectly well you weren't allowed.

But it was wrong. It had been wrong from beginning to end.

Then there was Dracina. Why had *she* been there at the very end, in that blue dress, only to turn into a snake and slide away from him? Why, out of everything, had that been the thing to turn his rage inside out, so that he had ended up sobbing after her like a little boy who had lost his mother in a crowd?

Harry shook his head hard, as though he could shake the whole thing out through his ears. It had been a dream, that was all. It had been a very strange dream.

He lifted his head. He opened his eyes and looked round the bedroom, half expecting to find something odd lurking in a corner. As a matter of fact, it would have been difficult to find a bedroom anywhere in Surrey with more odd things in it.

His big wooden trunk lay open at the foot of the bed. Inside it Harry could see a cauldron, the handle of his Firebolt, a heap of black robes and a jumble of spellbooks. Rolls of parchment covered the end of his desk. The rest of the desk was taken up by the large cage where Hedwig, his snowy owl, usually sat. It was empty. On the

floor beside the bed lay a book, still open where he had dropped it last night when his eyes had started to close.

The pictures in this book moved. Little wizards in bright orange robes were whizzing in and out of the pictures on broomsticks, tossing a red ball from one to another. Harry went over and picked the book up. He watched one of the tiny orange figures swerve round two Bludgers to put the ball straight through a hoop fifty feet high. Then he shut it with a snap. The book was called *Flying with the Cannons*, and it had been Ron's Christmas present in their second year. Not even Quidditch, the finest game ever invented as far as Harry was concerned, could hold his attention just now.

He put the book down by the lamp, went to the window and pulled back the curtains. Privet Drive lay below him, every bit as neat and respectable as a Surrey street ought to be in the small hours of a Saturday morning. Every curtain was drawn. As far as Harry could make out in the dark, there wasn't a living thing anywhere in the road. There wasn't so much as a cat.

And yet…

Harry wandered back to the bed. He couldn't keep still. He sat down on it and ran a finger along his scar again.

The pain itself didn't worry him much. Harry had been hurt far more often than most people of his age. Gilderoy Lockhart had once removed every bone in his right arm by accident, so that Harry had spent a horrible night in the hospital wing growing them back. A few months after that, a basilisk's fang had laid the same arm open just below the shoulder. Then, last term, the claws of Lupin's war form had raked his left arm above the elbow. Four long pale lines were still there. Madam Pomfrey had done her best, but a werewolf's wounds had to heal the slow way, without magic, or not at all.

He was used to strange accidents. They were bound to happen to you at Hogwarts, especially if you had a gift for finding trouble. Harry bloody well had a gift for it. He found it all the time, generally on somebody else's behalf. Lately, more often than not, the somebody had been Dracina Malfoy. He had saved her life once a year, as regular as clockwork, for three years running.

He thought about Dracina. He thought about the bright, enchanted twinkle that came into her silver eyes when she looked at him, which was very difficult to stop thinking about once you had started. Then there was her smile, which never seemed to be meant for anybody else. There was the secret they were keeping, too, with its folded notes, its dull little owl and its furious glares across the Great Hall. Thinking about Dracina always led him, sooner or later, to the one thing he had been running away from all summer. He had been running from it even harder than from the God business.

Harry Potter was in love with Dracina Malfoy.

There. He had thought it. After everything that had happened on that strange, rainy island inside a book, there was no getting round it any longer. If he was honest, he had known ever since the end of his second year, when he had talked to her in the hospital wing and made her giggle. He had known it again in the Forest, with the stream running round his knees. The Shield Charm had turned white in his hand, with something in it that was far bigger than Harry, and it had burnt Lupin's war form away like frost off a window. Then he had scooped Dracina up out of the water without stopping to think, as though he had been doing it all his life.

All he really wanted was to scoop her up again and never put her down. He wanted to keep her there for ever and ever. He wanted to be her knight, like somebody at the end of a story, if only she would stop trying to hurt him. He wanted her to call him *Harry*, the way she

sometimes did when nobody else could hear, instead of *Potter*, in the cold, scornful drawl she used the rest of the time. Most of all, he wanted her to be as happy as he felt whenever she walked into a room.

But he couldn't. Dracina didn't dare get into trouble with her father. Lucius Malfoy disapproved of the whole affair, Harry thought bitterly. This was the man who had let Tom Riddle's old diary fall into his own daughter's hands. Yet Harry, for reasons he still didn't understand, had managed to impress him in a single conversation at the close of second year. According to Dracina, he kept asking how Harry was, as though he genuinely wanted to know. Then, every time, he told her again that she was to have nothing whatever to do with him.

Dracina's letter lay open on the bedside table, beside the lamp. It had come with Juniper on the morning of his birthday, and he had read it so often since that it was going soft along the folds. He had read it again last night, just before he fell asleep. He knew most of it by heart. He picked it up anyway. The writing was in green ink, small, neat and spiky, pressed so hard into the parchment that he could feel the words from the back.

Harry,

Happy birthday. I wanted to be the first to say it, but I expect Granger has beaten me to it. Granger will have sent her owl off at one minute past midnight with a book tied to its leg. I am not sending you a book.

How are you? That is a proper question, so you are to answer it properly. You are not to write 'fine' the way boys do. Are they feeding you? Are you sleeping? You looked thin on the train, thinner than you did at Easter, and I did not like it.

Hedwig had in fact come swooping in at four minutes past midnight, bringing Hermione's card and a book tied to her leg. Harry had found that funny for most of the morning.

In case you have forgotten what I told you last summer about your relatives, I shall tell you again. Father's collection in the cellar is still there. I have been down to look at it twice since I got home. There are now four things in it I should like to see used on your uncle, not three, as well as one for your aunt. I have not yet decided about your cousin. Besides all that, Mr Borgin still has an opal necklace in his shop with a card on it that says it has killed nineteen Muggle owners. I have always thought twenty a rounder number. You have only to say the word.

Harry had laughed at that, too, until it occurred to him that she probably wasn't joking.

As it happens, you need not say anything at all. Granger and I have been writing to each other. Do not look like that. I can see you looking like that from here. We have come to an understanding. We've also had the aid of one other to help with this understanding.

He had read that part a dozen times, and he still had no idea who the other person could be. He hoped the understanding was a friendship. Harry wanted Dracina and Hermione to be friends. For a while he had wondered whether she meant Hermione's mother, who had been at King's Cross too. Mrs Weasley had been there as well, of course, but Mrs Weasley would never in a million years have gone in with a Malfoy.

Father asked about you at dinner on Sunday. He wanted to know how you were. He wanted to know whether you had got over the dementors, and whether Dumbledore had sent you back to your Muggles again, which he says is a scandal. He asked me, Harry. Me. Across the table, in front of Mother, in that voice. I could hardly tell

him that I had it from you yourself, could I? I sat there with my mouth open like Goyle.

Then Mother put down her fork. 'Severus tells me the boy is very well indeed,' she said, quite calmly. 'Madam Pomfrey let him out of the hospital wing the very next day, and he went home on the train with everybody else.' Father said, 'Ah,' and went back to his soup. I have no idea whether Professor Snape ever said anything of the sort. I very much doubt it. Mother did not look at me once for the rest of dinner, which is how I know she was doing it on purpose.

She has been most peculiar about you altogether. Last week she asked me, out of nowhere, whether you still had your father's hair. I told her I could not possibly have noticed. I do not know why she has always been so helpful about you, ever since first year, but it has all come in extremely useful, so I have decided not to ask.

Harry put a hand up to his hair without thinking. It was sticking up at the back, the way his dad's did in every photograph he had ever seen.

Now, Pansy. For Weasley's sake, since he appears to have appointed himself her champion, you need not worry. I have forgiven her for nearly ruining everything, and I mean it. But she is being extremely tiresome. Pansy has never cared a bit for Quidditch in her life. She used to take a novel to the Slytherin matches. Now, all of a sudden, she has got the Chudley Cannons. Of all the teams in the Prime League, she has chosen the Chudley Cannons. They came bottom, Harry. Bottom. She has a poster of them over her bed. It is orange. It clashes with absolutely everything she owns. She has written to me four times this fortnight about their Keeper.

Harry had read that paragraph more often than any of the others. *Nearly ruining everything.* At the time, on the front steps, he had thought she meant Buckbeak, or Hagrid, or the Committee. He

wasn't so sure any more. Four pages in her own handwriting had gone to her father behind her back, and for months afterwards Harry had believed she had lied to him to his face. That was what Pansy had nearly ruined. Harry was beginning to have a fair idea what *everything* meant. He had a feeling, from the heat creeping up the back of his neck, that a great deal of it was him.

As for the Cannons… Harry knew only too well who else in the world supported the Chudley Cannons. He had woken up under their orange posters in Ron's bedroom at the Burrow. He thought of Pansy on the front steps of the castle, lifting her blotchy face out of her hands to stare up at Ron while he told Dracina off. He thought of the way she had kept on looking at Ron in the days afterwards, in the corridors or at meals, whenever she thought nobody would notice. Then there had been the train, and Pansy hanging back in the doorway of their compartment. *Bye, Weasley.*

Harry sighed. It was a long, heavy, put-upon sort of sigh. Anybody who knew Ron would have recognised it at once, because Ron heaved the very same sigh at Harry about twice a day, whenever the conversation came round to Dracina. Harry didn't notice this at all.

When I asked her what on earth it was all in aid of, she went pink. 'I just appreciate that they're all English,' she said. I have no idea what she meant by it. I do not believe she knows either.

Harry laughed out loud again. He knew exactly where Pansy had got that from. Ron had said it to him on his very first day at the Burrow, pointing proudly at his bedspread, before going on to complain about blokes from Timbuktu. Ron was in deep trouble, by the look of it. Well, Ron had always looked out for Harry. It was only fair that Harry should look out for Ron. How anybody could be as

dense as Ron was being, Harry couldn't imagine. He was quite sure that he had never been that dense about anything in his whole life.

I have not forgotten your present. Last year's, I mean. I told you I had chosen it, and I had. Then there was last year, which I do not propose to discuss. There was never a proper moment for it, and one does not give a present like that at an improper moment. So you shall have to have it this year instead, together with this year's, in person, when I decide. It is not a present that can be sent by owl. You are not to guess.

Harry had wondered about that present for a whole year now. He had wondered about it on the train, at Christmas, in the hospital wing with his arm bandaged up. He still couldn't begin to guess what it was. What sort of present couldn't be sent by owl? What sort had to wait for a *proper moment*? He was smiling at the parchment anyway, like an idiot.

Dracina

At the very bottom of the page, under her name, she had added two more lines.

P.S. Burn this.

P.P.S. Don't forget me.

Harry stopped smiling.

For a second he wasn't in his bedroom at all. He was back in the golden room, screaming through the open curtains after a long blue snake. It was sliding away from him across the wet sawdust, into the rainy dark. He couldn't reach it. *Don't forget me! Please, please don't forget me…*

His scar seared. Harry gasped and clapped a hand to his forehead. The letter slipped out of his fingers on to the bed. It was worse than when he had woken up, a hot, stabbing pain, like a needle pushed into the bone.

When his scar had last hurt like this, Voldemort had been in the same room as him. Voldemort couldn't possibly be here, though. The thought of Lord Voldemort prowling round Privet Drive, among the hanging baskets and the company cars, was ridiculous. It was impossible…

Harry strained his ears. Was he waiting to hear a stair creak? Or a cloak swishing on the landing?

Then he jumped, as a tremendous grunting snore came through the wall from Dudley's room next door. Dudley was dreaming about doughnuts, probably.

Harry gave himself a mental shake. He was being an idiot. There was nobody in the house but the Dursleys, all three of them plainly fast asleep, having the sort of untroubled, painless dreams that never left anybody clutching their forehead in the dark. Harry liked the Dursleys best when they were asleep. They had never been the slightest use to him awake.

They were the only family he had left. They were Muggles, too, of the sort who loathed magic in every shape and form, so Harry was about as popular at number four as woodworm. For three years they had been telling the neighbours that he spent his terms at St Brutus's Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys. The Dursleys knew perfectly well that he wasn't allowed to do magic away from school until he came of age. All the same, they still had a habit of blaming him whenever anything went wrong in the house. Harry had never once been able to talk to them about Hogwarts, or anything else that mattered to him. The thought of going downstairs when they woke, to tell them that his scar hurt and that he was worried about Voldemort, was enough to make him laugh.

Yet it was Voldemort's fault that he lived with them at all. Without Voldemort, he would never have had that scar. Without Voldemort, he would still have had a mother and a father…

Harry knew the anger that was rising in him now. It was the hurt boy's anger, the cupboard kind, and it had never been any use to anybody. It could be made useful, though. He remembered Dumbledore in Lupin's bare office, on the day Lupin left, with his hand on the door. Harry had asked him whether the anger ever went away. Dumbledore had turned round slowly, and for a moment he had looked very old indeed.

'No, Harry,' he had said. 'Not completely. But it's up to you what to do with that anger.'

Well, Harry knew what he was going to do with his. He was going to use it. He would use it against Voldemort, and against anybody else who got in his way. Dumbledore had been very wise to tell him that. Harry had always known that Dumbledore was wise.

At the end of the summer he would be going back to Hogwarts for his fourth year. He had been counting the days ever since he got home. There was a chart on the wall by the door, like last summer's, with a line drawn through every day that had gone. Not many were left now. All the same, it would be another fortnight before he saw the castle again.

His eyes wandered hopelessly round the room once more. They came to rest on the birthday cards from Ron and Hermione, which still stood on the windowsill where he had put them on the last day of July. What would those two say, if he wrote to tell them his scar was hurting?

At once Hermione's voice was in his head, high and panicky.

‘Your scar hurt? Harry, that’s really serious… Write to Professor Dumbledore! And I’ll go and check *Common Magical Ailments and Afflictions*… Maybe there’s something in there about curse scars…’

Yes, that was Hermione all over. Go straight to the Headmaster, and look it up in a book while you waited.

Lupin, on the other hand, would have told him to go and talk to a priest. As it happened, that was more or less what Harry had been doing. He had gone to Evensong at St Michael’s every Sunday since that first evening at the beginning of July. He still didn’t feel completely at home there. Nobody in the congregation ever spoke to him. They were all elderly, just as they had been that first evening. They seemed to come mostly to catch up with one another about their hips and their grandchildren. Praying came a long way second.

It was the vicar Harry couldn’t make out. Every Sunday without fail, when the last hymn was over and the old ladies were collecting their handbags, the old man came all the way down the church to the back pew to ask how Harry was getting on. He seemed oddly interested in the state of Harry’s soul. He was very kind about it. That only made Harry more suspicious, because in his experience kind grown-ups generally wanted something. Besides, it wasn’t as though Harry could tell him very much. *Well, Vicar, there was this basilisk…*

All the same, he was learning a good deal about the Bible from him. The old man kept coming back to pride. There was the bad sort, the pride that went before a fall, which he said was the Devil’s own sin and the oldest one there was. Then there was the other sort.

‘He is proud of you, you know,’ the old man had said last Sunday, at the church door, with his long hand resting on Harry’s shoulder. ‘Our Lord, I mean. He is very proud of you indeed.’

He had said *you* in a very particular way, meaning Harry and nobody else, as though he knew what had happened under the school, in the Chamber of Secrets. Harry had lain on the cold stone floor down there and looked up into the same kind, grave face that he had stared at as a little boy, in the window over the altar. Sometimes Harry could have sworn the old man talked about Jesus like an old friend he had shared tea and crumpets with only last Tuesday. They might well be doing it again next week.

That was silly, of course. It was just as silly as the idea of writing to Dumbledore.

Where Dumbledore went for the summer holidays, Harry couldn't have said anyway. He cheered himself up for a moment by picturing him on a beach somewhere, stretched out in a deckchair in his long robes and pointed hat, with his silver beard spread over his chest, dabbing sun cream on the end of his crooked nose. Wherever he was, Hedwig would find him. She had never once failed to deliver a letter, even with no address on it. But what was Harry supposed to say?

Dear Professor Dumbledore, Sorry to bother you, but my scar hurt this morning. Yours sincerely, Harry Potter.

Even inside his own head, it sounded stupid. Dumbledore was wise. He had far more important things to deal with.

So he tried to imagine what Ron would say instead. In a moment Ron's freckled face swam up in front of him, red hair, long nose and all, wearing a baffled expression.

'Your scar hurt? But… but You-Know-Who can't be near you now, can he? I mean… you'd know, wouldn't you? He'd be trying to do you in again, wouldn't he? I dunno, Harry, maybe curse scars always twinge a bit… I'll ask Dad…'

Mr Weasley was a capable enough wizard. He worked for the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office, though, and as far as Harry knew he was no particular expert on curses. Besides, Harry didn't much like the thought of the whole Weasley family hearing that he was getting jumpy over a twinge or two. Mrs Weasley had always been funny about the Dursleys. She would fuss even worse than Hermione. As for Fred and George, Ron's twin brothers, who were sixteen, they might decide that Harry had lost his nerve. He liked the Weasleys better than any other family on earth. He was hoping they would invite him to stay any day now, since Ron had bellowed across King's Cross that he would call about the World Cup. He didn't want his visit spoilt by people peering anxiously at his forehead every five minutes.

Harry ground his knuckles into his forehead. What he really wanted, though he would have died rather than say so to anybody, was somebody like… well, somebody like a parent. He wanted a grown-up wizard he could go to without feeling a fool. He wanted somebody who cared about him, who knew about Dark magic.

Oh, brilliant, he thought savagely. *Off you go, then. Pop across the landing to wake up Mum and Dad. Tell them you've had a nasty dream.* That was what Dudley would do. Dudley had done it until he was well past ten, running across the landing to his parents' room every time there was a thunderstorm. Harry had lain in the dark in the cupboard under the stairs, listening to Aunt Petunia soothe him. *There, there, Diddykins. Mummy's here.* Nobody had ever come down the stairs to the cupboard to say *there, there* to Harry. He had given up waiting for anybody to do it at about the time he learnt to tie his own shoelaces. He was fourteen now. He had faced Voldemort twice and a basilisk once. He could hardly start crying for his

mummy now, like a normal boy, could he? He hadn't got one to cry for.

Then the answer came to him. It was blindingly obvious. He could hardly believe it had taken him this long.

Sirius.

Harry leapt up off the bed, hurried across to his desk and sat down. He pulled a sheet of parchment towards him, dipped his quill in the ink and wrote *Dear Sirius*. Then he stopped, wondering how best to put it. He was still amazed he hadn't thought of Sirius at once. Then again, perhaps it wasn't so very surprising. He had only found out he had a godfather two months ago.

Sirius was on the run, wanted for crimes he had never committed, because the Ministry was full of idiots. The whole wizarding world was full of idiots, if it came to that: people who needed telling what to do, and then needed making to do it.

All that would have to wait, though, until Harry was stronger. It would have to wait until Dracina stood beside him… if she wanted to be there. That was supposing she hadn't got fed up with him first, and worked out what a prize plonker he was for even thinking that sort of thing.

He still minded, rather a lot, being stuck with the Dursleys at all. He knew he couldn't really have gone to live with Sirius, not with Sirius on the run. But it was the blood that kept him here: his mother's blood, which ran in Aunt Petunia's veins as well as his own. It was the old magic Dumbledore had talked about, the magic of Elves and of Númenor. Harry had first met it in a book he had thought was nothing but a story. He had gone on thinking so even after the sword. He had pulled Andúril out of the Sorting Hat months before he reached the page where the Elves forged it anew.

It was all knotted together, he was sure: the Elves, the blood, Andúril, Aragorn. He couldn't for the life of him see how. Whether he liked it or not, Harry Potter was mixed up in something that most people thought was simply a very well written fantasy story.

That brought him, rather neatly, to Hermione's letter. The photograph she had sent was still propped against the ink bottle on his desk, where he could see it while he worked.

It had come a fortnight after he got back to Privet Drive, with the photograph tucked inside. It was a Muggle photograph, so nothing in it moved, and it showed the box of a computer game. It was the same sort of thing Dudley used to play on his Amiga, before he smashed the Amiga to pieces in a tantrum one Boxing Day. The bits were still in a cardboard box at the bottom of Harry's wardrobe. The picture on the front of the box showed an island, seen from high above, the way a bird would see it. Across the top, in big bold letters, was a single word: MYST.

Underneath, in smaller letters, it said *The Surrealistic Adventure That Will Become Your World*. Harry didn't know what *surrealistic* meant. He hadn't needed to. He had very nearly dropped the photograph. He had been to Myst. On the box it looked a good deal smarter than when he had seen it, all bright paint and sunshine, without a speck of rust anywhere. But it was the same island. There was the dock, with the sunken ship beside it, and the great stone gear on the hill. It had been real. He had stood on that dock in the rain.

Dear Harry,

I hope you're all right and that the Dursleys are behaving. Before you say anything, look at the photograph.

Dad bought a new computer last month, so that he can do the surgery's accounts at home. It came with a CD-ROM drive and a few games thrown in, to show off what CD-ROMs can do. (They're like

the compact discs Dad plays his Beethoven on, only they hold pictures as well as sound. Thousands of pictures.) Apparently everybody who sells computers is putting this game in the box at the moment, because it looks so impressive. It's called Myst. Dad tried it for one evening, got stuck on the very first island and gave up. I didn't.

Harry, it's OUR island. I've put in some photographs I took of the screen with Mum's camera, so you can see for yourself. They've come out rather stripy, but you can still tell. The dock is there, with the ship, the gear, the clock tower and the library with the map on the wall. Everything is exactly where it was when we were there, only it's all new and clean. The sun is shining. Nothing has rotted.

She was right. Harry had gone through her stripy photographs one by one, with his heart thumping, and there wasn't a single thing in them he didn't recognise.

You go round the island solving puzzles. They are VERY hard. I filled two exercise books with notes, and I still had to sit up until two in the morning over the last one. But it's worth it, because the story comes out bit by bit. I think it's TRUE.

The island belonged to a man called Atrus, whose journals you find in the library. He wrote books that linked to other worlds, which he called Ages, just as Anna did. His two sons used to go with him. Their names were Achenar and Sirrus.

The first time he read it, Harry had stopped dead at that name. He had gone back to read it again. *Sirrus.* It wasn't quite *Sirius*. It was near enough, though, for Harry to wonder whether this was another of God's little jokes at his expense. He had begun to suspect that God had rather a lot of those.

Something went wrong between them. When you get to the library, half the books on the shelves have been burnt, and Atrus has

gone. There are two books on the stands at the end of the room, a red one and a blue one. Sirrus is trapped inside the red one. Achenar is trapped inside the blue one. You can see their faces flickering on the pages, and they both beg you to bring them their missing pages so they can get out. Each of them says the other one burnt the library and murdered their father. I didn't believe either of them. Harry, those are the two EMPTY stands. The ones we saw.

It turns out they were both lying. Atrus is alive. His sons trapped him somewhere he can't get out of, because the page he needs to come home is missing from his book. If you find it for him, he can come back. Then he deals with his sons. He doesn't say how. He says his wife, Catherine, is being held prisoner in another world. He has to go and help her. (I keep thinking about the woman Sirius said he'd been talking to in the library. He said she was dreadfully sad about something. I've looked for her all over the game, but she isn't in it.)

There are four endings. I've done all four, which I'm not proud of. In two of them you believe one of the brothers, and he traps you in his book instead. In another you go to Atrus without the page. You're stuck there with him forever. In that one he says 'Welcome to D'ni.' He actually SAYS it.

So I'm nearly certain Atrus is D'ni, or something to do with them, even though Anna says they all died in the plague. He writes linking books, exactly the way Anna said the D'ni did. But Anna's journal never mentions anybody called Atrus. I've been through my notes on it twice. Perhaps he was in one of the bits that were cut out.

The game was made by two brothers in America. Somebody must have told them all this. Either that, or they've been there themselves.

I've been finding out as much as I can. The library in town gets all the computer magazines, so I've read every review. Dad has a modem as well, which lets the computer talk to other computers

down the telephone line. He pays a company called Demon Internet ten pounds a month for it, but Mum has rationed us both because of the phone bill. You can read things called newsgroups on it. They're a bit like noticeboards, only anybody in the world can pin things up on them. There's one called comp.sys.ibm.pc.games.adventure. (I know.) Hundreds of people talk about Myst on it. Most of them just want hints.

Every so often, though, somebody posts something different. There aren't many of them. I've found six so far, from different people in different countries, and none of them seems to know any of the others. They all describe the same thing. They talk about a sort of calling. They say they can't stop thinking about a desert they've never been to. One of them keeps dreaming about an old volcano with a crack in the ground beside it. Another said it felt like being called home.

They're all Muggles, as far as I can tell. They're clever, too. You'd have to be, to finish Myst. None of them has ever heard of Anna's journal, because it's never been published anywhere outside the wizarding world. All the same, they're starting to put things together, and I think it's because of this feeling, whatever it is. A few of them have begun talking about going to New Mexico. One says he got as far as a fence in the middle of nowhere, with men behind it who told him to go home.

Harry, nobody should know about New Mexico. I only know because of Anna, and because of what people say about the Muggles who are digging there. These people don't really know anything at all. They've only got the feeling.

I keep thinking about the holes in Anna's journal. If she really did have a baby down there, there might be people walking about

today with a little bit of D'ni in them, who haven't the faintest idea. I know that sounds mad. But what if it's something in the blood?

I'm going to keep looking. I'll write again as soon as I know more. Please don't do anything silly in the meantime, and do start your Potions essay.

Love from

Hermione

P.S. I sent Dracina copies of the photographs as well. She wrote back that she doesn't need a Muggle box to remember the island, thank you, because she was there. Well, so was I. I've been back eleven times.

That had been the last proper letter Hermione had sent. There had been a card on his birthday, of course, with the book. Inside it she had written just a few words, in her neat, rounded handwriting.

Still searching. We're all looking after you!

Harry had thought that was nice of her. He had stood the card on the windowsill, next to Ron's, and thought no more about it.

In the meantime, Harry had been working.

He knew he wasn't strong enough yet. He wasn't strong enough to change anything that mattered, not really. But he meant to be. He had spent the summer studying harder than even Hermione would have thought healthy. He was up most mornings before the milk float. He had read every book in his trunk twice. He had gone through his notes from Lupin's lessons three times, until he could have recited the defences against a grindylow in his sleep. He couldn't practise any spells, being underage, so he practised the wand movements instead, in front of the wardrobe mirror, with a pencil. He copied every counter-curse he could find into the back of an old exercise book of Dudley's. In the evenings, after the Dursleys

had gone to bed, he had even started on the little black Bible the vicar had pressed into his hands on his second Sunday.

He had worked something out, too. He had had three Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers so far. One had had Voldemort living on the back of his head. One had tried to wipe his memory. One had very nearly torn him to pieces, though that hadn't been Lupin's fault. Whoever turned up to teach them this year was very likely going to try to kill him as well. This time, Harry meant to be ready.

It was the anger that kept him going. Whenever he flagged, late at night with his eyes aching, he thought about the cupboard under the stairs, or about Sirius's thin face in that ruined library. He thought about the Ministry, which had locked Sirius up for twelve years without a trial. Then the anger would come up in him again, steady and strong, like a wind at his back. Instead of making him want to smash things, it made him want to *know* things, and to be ready. That was the good sort, he was nearly sure.

Odd things had happened while he worked, too. He never seemed to get tired, however late he sat up. One night at the end of July, the bulb in his lamp had gone with a pop, halfway through a chapter on Dark creatures. Harry had sat there in the dark, swearing under his breath. Then the clouds had slid off the moon. Its light came in at the window, so bright that he could read by it. It lay across his desk just where the book was, until he got to the end of the chapter. When he closed the book, a cloud drifted back across the moon, as neatly as a curtain being drawn. Lupin's cross had been warm against his chest the whole time.

'Thanks,' Harry had said to the window, feeling rather silly.

Nothing had answered. He had decided to take that as *you're welcome*.

The Dursleys never said a word about his school things any more. Partly that was Dumbledore. Harry still didn't know what he had said to them in the front room last summer, but they had never been quite the same since. Partly it was what Harry had told Uncle Vernon at King's Cross, which was that his godfather was a convicted murderer on the run. It was what the whole wizarding world believed, anyway. Harry had simply left out the part about Sirius being innocent, along with the part about there never having been a trial. He sometimes thought it was just as well that Sirius didn't know the whole story. If Harry ever told him properly what the Dursleys had done to him, the cupboard, the bars on the window, the bread pushed through the cat flap, Sirius would very likely come straight to Surrey to murder them. He wouldn't be quick about it, either.

Two letters had come from Sirius since Harry got home. Neither had come by owl, the way wizards usually sent their post. Both had arrived with large, gaudy tropical birds, which Hedwig thoroughly disapproved of. She had let them drink from her water dish with the worst possible grace before they flew off again. Harry, for his part, liked them. They made him think of palm trees and hot white beaches. Sirius never said where he was, in case somebody got hold of the letters, but Harry hoped he was enjoying himself. He couldn't imagine dementors lasting very long in bright sunshine. Perhaps that explained why Sirius had headed south. Both letters were hidden under the loose floorboard beneath his bed, which had come in very handy over the years. They sounded cheerful. In both of them Sirius had told him to get in touch if ever he needed to.

Well, he needed to now.

Outside, the sky was going grey. His lamp looked paler and paler as the cold light before sunrise crept across the room. Harry wrote,

crossed out and wrote again. At last the sun came up. The walls of his bedroom turned gold. Bedsprings creaked behind the wall, in the big front bedroom. Feet thumped on to the floor. Harry swept the crumpled bits of parchment off his desk into the wastepaper basket and read his finished letter through.

Dear Sirius,

Thanks for your last letter. That bird was enormous; it could hardly get through my window.

Things are the same as usual here. Dudley's diet isn't going too well. Was that prank with all the dead and bleeding rats in the fridge yours?

Harry had to stop there for a good laugh. It had been the best thing to happen at number four all summer. On Thursday morning Aunt Petunia had opened the fridge to get out the grapefruit for Dudley's breakfast. She found every shelf in it crammed with dead rats. All of them were bleeding, slowly, steadily, over the cheese, the margarine and Dudley's low fat yoghurts. Her scream brought the woman from number seven out on to her front step in her dressing gown. Uncle Vernon came pounding up the stairs, purple to the roots of his moustache. His hand shot out for Harry's collar, then stopped a few inches short, trembling. He marched Harry downstairs without touching him. Then he stood in front of the open fridge for a long time, breathing hard through his nose. He looked at Harry, who had quite plainly been asleep until two minutes before. Then he looked out of the kitchen window at the empty garden, as though a man with a wand might be crouching behind the shed. He went a peculiar greyish colour. He left for work an hour early. He hadn't mentioned it since. Dudley went back to bed.

That left Aunt Petunia. Nobody offered to help her. She cleaned it all up herself, in her yellow rubber gloves, with a bucket of hot

water and a bottle of bleach. She lifted the rats out one at a time by their tails and dropped them into a bin bag, gagging. Every few minutes she had to stop to hang over the sink. She cried the whole time, in thin, hiccuping sobs that Harry could hear from the top of the stairs. The blood had got everywhere. It had soaked into the butter. It had run down into the salad drawer, into the rubber seal round the door, into every crack in every shelf. She scrubbed each shelf three times. Then she threw away every scrap of food in the fridge and scrubbed the whole thing again.

'In my fridge,' she kept whispering, to nobody at all. 'In my nice, clean fridge…'

By lunchtime the woman from number seven had told everybody in Privet Drive that the Dursleys had rats. Aunt Petunia spent the afternoon on her knees on the kitchen floor, red-eyed, scrubbing at a stain on the lino that had already gone. That evening a van brought a new fridge. Since then she had opened it every morning with her eyes shut. Harry hadn't offered to help. Nobody had ever helped him in that kitchen.

Harry was almost certain it had been Sirius. He had thought of Dracina's letter, of course. But Dracina and Hermione were no more allowed to do magic out of school than he was. He couldn't picture any grown-up they knew filling a fridge with bleeding rats, either. It had Marauder written all over it. He wasn't at all sure how Sirius had managed it from the other side of the world, but then Marauders had their ways.

My aunt found him smuggling doughnuts into his room yesterday. They told him they'd have to cut his pocket money if he keeps doing it, so he got really angry and chucked his Megadrive out of the window. That's a sort of computer thing you can play games on. Bit

stupid really, now he hasn't even got Sonic the Hedgehog or that Shinobi game to take his mind off things.

I'm OK, mainly because the Dursleys are terrified you might turn up and turn them all into bats if I ask you to.

A weird thing happened this morning, though. My scar hurt again. Last time that happened it was because Voldemort was at Hogwarts. But I don't reckon he can be anywhere near me now, can he? Do you know if curse scars sometimes hurt years afterwards?

I'll send this with Hedwig when she gets back; she's off hunting at the moment. Say hello to Buckbeak for me.

Harry

Harry read it through once more. Yes, he thought, it would do. He had left out the dream on purpose. He didn't want Sirius to think he was frightened. He folded the parchment up and put it to one side of the desk, ready for when Hedwig came back. He got up, stretched and opened the wardrobe again. This time he didn't look in the mirror. He started pulling his clothes on, ready to go down to breakfast.

Then he heard a scream.