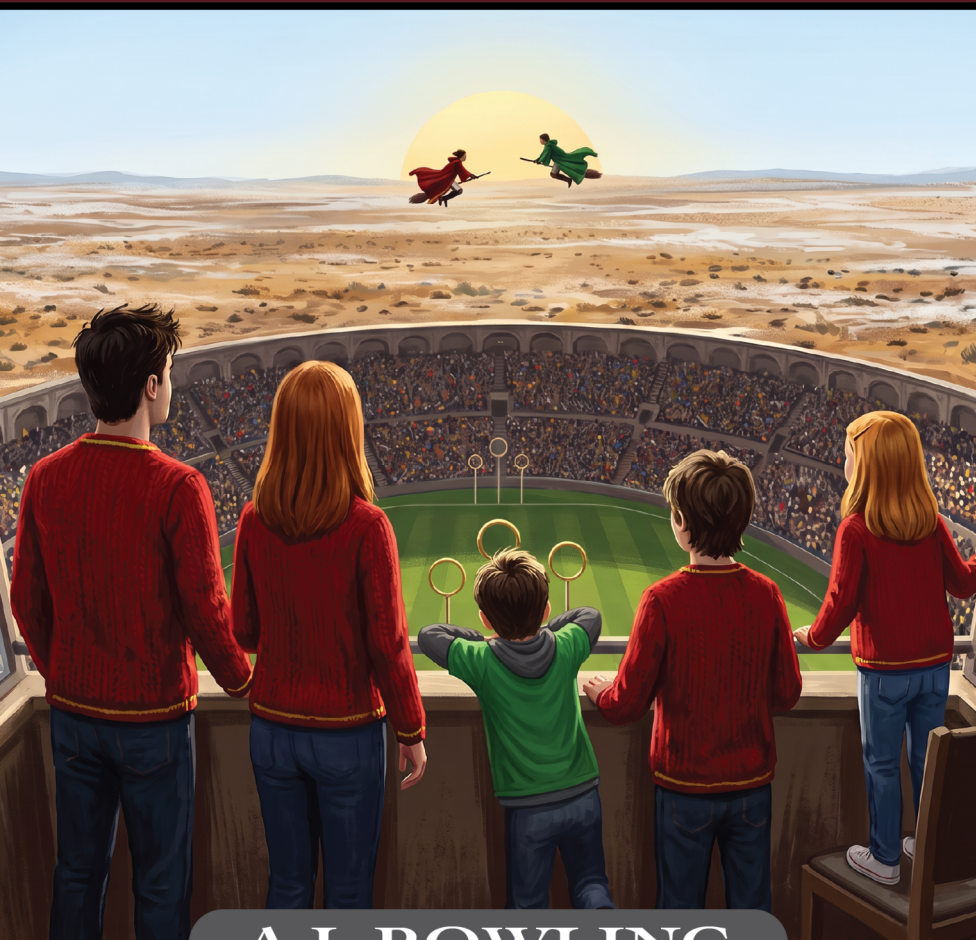


FAMILY POTTER

and the Quidditch World Cup



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LLM-GENERATED

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— CHAPTER ONE —

The Wrong Season

The semi-final had been going for nineteen hours and forty minutes, and Ginny had stopped being able to feel her feet at about hour eleven.

The American Chasers had stopped being able to feel their hands at about hour twelve, which was more of a problem for them. Mercy Wardwell had been beating her head against her broom handle at intervals since midnight. Ginny had written it down the first time, and the second, and after the fourth had simply drawn a small broom in the margin and a line through it.

Beside her in the press enclosure, Rita Skeeter's acid-green quill was writing on its own, as it had been all night. That was how Ginny knew Rita hadn't watched a single minute of the match. The quill didn't care about Quidditch. It cared about which of the American wives had been crying in the supporters' stand, and whether it had been the Keeper's.

"Twentieth hour," Ginny said, to her own notebook. "Smackhammer's seen it."

He had. Everyone had. The Snitch was hanging low over the Brazilian end like something that had got bored of being chased, and the American Seeker went for it flat along his broom, and the Brazilian Beaters, who had been saving something all night, put two Bludgers across his line so precisely that he had to pull up or lose his head.

Then Silva went.

Not at the Snitch. At the *scoreboard*, as far as anyone could tell, straight down the pitch at a speed that made the Brazilian supporters stop singing, and for a whole second Ginny thought *suicidal*. Then the Snitch broke the same way, as if it had been waiting to be asked, and Silva put out a hand without slowing down.

Brazil 420, USA 310.

The noise came up out of the stadium like weather. Ginny wrote the time, the score, and *Silva* — *mad or brilliant, possibly both*, and underlined *both*.

"Your family arrives today, I hear," said Rita, not looking up from her quill.

"Does it," said Ginny.

"How *lovely* for you. After all this time." A tiny pause, in which the quill wrote something and underlined it twice. "Three whole months."

Ginny capped her ink, put her notebook in her bag, and left the enclosure without answering. It wasn't restraint. She'd been awake for twenty hours, and if she'd opened her mouth she'd have hexed something, and she needed her press pass until Friday.

The Portkey field was on the far side of the campsite, past the supporters' tents and the charmed banners fighting each other in the wind, past a single sad WALES flag somebody had forgotten to take down in June. Gwenog Jones had gone home with the Welsh squad after the quarter-final, having tried on her way out to curse the face off Brazil's manager, as promised. Ginny had written that up too. Gwenog had sent her an owl about the article which Ginny was keeping for her old age.

It was just after noon, and the sun was nearly as high as it was going to get, which in July in Patagonia wasn't very. Hard, bright light, a sky so big it made you feel you were standing on a plate, and a wind straight off the desert that went through everything. Ginny pulled her hat down and thought, not for the first time, that nobody at home understood what *winter* was.

They came in at twelve-forty, in a tangle, the way people always came off international Portkeys: a lot of stumbling and one person sitting down. The person sitting down was Ron.

Ginny saw them before they saw her, and she did what she always did with a squad she hadn't seen in a while — counted them, and looked for what had changed.

Harry, hand already out for the nearest child. James, taller, *definitely* taller, already talking. Albus, in a green Brazil shirt and nothing warmer. Lily, holding Hermione's hand because she'd been nearest, grinning at everything. Hermione, Rose, and Hugo in proper coats. Teddy, hair a cheerful, freezing blue. Behind them, Bill's lot, George's lot, Neville, Luna already waving at a cloud.

Lily had lost a tooth. The top one, at the front. Nobody had written to tell her.

Ginny counted the gap twice, and then went to find something to shout at.

She didn't get the chance. Somebody near the field fence said *that's Harry Potter* in the voice people had been using for sixteen years, and somebody else said *the whole lot of them, the DA*, and the crowd changed shape.

It happened fast. It always did. Heads turned, then bodies, then the people at the back started pushing to see what the people at the front could see, and the people at the front had nowhere to go but forward. A tent went down on its poles with a noise like a sneeze. Somebody's small child sat down hard on the frozen ground and was lifted, squalling, by three strangers at once.

Harry had the children behind him before Ginny had moved. He didn't draw his wand. He didn't shout. He just went very still and very calm, with one hand flat against James's chest and his eyes going to the gaps in the crowd — this one, that one, that one — the way a Keeper reads three Chasers at once. By the time the Security Warlocks arrived, wands up and whistles going, he'd already moved the whole family six feet to the left, out of the way of whatever was coming.

Ginny got there on the third whistle. Harry saw her, and his face did nothing at all for a second, and then everything.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," said Ginny. "Where are your coats?"

The VIP campsite had been charmed by somebody who'd been paid a great deal of money and had cared about none of it. The tents were big inside and warm inside, right up to the flap, where the heating charm stopped as if it had hit a wall. Step out of the Potters' tent and you went from a nice spring afternoon to the inside of an icebox in one stride.

"It's *July*," Harry said.

"It's July here too," said Ginny. "It's also winter. I wrote to you."

"You didn't—"

"I wrote to you. A whole letter. Two sides." She looked at his jacket, the thin one, the one he wore to the shops. "Check your pocket."

He checked his pocket. He took out a letter, in her handwriting, the seal unbroken, and looked at it.

Ginny gave him a look. Harry gave her nothing back at all, which was worse, and which she'd have found funny if her children hadn't been blue at the lips.

"I did say," said Hermione, from inside a scarf.

"You did say," Ron agreed, from inside a borrowed blanket.

"I said it to you, specifically. Four times."

"And I *listened* to you. Four times."

Rose and Hugo, who had been packed for by their mother, stood in their good wool coats looking like two small, warm, smug advertisements for the Granger method. Albus, beside them, had his arms wrapped round himself in his Brazil shirt and his jaw set in a way Ginny recognised from the mirror.

"Put a jumper on, Al."

"I haven't got one."

"Put *James's* hoodie on."

"It's got a Bulgaria badge on," said Albus, as if that ended it.

It did, apparently. Ginny went and found him a blanket.

Victoire had drifted over to the fire-bowl outside the next tent with her hands in her sleeves, and James, who had been in Patagonia for under an hour and already knew the location of every snack stall on the campsite, drifted after her with the air of someone who'd just found out something important.

"France didn't even *qualify*," he said.

"Neither did England," said Victoire.

"England's not *French*."

Victoire, who was fourteen and had grown up in a house with Fleur, looked at him the way Fleur looked at bad cheese, and turned back to the fire. James considered this a win.

Teddy, across the fire, laughed at something Victoire said, and his hair went a shade bluer. Ginny decided that was none of her business, and filed it anyway.

The sun went at ten past six, all at once, the way it did out here. The cold came down after it like a lid.

They'd got the fire-bowls going between the tents, and everyone had ended up outside anyway, because the tents were warm and the fires were better. The Weasleys and the Potters sat on anything they could find — crates, cushions, Ron on the ground again — with the children packed into blankets, the whole campsite smelling of woodsmoke and other people's grilling meat, and the sky going from blue to a clear, hard black, full of more stars than Ginny had ever seen at home. Three months in, and she still hadn't got used to that.

Teddy was the first one to look up properly.

"That's wrong," he said.

He said it the way he said most things, easily, but he didn't look away. The moon was up, high in the north, exactly half full, with the lit half on the left.

Ginny, who had seen it do that every night since April, looked at him instead of the moon. Remus used to know the phase without looking up, too. She didn't say so.

"It's lit on the wrong side," Teddy said. "Isn't it? At home it's the other way round."

"It is!" said Hermione, sitting up as if somebody had rung a bell. "It's because we're in the southern hemisphere. We're standing — well, upside down isn't quite right, but it's a good way to think of it — upside down compared with home. So we're seeing it the other way up. At home, when it's getting bigger, the lit side's on the right. Here it's on the left. And all the markings are upside down as well: the face, if you look for a face. And it's in the *north*, because from this far south the moon goes across the northern part of the sky, the same as the sun does at midday, which is why the sun here's always—"

"Does the water go down the plughole the other way, then?" said Ron.

"That's a myth."

"Is it?"

"It's a *myth*, Ron. The sink's too small. It depends on the shape of the basin and which way you pull the—"

"Right," said Ron, and lay back down on the ground with his eyes shut.

Hermione went on for a bit about the Earth's tilt. Rose listened to all of it. Hugo listened to about half. James said "That's so weird" twice and then started a competition with Fred about who could get their breath to make the biggest cloud. Ginny, who could have told them all of it in six words — *other end of the world, other way up* — didn't.

Lily hadn't said anything the whole time. She was sitting in Luna's lap, inside Luna's cloak, which was made, as far as Ginny could tell, of sixteen national flags sewn together, and she was staring straight up at the moon with her mouth open and the gap in her teeth showing.

"Why's it upside down?" she said, to Luna, not to anyone else.

Hermione opened her mouth.

"It's the same moon," said Luna. "It's just looking at us from the other side for a change. It must be nice for it. It usually only sees the top of our heads."

Lily thought about that for a while.

"Hello, moon," she said, and waved.

Hermione closed her mouth again, and after a second she smiled, and didn't say anything else. Ginny, across the fire, raised her mug to her.

The Prophet's dispatch case went back to London at eleven every night, local time, which was three in the morning in Diagon Alley. Ginny had been filing into it since April. It took copy from the desert to the night desk faster than any owl, and it didn't care what was on the bottom of the page.

She wrote the Brazil–USA report in forty minutes with her feet on the stove: twenty hours, Silva's run, Wardwell's head, Smackhammer robbed. She read it over once and cut two adjectives.

Then, under the last line, she wrote:

For the night desk — please forward to Mrs M. Weasley, the Burrow. Personal.

MUM — They've all come in their summer things. It's winter here. Jumpers please for Harry, James, Al, Lily, Ron. Sizes as last Christmas. Hermione's fine, obviously. Urgent.

Love, G.

She put it in the case, shut the lid, and heard it go.

Behind her, in the tent, Harry was already asleep with a child on each side of him and one across his feet, and the letter she'd written him in May was on the table, open at last. He'd read it. He'd put a mug on it to stop it curling.

The second semi-final started at eleven the next morning and lasted ten hours.

Ginny had watched a lot of Quidditch. She'd played seven years of it professionally and written about it for four, and she knew when she was watching something she'd be asked about when she was old. By the end of the first hour, six Bulgarian players were bleeding from the head, and she knew.

The Japanese Beaters, Hongo and Shingo, were the best pair she'd ever seen. They weren't hitting Bludgers. They were placing them, the way you'd put down a cup of tea. Bulgaria, fifty-to-one outsiders, flew like people who'd been told they had nothing to lose and had decided to believe it.

In the third hour, a Bludger came at Krum from behind, and Vulchanov, the Bulgarian Beater, put his own body in the way of it. He took it full in the chest and went off his broom like a dropped coat, and Noriko Sato, the Japanese Seeker, who had been chasing the Snitch across the far end of the pitch, turned without a pause and dived and caught him by the collar thirty feet above the grass.

The Snitch was right there. Krum was right there. Krum had a clear line to it, and Sato had both arms full of an unconscious Bulgarian.

Krum pulled up.

The whole stadium stood. Ginny stood. She didn't decide to; she was just on her feet, with her quill on the floor, clapping, and Rita beside her was writing something about *theatrics*. Up in the stands to her left, she could see Harry standing too, with James on his shoulders and Albus on a bench next to him, both of them clapping without knowing quite what for.

It got dark at six. The floodlights came on, pale and cold, and the wind brought frost with it. By the eighth hour Japan were two hundred and fifty points ahead, and the children were asleep in blankets in the stands, and the Bulgarian supporters had stopped singing.

Then Bulgaria started scoring. They scored and scored, chipping away at it, a goal at a time, like people digging themselves out of a hole with spoons, until,

with the clocks past eight, it was level. And in the tenth hour Krum went into a dive so steep and so convincing that Sato followed him down, and at the bottom of it he wasn't there any more. He was going *up*, the other way, towards a glint that had been hanging over the Japanese hoops for a minute and a half without anyone but him seeing it.

He caught it. The stadium went completely silent for about ten seconds, as if nobody could quite believe it had been allowed.

Then the Bulgarian end went mad.

Six hundred and ten to four hundred and sixty. Ginny wrote it down in a hand she'd have to decipher later, and underlined *Vulchanov* and *Sato* and *Krum* *pulled up* three times each.

She found Harry afterwards, at the bottom of the stand, with Lily asleep over his shoulder and James and Albus propped against his legs like two sacks. His breath was smoking in the floodlights.

"That," he said, "was the best thing I've ever seen."

"It was all right," said Ginny.

He nearly laughed. Then he looked back up at the pitch, where the Bulgarian players were still lying on the grass as if somebody had dropped them there, and his face went quiet.

"I'd like the boys to meet him," he said. "Krum. If that's—"

"I'm interviewing him tomorrow at two," said Ginny. "Bulgarian compound. They've locked all the team compounds down since the Americans pinched Liechtenstein's bird, but I'm press." She looked at Albus, who was asleep on his feet in his Brazil shirt and a blanket and somehow still managing to look disapproving. "Bring them. Bring a blanket. Bring *yourself* a blanket."

"Albus won't want to."

"Albus," said Albus, with his eyes shut, "wants Brazil to win."

"Then he'll want to meet the man Brazil have got to beat," said Ginny. "Know your enemy."

Albus opened one eye and considered this.

"Fine," he said, and shut it again.

— CHAPTER TWO —

The Third Attempt

The team compounds were on the far side of the stadium, where the campsite ran out and the desert started, and since June they'd had fences round them.

Not ordinary fences. Harry could feel the wards from thirty yards away, the way you could feel a stove was on without touching it. Somebody had been very frightened about somebody else's bird, and had spent a great deal of the ICWQC's money making sure it couldn't happen twice.

"They pinched a *bird*?" said Ron.

"An Augurey," said Ginny, walking fast, the way she always walked when she was working. "Liechtenstein's mascot. American supporters. They gave it back. There were owls between Ministers about it."

"Over a *bird*."

"Over a bird, Ron."

Two Security Warlocks stood at the Bulgarian gate in long grey coats with the collars up. One of them looked at Ginny's press pass. The other looked at Harry, and then kept looking at Harry, in a way Harry had long since stopped noticing and never stopped seeing.

"Mrs Potter's here for Mr Krum at two," said the first Warlock, reading. "And... party."

"Party," Ginny agreed.

Harry took the layout in on the way through the gate, because he always did, and it went in without comment. Canvas, a practice pitch marked out in frost, a row of long tents for the players, the Bulgarian flag cracking on its pole in the wind. The fence ran all the way round. On the east side there was a second, lower fence and a gate with a padlock on it, and beyond that a strip of churned ground with animal pens along it, and beyond *that*, green. Green flags, green tents, green everywhere, and a noise like the sea. The Brazilian end.

He looked at it for exactly as long as it took to see it, and then looked back at his children.

James was walking backwards in front of him so as not to miss anything, in a blanket worn as a cloak. Albus was walking forwards, slowly, in his Brazil shirt and another blanket, with his arms wrapped round himself and an expression of deep suspicion, as if the whole Bulgarian compound had been built specifically to annoy him.

"Al," Harry said. "Try and be nice."

"I *am* nice."

"Try and look it."

Albus tried. It didn't help.

Viktor Krum came out of the long tent at five to two, in a tracksuit, with a towel round his neck, and stopped.

He was bigger than Harry remembered. Or not bigger, exactly: more solid, the last twenty years gone into him and stayed there. The heavy dark eyebrows were the same, and the slight stoop of someone who had spent his life on a broom and only visited the ground. There was grey at his temples, and a bruise going green on his jaw from last night.

For a second the air smelled of cut hedge, and night, and something burning a long way off. Then it didn't.

"Harry," said Krum.

"Viktor."

Harry put his hand out, from habit. Krum looked at it, and then stepped past it and put both arms round him, briefly and hard, like somebody lifting a trunk.

Harry, who hadn't been expecting that, found he didn't mind.

"You are old now," said Krum, letting go.

"So are you."

"I am *older*." Krum considered him. "You have grey. There, and there."

"I've got three children."

Krum nodded, as if that was a perfectly sound medical explanation, and looked down.

"Mr Krum," said James, who had been waiting for this moment with the patience of a coiled spring. He put his hand out. Krum shook it, gravely. James's whole hand disappeared.

"You are the oldest?"

"James," said James. "I saw you yesterday. When you didn't catch it. When she was holding the other man. That was—" He looked for a word, and couldn't find one big enough, and settled for: "*Wicked*."

"Thank you," said Krum. "It vos very stupid. My coach is still shouting."

James laughed, delighted, as if Krum had made a joke. Maybe he had.

"And you are Albus," said Krum, looking at the Brazil shirt.

Albus looked back at him from inside his blanket.

"Do you know Gonalo Flores?" he said.

"Al," said Harry.

"I know him," said Krum. "He is very fast. Very good. He goes left always, ven he is tired, and then he is very dangerous, because you think he is tired." He turned, and pointed with his chin, east, past the practice pitch, past the lower fence, at the green. "His team is there. He vill not tell you ven he goes left, I think."

Albus looked where Krum was pointing, and said nothing at all, and Harry, who should have seen it, was looking at Ron.

Ron had come because, as he'd put it at breakfast, someone had to carry things. Nobody had been able to think of anything that needed carrying. He'd come anyway, in a borrowed hat, with his hands in his pockets.

He had not, Harry was fairly sure, come in order to shake hands with Viktor Krum. But Krum had turned from the boys, and seen him, and put out his hand, and there was nothing in all the world Ron could do about it.

"Ron," said Krum.

"Viktor," said Ron.

They shook. It went on for a moment longer than handshakes usually go on.

"And how is Hermione?"

He said it carefully, every syllable where it belonged, like something he had practised for twenty years. Ron's ears went red.

"Fine."

"She is well?"

"Yeah."

"Good. That is good." Another squeeze. "Tell her I asked."

"Will do. Thanks for spelling that out."

They let go at the same moment, as if a referee had blown a whistle. Ron put his hand back in his pocket. Krum turned to Ginny, who was standing with her quill already moving and her face perfectly straight.

Harry had to look at the Bulgarian flag for a while.

The interview took forty minutes. Harry stood at the edge of the practice pitch and half listened, because Ginny asking a Seeker questions was worth listening to. She knew exactly what she wanted and got it in two questions where anyone else would have needed ten. Krum talked about Vulchanov, who had two cracked ribs and wanted to play on Friday. He talked about Sato. He talked about being thirty-eight.

"This is my third time. Third World Cup." He shrugged, a small movement for such big shoulders. "There will not be a fourth. So."

"So," said Ginny, writing.

Harry didn't say anything. He'd been seventeen once, with one thing left to do. He looked at the bruise going green on Krum's jaw, and wanted him to win.

James was on his back on the frozen ground, blowing clouds at the sky. Beside him—

Harry looked. He looked again.

Beside him was a blanket. Albus's blanket, folded, neatly, on purpose.

He counted without meaning to. James. Ron. Ginny. Krum. Two Warlocks at the gate. Three players at the tent. James.

One short.

The world did what it always did at moments like this, which was go very quiet and very slow and very clear. His own voice came out low and ordinary.

"James. Where's Al?"

"Dunno." James sat up. "He was here."

"When?"

"Just now. Before."

Harry was already walking. Not running: running made people look. The practice pitch, empty. The long tents: a physio, a Beater with his arm in a sling, nobody small. Behind the tents. Round the back of the flagpole. The frost on the pitch, with nothing but boot prints on it and one set of small trainer prints, going east.

He followed them to the lower fence. They stopped at the fence. There was a gap at the bottom, between two posts, where the frozen ground had heaved. It was the width of a small boy lying flat.

On the other side, the churned strip, and the animal pens, and beyond them, green. Thousands of people in green. Singing. Drums. Somebody letting off sparks.

He had his hand on the padlock before he'd thought.

"Sir." A Warlock, at his elbow. Not unfriendly. Very firm. "Sir, I can't let you through there."

"My son's through there."

"Then we'll get him, sir. But that's the Brazilian side. This week, a breach between compounds is an international incident, sir, it's got to go through the —"

"He's *eight*."

"Yes, sir." The Warlock had a notebook out already. He was doing everything exactly right. "What's he wearing, sir?"

"Green," said Harry, and heard it, and nearly laughed.

He looked past the Warlock at the Brazilian end. Someone at the nearest fence had seen him. Harry watched it happen: a face turning, a hand grabbing an arm, a word going sideways through the crowd like a Snitch through fingers. *It's him. It's Harry Potter. The DA*— The noise of the crowd changed shape. It leaned towards him.

He took his hand off the padlock and stepped back from the fence, and the crowd leaned back.

If he went in there, they'd come to him. All of them. They wouldn't mean any harm, and there were thousands of them, and his son was somewhere in the middle, small and green and exactly the same colour as everyone else.

He stood very still. Behind him he could hear Ginny, who had worked it out a second after he had, talking fast and low to a second Warlock and then to a man from the ICWQC with a clipboard. She was using the voice she used on referees. She couldn't go in there either. He could tell from the way she'd planted her feet: a Prophet reporter forcing her way into the Brazilian compound three days before the final, in front of half the world's press, would never be let near a pitch again. She was using the only door she had.

"I'll go," said Ron, at his shoulder.

"They know your face too."

Ron swore, quietly.

Someone they don't know, Harry thought. Someone nobody would look at twice. Someone who could walk into that crowd and be nobody at all.

"Ron," he said. "Teddy."

Ron got it instantly. Harry saw it land. Ron's wand was already out and down by his side, and a small silver terrier shot away from the tip of it along the ground, low and fast, round the back of the tents towards the campsite.

"He'll come," Ron said.

"I know."

Harry turned round.

James was standing where he'd left him, on the practice pitch, with his blanket round his shoulders. He wasn't looking at the Brazilian end, or at the Warlocks, or at his mother. He was looking at a spot on the frozen ground about a yard to the left of his own feet, very hard, as if something was written on it.

He wasn't looking at Harry at all.

— CHAPTER THREE —

Back-to-Front Feet

Al said not to tell.

He'd said it right after Krum pointed. He'd leaned over while James was lying on the frost doing breath-clouds, and whispered it, fast, with his eyes on the green end. *I'm going to get Flores's autograph. Don't tell. You promised.*

James hadn't promised. He'd said *You're not*, and *Al*, and *You'll get killed*, which was what Mum said about things. But Al had already said *You promised*, like that made it true, and then he'd got up and walked off round the back of the tents in his Brazil shirt, and James had thought he was going for a wee.

He'd folded his blanket first. That was how you knew he meant it. Al never folded anything.

Now Dad was at the fence, and the grey-coat men were at the fence, and Mum was talking to a man with a clipboard in her quick voice, and Uncle Ron had done a Patronus, a proper one, a little silver dog that went off along the ground like it was chasing a ball. And nobody was looking at James.

Which was good. Which was fine.

James looked at the ground. There was a stone in the frost, a white one, and he looked at it very hard.

Al said.

He thought about Al on his own in the green end with all those people. He thought about Al being eight. Al was small for eight. He thought about what Mum would say if Al got killed, and what Mum would say if James told, and what *Al* would say if James told, and he couldn't work out which was worst.

Uncle Ron came back from the fence and stood next to him and didn't say anything. James told Uncle Ron that Krum's hand was massive. Uncle Ron said, "Mm." James told him the Japanese Beaters were the best Beaters ever, better than anyone, and that Hongo could probably hit a Bludger through a wall. Uncle Ron said, "Mm." James told him about the stone.

Then he stopped talking, because he'd run out.

Teddy came round the side of the tents at a run, with his hair blue and his coat flapping open and Uncle Ron's silver dog fading out beside him.

"What's happened? What's—"

"He's gone to find Flores!"

It came out much too loud. The grey-coat men both turned round. Mum stopped talking to the clipboard man. Dad turned from the fence.

James's face went hot. He said the rest of it anyway, because it was out now and there was no putting it back.

"Al has. He said. To get his autograph. He went through the Brazil side. By the animal bit, where the Curupiras went in. Because Flores feeds them, I think. He thinks. He said don't tell."

Dad came over. He crouched down in front of James so their faces were level, which he only did when something was serious.

James waited to be in trouble.

"By the animal pens," Dad said. His voice was very calm. It was so calm it was worse than shouting. "The Curupira ones. That's where he said?"

"Yeah."

"When did he go?"

"When Krum pointed. Before the interview. I didn't— I thought he was going for a wee."

Dad nodded. That was all. He nodded, and stood up, and put his hand on James's head for a second, and then took it off again.

James wasn't in trouble. Somehow that was the worst thing so far.

"I can go in," said Teddy. "Can't I? They won't know me."

"That's why I sent for you," said Dad.

Teddy screwed his face up, as if he was about to sneeze.

His hair went first. The blue sort of drained out of it, like water going down a plughole, and it came out a flat brown, the brown of nothing in particular. Then his nose got bigger. Then his eyebrows got thicker, and he got some

freckles, and his chin went sort of soft, and when he opened his eyes again he looked like someone's uncle. Not a good uncle. The sort of uncle who asks how school is and then doesn't listen.

"*Wicked*," breathed James.

"Don't," said Teddy, in someone's uncle's voice, and grinned in his own. "It itches."

It was the best thing James had ever seen. It was better than Krum. It was better than the whole ten-hour match yesterday.

"Take James," said Dad.

Mum turned round. "*Harry*—"

"Nobody out there knows his face. They know mine. They know yours." Dad didn't take his eyes off her. "And he knows what Al said. He knows what *Al* looks like from behind in a crowd, which is more than a Warlock does." Something went between them that James couldn't read. "Teddy doesn't let go of him. Not once."

"Not once," said Teddy.

Mum looked at Teddy for a long moment, and then at James, and then she nodded.

Dad put his hand on James's shoulder. He didn't say anything. He just looked at him, for a long time. James looked back.

"I'm going round the handlers' side," Dad said to Teddy. "The ICWQC side, not the Brazilian side. There's a gate." He looked at the grey-coat man, who said *sir* and *yes, sir, with an escort, sir*, very fast, like he was glad. "If you get to him first, hold on to him and don't make a fuss. If I get there first, same."

"Same," said Teddy.

Teddy pulled James's blanket up over his head like a hood. "There," he said. "Now you're nobody too."

Then Teddy's hand was on James's collar, and they were going.

The supporters' end was public. Anyone could walk into it. Anyone except Dad.

They went round the outside of the Bulgarian compound, along the edge of the desert, where the wind came straight off nothing and made James's eyes water, and then in through a gap between two tents, and then it was just green.

Green tents. Green flags. Green faces, painted. A green banner fighting a red Bulgarian one in the air over the path, both of them twisting and snapping like two dogs, while people underneath cheered for the green one. Drums. So many drums that James could feel them in his teeth. A smell of meat cooking on sticks, and smoke, and something sweet, and the frost melting into mud under everybody's boots.

Nobody looked at them. Nobody looked at Teddy at all. Teddy walked with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders down, slouching along like he had somewhere boring to be, and James, after a bit, found he was walking like that too, hands in pockets, shoulders down.

It was brilliant. He was a spy.

"Keep up," said Teddy's someone's-uncle voice.

Teddy kept looking back, over his shoulder, towards the campsite where the tents were. James looked too, the first couple of times, but there wasn't anything there, only tents. He stopped looking. It must have been a spy thing.

They asked a man selling hats where the animals were. They asked a lady with a baby in a sling. They asked a boy about Al's age wearing a Flores shirt, and the boy pointed and said something in a language James didn't know, and then said, in English, "Curupira," and made claws with his hands and laughed.

The path went down between the last tents and came out on the strip of churned-up ground behind the Brazilian compound fence. There were pens along it, like big wooden stables with fence round the front. The grey-coat men were at the far end. And right in front of them, halfway along, pressed up against the fence of the biggest pen, very small and very green, was Al.

He wasn't looking at the pen. He was looking through it, and out the other side, and over the Brazilian fence, where a long way off some people in green were flying slow circles over a practice pitch.

"AL!" yelled James.

Al didn't even turn round.

It all happened at once, after that.

Somebody in the crowd behind them let off a lot of sparks, green and gold, with a bang like a door slamming. Something inside the pen screamed.

It sounded like a kettle. That was the first thing James thought. A kettle, if a kettle was the size of a pony and furious.

Then the gate of the pen came open, and it came out.

It had red hair. Not ginger, like Uncle Ron. *Red*, like paint, sticking out everywhere. It had a lot of teeth. It was about as tall as James. And its feet were on backwards. They pointed the wrong way, heels at the front, toes at the back, so it looked like it was running away from you even while it was running at you. James couldn't stop looking at them. How did it know where it was going?

It was going at Al.

Al was just standing there. Teddy let go of James's collar for the first time, and James thought *not once*, and Teddy was running, but he was too far off.

And then Dad was there.

He came from the other side, out of a gate James hadn't even seen, with a grey-coat man behind him, and he didn't go round the Curupira or try to hex it. He just stepped in front of Al. That was all. One step, like getting in front of someone in a queue.

The Curupira hit him.

There was a noise, and Dad's head went sideways, and his glasses went sideways on his face, and he didn't fall over. He put one arm back behind him, round Al, and he stayed exactly where he was.

Then there were people everywhere. Men and women in green coats with the Brazilian badge on them, handlers, three of them, then five. One of them, an old woman with a grey plait, walked right up to the Curupira, with her hands out low, and started singing. Not loudly. Just singing, in the other language, the same four notes over and over, like you'd sing to a baby.

The Curupira stopped screaming. It stood there with its chest going in and out, and its red hair slowly flattening down, and then it let her take hold of its collar and walk it backwards into the pen. Backwards, which was forwards for its feet.

It smelled like a wet dog that had been sitting too close to a bonfire. James noticed that afterwards. He noticed that Dad's glasses were still crooked. He noticed that the singing lady had a hole in the elbow of her coat.

He only noticed Dad's face last.

There was a line on it. Under his right eye, across the top of his cheek, bright red, and getting redder.

A man came running up with a bag that said HEALER on it in three languages.

"No," said Dad.

"Sir, if you'll just—"

"No, thank you."

"Sir, it's protocol, any injury from a registered creature has to be—"

"No," said Dad, not loudly at all, and the man stopped.

James didn't understand. It was a proper cut. It was bleeding a bit now, down onto Dad's collar. A Healer could fix that in about a second. But Dad just straightened his glasses with one hand, and kept the other one on Al, and said "No" a third time, and the Healer went away looking cross.

On the fence post next to James there was a beetle. A big one, shiny, green like a sweet wrapper, sitting perfectly still on the wood like it was watching. The sort of green Al would like. James nearly pointed it out to him. Then Teddy got hold of his collar again, hard, and he forgot.

They went back round the handlers' side, through Dad's gate, with the grey-coat man in front and Teddy's hair already going back to blue at the ends.

For about five minutes, nobody said anything.

Then James said, "Did you see its *feet*?"

"James," said Teddy.

"They were *backwards*. They were completely backwards. How does it even *walk*? How does it know where it's going? Did you see its *teeth*? It was going to eat Al. It was *definitely* going to eat Al, and Dad just—" He did Dad's step, one step sideways. "Like that. Like *that*. And it went *bang*, and he didn't even fall over—"

"*James*," said Teddy, and James shut up for a bit, and then started again.

Al didn't say anything at all. He walked next to Dad, with Dad's hand on the back of his neck, the whole way. He was shivering. Nobody said anything about that either.

Only once, when they were nearly at the Bulgarian gate and they could see Mum there, standing very straight with her arms folded, Al said something, so quietly James almost didn't hear.

"He waved," he said. "Flores. At me. I think he did."

Dad's hand stayed where it was.

"I bet he did," Dad said.

— CHAPTER FOUR —

Provenance Unknown

The first thing Ginny said to her husband, when he came back through the Bulgarian gate with their son under one hand and blood down his collar, was "Your *glasses* are crooked," which wasn't what she'd meant to say at all.

"I know," said Harry.

"Well, *fix* them."

He fixed them. Albus, under his other hand, looked at the ground. James was talking. James had been talking since before they'd come into view, and was going to go on talking. Ginny suspected, until somebody put him to bed or a Veela sat on him.

She turned round to the nearest Security Warlock, a young one with a notebook, who had spent the last hour and a half telling her it was an international incident.

"Is it still an international incident?"

"Madam, I—"

"Because he's back. So it's just an incident now. Is it? A national one? A family one?"

"I'll have to check, madam."

"You do that," said Ginny. He went off with his notebook. He was only doing his job. She'd have done the same. She looked round for something else to shout at, and there wasn't anything.

She got the story in the tent, in pieces, the way you got a match from people who'd been in different parts of the stand.

From James, all of it at once and far too loud: the fence, the spy walk, the sparks, the teeth, a beetle on the fence post, a massive green one, *watching*, the feet, the *feet*, Mum, its feet were on *backwards*. From Teddy, his hair still coming

back blue from the tips and his nose not quite his own yet: the order it had happened in, and the fact that Harry hadn't fallen over. From Harry: nothing. Or nearly nothing. "It got a bit close," and "It's fine," and "Al's fine," in the voice he used for things that weren't.

Albus wouldn't take his Brazil shirt off. He sat on the end of his camp bed in it, with a blanket round his shoulders and his knees up, and watched everybody, and said nothing, and when Ginny sat down next to him he let her, which was how she knew how frightened he'd been.

She'd find something to shout at him about tomorrow. Tonight she just sat.

Then she got up and got the dittany out of her bag and went to Harry.

The cut ran under his right eye, across the top of the cheekbone. Clean. Not deep. It had stopped bleeding. It would, she thought, look like much more than it was for about a week.

"Hold still."

"Leave it."

"Harry."

"Leave it," he said again. "This will easily be fixed."

"Then *fix* it."

"When we're home."

Which meant not this week, not here, not anywhere with a Healer and a form to fill in. He'd rather walk round the World Cup with his face opened up than have anyone write down how it happened.

She didn't argue. She put the dittany back in her bag.

Harry sat on the edge of the table. He wasn't looking at anything in particular. After a moment his hand came up, the way it did sometimes when he was tired, and his fingers went to his forehead, to the thin white line there, the old one, and stayed.

Ginny saw it. She didn't say anything. She went and stood behind him and put her hand on the back of his neck, and left it there, and after a while his hand came down again.

The tent flap opened, and a gust of freezing air came in, and Hermione with it.

She had her coat on, and her scarf up to her nose, and a jam jar in one gloved hand with the lid screwed down very tight. She saw Ginny look at it.

"Pickles," said Hermione. "I'm returning it."

There were no pickles in it. There was nothing in it Ginny could see from where she stood except a sort of shiny green gleam at the bottom, like a sweet wrapper, and then Hermione's hand was over it and the jar was in her coat pocket.

"Is Harry all right?"

"He says it'll easily be fixed," said Ginny.

"Good," said Hermione. She looked at Harry's face for a moment, hard, the way she looked at problems. "Good. I've just got to go and — return this." And she went out again into the cold, walking fast.

Ginny looked at the tent flap for a bit after it closed. Then she decided that whatever Hermione was doing with a pickle jar at eight o'clock at night in the middle of a Patagonian winter was Hermione's business, and went to find James before he talked himself to death.

She was up at half past seven, because the Prophet waited for nobody, least of all a correspondent whose family had had an interesting day.

It was still dark. It stayed dark here until nearly nine. The frost on the tent ropes was thick enough to write in, and the sky was clear and black and enormous, and the moon had gone down hours ago. The campsite was quiet except for the flags. Ginny stood outside the tent flap with her tea, letting the cold wake her up, and thought about the next three days.

Somebody was coming along the path from the Portkey field. Somebody tall and thin, carrying a large brown-paper parcel with both arms, and walking the stiff, careful walk of a man who'd just been yanked across the planet by his navel and resented it.

"Percy?"

"Good morning, Ginny." Percy stopped, and shifted the parcel, and looked at the frozen campsite as if it had personally failed an inspection. "It's *very* cold."

"It's winter."

"So I'm told." He held the parcel out. "From Mother. She said it was urgent. She's knitted, I believe, through the night."

The paper had MUM written on it, in Molly's big round capitals, and underneath, smaller, WEAR THEM.

"And this," said Percy. He took a rolled newspaper out from under his arm: this morning's Prophet, the London edition, still smelling faintly of the press. He held it for a second longer than necessary before handing it over. "I thought you'd rather see it before anybody else showed it to you."

That was, Ginny thought, about the kindest thing Percy had ever done, and he'd done it in exactly the tone he'd use to hand in a report on cauldron-bottom thickness.

"Have you read it?"

"I read it on the way," said Percy. He cleared his throat. "I have breakfast with the Liechtenstein delegation at eight. They're still quite upset about the bird."

And he went off along the path towards the officials' end of the campsite, greying and a little bald at the crown, in a very good coat.

The parcel went first, because it could be opened in front of children.

It woke the whole tent. Molly's jumpers came out one after another, warm, thick, and red. A red one for Harry, with an H on it. A red one for James. A little red one for Lily, who put it on over her pyjamas and immediately fell asleep in it again. A maroon one for Ron, who'd come over from next door at the sound of paper tearing.

"Of *course* it's maroon," said Ron, putting it on.

There was one for Teddy.

"She did me one?" said Teddy.

He held it up. It was red, with a T on it. He looked at it for a second too long, and then he put it on, and his hair went a warm, pleased sort of orange for a moment before he noticed and put it back.

The last one was grey.

Not red. Grey, the grey of the wool Molly kept at the bottom of the basket for darning. On the front, knitted on in careful red, was a small, lumpy patch in a shape Ginny didn't recognise for a second.

Then she did. It was Bulgaria. Not the flag. Not the team crest. The *country*. The coastline, the border, the bumpy bit at the top. Molly had got a map from somewhere and copied it, stitch by stitch.

"That's yours, Al," said Ginny.

Albus looked at it. He was still in his Brazil shirt. He'd slept in it.

"No," he said.

"Al, you're freezing."

"No."

He was shivering while he said it. He didn't stop saying it. Ginny laid the jumper on the end of his bed and left it there, which was a lesson three children had taught her: you don't win with Albus. You wait.

She read the paper at breakfast, at the table, while the children ate sausages in the warm end of the tent.

She should have waited. She knew she should have waited.

HEROES IN THE HIGH SEATS: THE DA TAKE PATAGONIA

by Rita Skeeter

Tents were flattened and toddlers trampled on Saturday as Dumbledore's Army descended on the World Cup — and what a sight our old heroes are! Harry Potter (nearly THIRTY-FOUR, if you can believe it!) is showing distinguished threads of silver in that famously untidy thatch, and sported at yesterday's Bulgarian reunion a nasty cut across his right cheekbone, provenance unknown. A clash with his old Triwizard rival? A domestic disagreement? One cannot help but wonder what really happened in that maze...

...whose wife Ginevra, you'll recall, was perfectly content to abandon husband and children in London for three whole months to "cover" the tournament (qualifications, dear readers? The jury is back, and the answer is a resounding NO)...

...and godson Teddy Lupin, a lanky half-werewolf with alarmingly blue hair, has been spotted in every dark corner of the VIP campsite snogging the undeniably pretty Victoire Weasley, the pair of them apparently having learned to breathe through their ears...

There was more. There was Ron's hair and Hermione's hair and Neville's drinking and Luna's twins and a line about Bill that Ginny read twice and then decided she hadn't. There was a box at the bottom advertising a book.

Ginny finished it.

Then she folded the paper in half. Then in half again. Then again, and again, until it wouldn't go any smaller, until it was a hard little square of Rita the size of a matchbox. She got up, went to the end of the table that had wobbled all week, lifted it with one hand, and put the square under the short leg.

The table stopped wobbling.

"*Thinning?*" said Ron, who'd been reading over her shoulder. "*Thinning?*"

"It's the wind," said Hermione, without looking up. "Here. It's the wind."

Teddy, who'd been reading over the *other* shoulder, had gone a colour Ginny had never seen his hair go before, a sort of boiled pink right down to the roots. He put his toast down, very carefully, and went outside, and stayed outside for some time, in the cold, in his new jumper.

James and Lily hadn't looked up from their sausages. James was explaining to Lily, for the fourth time, about the Curupira's feet.

Ginny sat back down. Hermione, across the table, was still looking at the folded square under the table leg. She said, very quietly, so that only Ginny could hear:

"He's not in it."

Ginny looked at her.

"Albus," Hermione said. "He's not in it."

She got the rest of it on the walk to the press enclosure, with the sun just up and the frost going off the grass in the first real light.

"She was there," said Hermione. "Yesterday. At the pens. As a beetle."

"As a *what?*"

"She's an Animagus. Unregistered. She has been since before our fourth year. It's how she used to get into Hogwarts." Hermione's breath smoked. "I caught her in a jar once before. I thought, after James told half the campsite about a green beetle on the fence..." She made a small, exasperated sound. "I

went and had a look round the tent last night. She was on the canvas, right above where Harry was sitting."

"The pickle jar."

"The pickle jar."

Ginny walked for a while.

"She had all of it," said Hermione. "Ginny, she had *all* of it. The fence, and Al going through it, and the creature, and Harry. That was going to be the story. Harry Potter's son breaks into the Brazilian compound, causes an incident, gets his father clawed. With a quote from a Warlock. It would have been on the front page in the morning, and it would have followed him to Hogwarts."

"So what did you give her?"

"Her freedom. Unregistered Animagi go to Azkaban, if anyone official ever finds out." Hermione didn't look at her. "She keeps Albus out of it, all of it, and I keep the jar in my desk and never mention it to anyone at the Ministry. She'll keep to it. She'll keep to it to the *letter*, and she'll make everybody else pay for it, which is what she did. But she'll keep to it."

"Provenance unknown," said Ginny.

"Provenance unknown," Hermione agreed.

Ginny stopped walking. They were at the gate of the press enclosure. Through it, she could see the desks, the Wizarding Wireless booth, the green gleam of a certain quill already moving on its own in the second row.

"Thanks, Hermione," she said.

It didn't cover it. It never had. Hermione just nodded, and put her gloved hand briefly on Ginny's arm, and went off back towards the tents.

Ginny went in and sat down in the second row, next to Rita Skeeter.

"Good morning, Ginevra," said Rita. "Such a *pity* about Harry's face."

"Isn't it," said Ginny.

She took out her quill and her notebook. She thought about Friday.

That night she told Harry, in bed, in the dark, in about four sentences.

"Hermione's dealt with it," he said, when she'd finished. His voice was quiet. "I thought she might."

"You knew?"

"I knew it was Rita, when I saw the paper. I didn't know how." He was quiet for a while. "Al's not in it."

"No."

"Good," said Harry, and after a moment Ginny felt the whole of him go loose against the mattress, for the first time since the fence.

The third-place match was on Wednesday. Japan beat the Americans 330 to 120 in a little under three hours, and afterwards, in front of the whole stadium, the Japanese captain gave the American captain a Hoo-hoo chick in a golden cage, as an apology from one nation's supporters for another nation's supporters, or possibly just as a present. It was the size of a teacup and on fire. The Americans cried. Ginny wrote *Japan — class* and underlined it.

By Thursday the Hoo-hoo chick had set fire to two tents, the American manager's hat, and a press-enclosure deckchair. Rolf, who had been Chief Magizoologist since April and had the look of a man counting the days, got it into a fireproof box at teatime and sat on the lid.

Ginny covered the build-up. She interviewed Silva, who was very young and talked very fast and very sweetly about his grandmother. She interviewed Vulchanov, who had been strapped up like a parcel and told her he would play on Friday or die, and who did not look as if he'd mind much which. She sat next to Rita for eleven hours across two days and said nothing to her at all. It was, she thought, the best thing she'd ever done.

On Thursday evening, she came back to the tent and found Albus's grey jumper on the end of his bed, where it had been since Tuesday.

It had a hole in it.

She picked it up. The hole was in the middle of the front, neat, deliberate, cut with somebody's safety scissors, and it was exactly, perfectly, beautifully the shape of Bulgaria. You could see the bumpy bit at the top. Molly would have been proud of the coastline.

The patch itself was in the stove, curling.

Ginny put the jumper back down very carefully, exactly where it had been, and went out of the tent.

Albus came in about ten minutes later, from wherever he'd been, with James. Ginny, back by then and busy at the kettle with her back to them, heard him go to his bed and stop. She heard him pick the jumper up. She heard the soft wool sound of him pulling it on over his head, and then the rustle of the Brazil shirt going on over the top of it.

He didn't say anything. Neither did she.

She made the tea with her back turned and her shoulders shaking, and James said, "What's funny?" and she said, "Nothing," and nearly dropped the pot.

Outside, the moon was up over the desert, round and white and nearly full and still upside down, and tomorrow was Friday.

— CHAPTER FIVE —

The Wrong Colours

Box Two was the best box in the whole stadium, and everybody in it was wearing the wrong colours.

Well. Not everybody. Most of the Weasleys in the rows behind were in green, which was correct. But they were *behind*. The front row, which was the row that mattered, was Dad, and James, and Lily, and Albus, and all of them were in red except him.

Dad was in his red jumper with the H on it. James was in his. Lily was in hers, and a red hat, and a red scarf, and a Bulgarian flag painted on her cheek, which Aunt Hermione had done that morning, and which Lily kept touching to see if it was still there.

Albus was in his Brazil shirt. Under his Brazil shirt he had his grey jumper, because it was cold, and because it didn't have Bulgaria on it any more.

He could feel the hole with his hand, through the shirt. He kept checking it too.

The stadium was the biggest thing he had ever seen. It went up and up on every side, all round the pitch, full of people, a hundred thousand, Dad said, maybe more, and all of them were shouting. Half the stadium was red and half was green. The green half was louder. Albus was completely sure of that.

The sun was low and gold over the far stand, even though it was only two o'clock. It was always low here. It got in your eyes. It made everything look like the end of a day, even the beginning.

Behind him, the grown-ups were doing grown-up things. Uncle Neville was laughing at something Dad had leaned back to say. Uncle Charlie was talking to Luna's husband about something with teeth. Uncle George and Aunt Angelina had Fred and Roxanne between them, both in green. Uncle Percy wasn't in

their box at all; he was over in the Ministry box with all the important people, and you could see him from here, sitting up very straight. Aunt Hermione wasn't wearing any colours, because she worked at the Ministry and had to be fair. Uncle Ron said that was cheating. Teddy was sitting next to Victoire, and then Uncle Bill came along and made Teddy go and sit at the other end, for some reason.

Luna was going along the rows handing out things from a tin. Albus took one because you had to. It was a biscuit with bits in it. The bits were purple. He put it in his pocket for later, for James.

Rose, at the end of the row, had her own Omnioculars and was only watching the Chasers warming up, not the Seekers, which was the correct thing to watch, because Flores was a Chaser.

In the box next door, which wasn't a proper family box like theirs, lots of the people kept looking at small flat things in their hands instead of the pitch. They were dressed like Muggles, sort of, with scarves over the top. There were children in there too, lots of them, holding little flags.

"Phones," said Hugo, who was sitting on Albus's other side. Hugo knew about Muggle things because of his granny and granddad. "Those are phones."

"So?"

Hugo listened. A man in the next box was showing his phone to the people round him, and they were all groaning and laughing.

"Brazil lost seven-one," said Hugo.

Albus stared at him.

"In the *normal* football," Hugo explained. "The Muggle one. On Tuesday. Against Germany. That man says."

"No they didn't."

"They did. It's on his phone."

"Phones are *Muggle*," said Albus. "Muggles don't know anything about Brazil."

Hugo thought about that. "They know about their football," he said. Which was true, sort of.

"Well, they're wrong," said Albus, and folded his arms, and looked at the pitch.

Brazil couldn't lose twice in one week. That wasn't allowed. That was just a *fact*.

First there were the mascots.

The Bulgarian ones came out first, and they were ladies. They were very tall and very pale and they had long silvery hair and floaty dresses, and when the music started they danced, and something happened to all the men.

Albus didn't understand it. The ladies were just dancing. But all over the stadium, men started standing up and leaning forward and looking stupid. Uncle Ron went the most stupid of anybody. His mouth came open and his eyes went round and flat like a fish's, and he stayed like that, completely still, until Aunt Hermione elbowed him hard in the ribs without even turning her head.

"Ow," said Uncle Ron, and came back.

Dad's face went blank for a second. Then he blinked, once, hard, and it was his face again. He watched Lily watching the ladies instead, and smiled.

Then the Brazilian mascots came out, and Albus stopped breathing.

Curupiras. Dozens of them. Red hair sticking out everywhere like fire, and feet on backwards, and teeth. They tumbled across the pitch, over and over each other, running forwards on their backwards feet, turning cartwheels and somersaults and standing on each other's shoulders.

He'd been this close to one. Closer. He'd heard one scream. He could still smell it, if he thought about it.

He didn't breathe for a long time. Nobody noticed. Everybody was clapping.

At the end the ladies and the Curupiras made a big pyramid together, all the way up, a Curupira on top with its arms out, and the whole stadium roared, and Lily clapped so hard she fell off her seat.

The match started at two, and at three minutes past two Lily said, "Is it nearly finished?"

"*Lily*."

"I just asked."

At the start Brazil were brilliant. The Brazilian Chasers had the Quaffle, and kept it, and passed it about between them like it was on a string, and the Bulgarians couldn't get near it. Flores was everywhere. He went left, and left

again, and Albus thought about what Krum had said about when Flores went left, and decided Krum was just jealous.

Then, thirty-seven minutes in, Flores took the Quaffle off a Bulgarian Chaser right in the middle of the air, turned, and put it through the left hoop so hard the hoop rang.

Albus was on his feet. He was on the edge of the box. He was leaning out over the edge of the box, over the rail, over the drop, shouting, because it was *Flores*, and it was *first*, and—

Something grabbed the back of his shirt and his jumper both, and hauled.

He sat down, hard, on the bench.

"Steady on," said Uncle Ron, letting go of his collar.

Albus was furious. He was so furious he couldn't say anything. He'd been *fine*. He'd been holding on. He'd been completely—

Flores went round the pitch with his fist in the air, and the green half of the stadium roared, and Albus forgot to be furious.

Then a Bulgarian scored, which was unfair. Then Brazil scored, and scored again, three goals really fast, two of them Flores, forty points to ten, and Albus knew, the way you know it's going to be your birthday, that Brazil were going to win.

An hour and forty minutes in, the Snitch came out.

Albus didn't see it at first. He saw the two Seekers see it. Silva and Krum both just *went*, straight up, almost standing on their brooms, side by side, up and up towards the sun.

And then they both stopped, and put their hands up over their eyes, and hung there.

The sun had got them. It was so low it was right in their faces, big and gold, and the Snitch had gone straight into it. Albus squinted up with his hand over his eyes too, and couldn't see anything but gold, and then spots.

When he could see again, the Seekers were coming down, slowly, looking at each other.

Lily was asleep. She'd gone over sideways onto Luna, who had her arm round her and was still watching the match, and her face paint had smeared off onto Luna's flag-cloak, so there was a little bit of Bulgaria on Liechtenstein.

Two hours and three minutes in, Santos hit Krum on the head.

He was a Brazilian Beater. He was going for a Bludger, and missed the Bludger, and his bat went round and caught Krum across the back of the head, *crack*, so loud Albus heard it from the box.

Krum wobbled on his broom. When he straightened up, his nose was bleeding. It went down over his mouth and his chin and his red robes.

The referee stopped everything and flew over and talked to Santos and talked to Krum and looked at something in his hand for a long time. Then he said it wasn't a foul, because Santos hadn't meant to do it.

Albus thought that was fair. Santos hadn't meant to. It was an accident. It was fair.

Then he looked at Krum's face, with the blood on it, and Krum wiping it with the back of his glove and getting back in position without saying anything, and he wasn't sure.

Krum had shaken his hand. Krum had said Flores was very fast and very good.

Albus looked at the blood for a bit, and then at Dad's face, next to him. There was the line on Dad's cheek, the red one from the Curupira, gone darker now and a bit crusty. Dad hadn't let anyone fix it. Albus didn't know why. He'd asked, and Dad had said it would be easily fixed, which wasn't an answer.

He looked back at the pitch.

It happened at two hours and forty-five minutes, and it happened fast.

Krum saw it first. Albus saw him see it, because Albus was watching Krum by then, he didn't know why. Krum just went, and a second later Silva went too, and they went down the pitch side by side, so close their brooms kept knocking, and the whole stadium stood up.

Albus stood up. Everyone stood up. James was shouting "GO GO GO GO," and Albus didn't know who at.

They were exactly level. Neck and neck. The Snitch dived and they dived. It went up and they went up.

Krum put out his hand.

Then he was holding his hand up in the air, and there was a little gold flicker in it, and the whole red half of the stadium exploded.

"KRUM'S GOT THE SNITCH," somebody was shouting, all round the stadium, as if the air was shouting it. "BULGARIA HAVE WON!"

One hundred and seventy to sixty.

Albus sat down.

Everyone else was jumping. Dad was jumping. James was jumping on the bench and screaming. Behind them, all the Weasleys in green had gone quiet, and then started clapping anyway, the way you do.

Down on the pitch, Krum had stopped flying. He was just sitting on his broom in the air, with the Snitch in one hand, and his other hand over his face, and his shoulders were going up and down. He was crying. A grown-up. In front of everybody. With blood on his face.

And Silva, who had lost, who was *Brazil*, flew over to him, and put both arms round him, and held on.

They stayed like that, in the air, going slowly round in a circle, holding on to each other, while the whole stadium cheered.

Albus watched them.

James turned round from jumping, with his mouth wide open to shout something at him. Something about Bulgaria. Something about *told you*. Albus could see it coming.

Then James saw his face, and shut his mouth.

Albus got up, and put his arms round James, hard, for about one second, and then let go and sat back down.

James stood there. He didn't jump any more. After a moment, he sat down on the bench too, right next to Albus, so their arms were touching, and stayed there.

Dad was looking at them. Albus saw him. Dad's face was doing something complicated, like he might cry too, and then it turned into a grin instead, a big stubborn one, and he looked back at the pitch.

Behind them, Uncle Ron was wiping his eyes with his maroon sleeve.
"It's the *wind*," he said, to nobody. "Stop looking at me. It's the wind."

Later, while the players were going round the pitch with the Cup and everybody was still shouting, Dad nudged Albus and gave him his Omnioculars and pointed.

"Look. Press box. Watch your mum."

Albus looked. The press box was all the way on the other side of the stadium, but the Omnioculars made it close. There were rows of desks, and people writing, and quills. There was Mum, standing up. She had her notebook under one arm.

She walked along the row. She walked right up to a lady with very curly hair and glasses with jewels on and a bright green quill. That was Rita Skeeter, who wrote things in the paper. James said most of them weren't true. Mum said something to her. Albus couldn't hear what. It looked short.

The lady opened her mouth to say something back.

Mum did something with her hand, quite small, down by her side. Albus couldn't see what it was.

And then Rita Skeeter sort of folded up.

She just went, in the middle. Like a deckchair. She sat down very suddenly on the floor of the press box with her mouth open and her quill still going on its own, writing on the desk. Some people rushed over. Mum was already walking away along the row, not fast, with her notebook under her arm.

Albus took the Omnioculars down.

"What did Mum *do*?"

"I think," said Dad, and his voice was very steady, and his face wasn't steady at all, "Rita's just feeling a bit unwell."

It was getting dark when they walked back to the tents.

It got dark early here. The sun was going down behind them in a long red line, and the sky was going purple, and the cold was coming down out of it like it did every night. Everybody was in a long straggle along the path, all mixed up,

red and green, singing different songs. Lily was asleep on Dad's shoulder. James was walking next to Albus, not saying anything, which was a first.

In front of them, over the desert, the moon was coming up.

It was massive. It was nearly round, nearly full, so big and so white it looked close enough to hit with a Bludger, just sitting on the edge of the flat ground. And it was upside down. Albus could see it was. The face on it, the one you could see at home if you looked, was the wrong way up, like it was standing on its head.

Aunt Hermione had said why, on the first night. Albus hadn't listened. Luna had said it was just looking at them from the other side. He didn't know which one was right.

He stopped on the path and looked at it.

Everything here was the wrong way round. It was winter in the summer. It got dark at teatime. Grown-ups cried. Brazil lost. Even the moon was wrong.

He put his hand up under his Brazil shirt, and found the hole in his jumper, where Bulgaria had been, and put his finger through it.

He kept it there all the way back to the tent.