

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

Chapter 11 - The Sorting Hat's New Song

Harry did not want to tell the others that he and Luna were having the same hallucination, if that was what it was, so he said nothing more about the horses as he sat down inside the carriage and slammed the door behind him. Nevertheless, he could not help watching the silhouettes of the horses moving beyond the window.

'Did everyone see that Grubbly-Plank woman?' asked Ginny. 'What's she doing back here? Hagrid can't have left, can he?'

'Til be quite glad if he has,' said Luna, 'he isn't a very good teacher, is he?'

'Yes, he is!' said Harry, Ron and Ginny angrily.

Harry glared at Hermione. She cleared her throat and quickly said, 'Erin... yes... he's very good.'

'Well, we in Ravenclaw think he's a bit of a joke,' said Luna, unlazed.

'You've got a rubbish sense of humour then,' Ron snapped, as the wheels below them creaked into motion.

Luna did not seem perturbed by Ron's rudeness; on the contrary, she simply watched him for a while as though he were a mildly interesting television programme.

Rattling and swaying, the carriages moved in convoy up the road. When they passed between the tall stone pillars topped with winged boars on either side of the gates to the school grounds, Harry leaned forwards to try and see whether there were any lights on in Hagrid's cabin by the Forbidden Forest, but the grounds were in complete darkness. Hogwarts Castle, however, loomed ever

closer: a towering mass of turrets, jet black against the dark sky, here and there a window blazing fiery bright above them.

The carriages jingled to a halt near the stone steps leading up to the oak front doors and Harry got out of the carriage first. He turned again to look for lit windows down by the Forest, but there was definitely no sign of life within Hagrids cabin. Unwillingly, because he had half-hoped they would have vanished, he turned his eyes instead upon the strange, skeletal creatures standing quietly in the chill night air, their blank white eyes gleaming.

Harry had once before had the experience of seeing something that Ron could not, but that had been a reflection in a mirror, something much more insubstantial than a hundred very solid-looking beasts strong enough to pull a fleet of carriages. If Luna was to be believed, the beasts had always been there but invisible. Why, then, could Harry suddenly see them, and why could Ron not?

'Are you coming or what?' said Ron beside him.

'Oh... yeah,' said Harry quickly and they joined the crowd hurrying up the stone steps into the castle.

The Entrance Hall was ablaze with torches and echoing with footsteps as the students crossed the flagged stone floor for the double doors to the right, leading to the Great Hall and the start-of-term feast.

The four long house tables in the Great Hall were filling up under the starless black ceiling, which was just like the sky they could glimpse through the high windows. Candles floated in midair all along the tables, illuminating the silvery ghosts who were dotted about the Hall and the faces of the students talking eagerly, exchanging summer news, shouting greetings at friends from other houses, eyeing one another's new haircuts and robes. Again, Harry noticed people putting their heads together to whisper as he passed; he gritted his teeth and tried to act as though he neither noticed nor cared.

Luna drifted away from them at the Ravenclaw table. The moment they reached Gryffindors, Ginny was hailed by some fellow fourth-years and left to sit with them; Harry, Ron, Hermione and Neville found seats together about halfway down the table between Nearly

Headless Nick, the Gryffindor house ghost, and Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown, the last two of whom gave Harry airy, overly-friendly greetings that made him quite sure they had stopped talking about him a split second before. He had more important things to worry about, however: he was looking over the students' heads to the staff table that ran along the top wall of the Hall.

'He's not there.'

Ron and Hermione scanned the staff table too, though there was no real need; Hagrid's size made him instantly obvious in any lineup.

'He can't have left,' said Ron, sounding slightly anxious.

'Of course he hasn't,' said Harry firmly.

'You don't think he's... hurt, or anything, do you?' said Hermione uneasily.

'No,' said Harry at once.

'But where is he, then?'

There was a pause, then Harry said very quietly, so that Neville, Parvati and Lavender could not hear, 'Maybe he's not back yet. You know - from his mission - the thing he was doing over the summer for Dumbledore.'

'Yeah... yeah, that'll be it,' said Ron, sounding reassured, but Hermione bit her lip, looking up and down the staff table as though hoping for some conclusive explanation of Hagrid's absence.

'Who's that?' she said sharply, pointing towards the middle of the staff table.

Harry's eyes followed hers. They lit first upon Professor Dumbledore, sitting in his high-backed golden chair at the centre of the long staff table, wearing deep-purple robes scattered with silvery stars and a matching hat. Dumbledore's head was inclined towards the woman sitting next to him, who was talking into his ear. She looked, Harry thought, like somebody's maiden aunt: squat, with short, curly, mouse-brown hair in which she had placed a horrible pink Alice band that matched the fluffy pink cardigan she wore over her robes. Then she turned her face slightly to take a sip from her goblet and he saw, with a shock of recognition, a pallid, toadlike face and a pair of prominent, pouchy eyes.

'It's that Umbridge woman!'

'Who?' said Hermione.

'She was at my hearing, she works for Fudge!'

'Nice cardigan,' said Ron, smirking.

'She works for Fudge!' Hermione repeated, frowning. 'What on earth's she doing here, then?'

'Dunno...'

Hermione scanned the staff table, her eyes narrowed.

'No,' she muttered, 'no, surely not...'

Harry did not understand what she was talking about but did not ask; his attention had been caught by Professor Grubbly-Plank who had just appeared behind the staff table; she worked her way along to the very end and took the seat that ought to have been Hagrids. That meant the first-years must have crossed the lake and reached the castle, and sure enough, a few seconds later, the doors from the Entrance Hall opened. A long line of scared-looking first-years entered, led by Professor McGonagall, who was carrying a stool on which sat an ancient wizard's hat, heavily patched and darned with a wide rip near the frayed brim.

The buzz of talk in the Great Hall faded away. The first-years lined up in front of the staff table facing the rest of the students, and Professor McGonagall placed the stool carefully in front of them,

then stood back.

The first-years' faces glowed palely in the candlelight. A small boy right in the middle of the row looked as though he was trembling. Harry recalled, fleetingly, how terrified he had felt when he had stood there, waiting for the unknown test that would determine to which house he belonged.

The whole school waited with bated breath. Then the rip near the hat's brim opened wide like a mouth and the Sorting Hat burst into song:

In times of old when I was new And Hogwarts barely started
The founders of our noble school
Thought never to be parted: United by a common goal,

They had the selfsame yearning,

To make the world's best magic school

And pass along their learning.

'Together we will build and teach!'

The four good friends decided

And never did they dream that they

Might some day be divided,

For were there such friends anywhere

As Slytherin and Gryffindor?

Unless it was the second pair

Of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw?

So how could it have gone so wrong?

How could such friendships fail?

Why, I was there and so can tell

The whole sad, sorry tale.

Said Slytherin, 'We'll teach just those

Whose ancestry is purest.'

Said Ravenclaw, 'We'll teach those whose

Intelligence is surest.'

Said Gryffindor, 'We'll teach all those

With brave deeds to their name,'

Said Hufflepuff, 'Til teach the lot,

And treat them just the same.'

These differences caused little strife

When first they came to light,

For each of the four founders had

A house in which they might

Take only those they wanted, so,

For instance, Slytherin

Took only pure-blood wizards

Of great cunning, just like him,

And only those of sharpest mind

Were taught by Ravenclaw

While the bravest and the boldest

Went to daring Gryffindor.

Good Hufflepuff, she took the rest,

And taught them all she knew,

Thus the houses and their founders
Retained friendships firm and true.
So Hogwarts worked in harmony
For several happy years,
But then discord crept among us
Feeding on our faults and fears.
The houses that, like pillars four,
Had once held up our school,
Now turned upon each other and,
Divided, sought to rule.
And for a while it seemed the school
Must meet an early end,
What with duelling and with jighting
And the clash of friend on friend
And at last there came a morning
When old Slytherin departed
And though the fighting then died out
He left us quite downhearted.
And never since the founders four
Were whittled down to three
Have the houses been united
As they once were meant to be.
And now the Sorting Hat is here
And you all know the score:
I sort you into houses
Because that is what I'm for,
But this year I'll go further,
Listen closely to my song:
Though condemned I am to split you
Still I worry that it's wrong,
Though / must fulfil my duty
And must quarter every year
Still I wonder whether Sorting
May not bring the end I fear.
Oh, know the perils, read the signs,
The warning history shows,
For our Hogwarts is in danger
From external, deadly foes
And we must unite inside her
Or we'll crumble from within
I have told you, I have warned you...
Let the Sorting now begin.

The Hat became motionless once more; applause broke out, though it was punctured, for the first time in Harry's memory, with muttering and whispers. All across the Great Hall students were exchanging remarks with their neighbours, and Harry, clapping along with everyone else, knew

exactly what they were talking about.

'Branched out a bit this year, hasn't it?' said Ron, his eyebrows raised.

Too right it has,' said Harry.

The Sorting Hat usually confined itself to describing the different qualities looked for by each of the four Hogwarts houses and its own role in Sorting them. Harry could not remember it ever trying to give the school advice before.

'I wonder if it's ever given warnings before?' said Hermione, sounding slightly anxious.

'Yes, indeed,' said Nearly Headless Nick knowledgeably, leaning across Neville towards her (Neville winced; it was very uncomfortable to have a ghost lean through you). The Hat feels itself honour-bound to give the school due warning whenever it feels -

But Professor McGonagall, who was waiting to read out the list of first-years' names, was giving the whispering students the sort of look that scorches. Nearly Headless Nick placed a see-through finger to his lips and sat primly upright again as the muttering came to an abrupt end. With a last frowning look that swept the four house tables, Professor McGonagall lowered her eyes to her long piece of parchment and called out the first name.

'Abercrombie, Euan.'

The terrified-looking boy Harry had noticed earlier stumbled forwards and put the Hat on his head; it was only prevented from falling right down to his shoulders by his very prominent ears. The Hat considered for a moment, then the rip near the brim opened again and shouted:

'Gryffindor!'

Harry clapped loudly with the rest of Gryffindor house as Euan Abercrombie staggered to their table and sat down, looking as though he would like very much to sink through the floor and never be looked at again.

Slowly, the long line of first-years thinned. In the pauses between the names and the Sorting Hat's decisions, Harry could hear Ron's stomach rumbling loudly. Finally, 'Zeller, Rose' was Sorted into Hufflepuff, and Professor McGonagall picked up the Hat and stool and marched them away as Professor Dumbledore rose to his feet.

Whatever his recent bitter feelings had been towards his Headmaster, Harry was somehow soothed to see Dumbledore standing before them all. Between the absence of Hagrid and the presence of those dragonish horses, he had felt that his return to Hogwarts, so long anticipated, was full of unexpected surprises, like jarring notes in a familiar song. But this, at least, was how it was supposed to be: their Headmaster rising to greet them all before the start-of-term feast.

To our newcomers,' said Dumbledore in a ringing voice, his arms stretched wide and a beaming smile on his lips, 'welcome! To our old hands - welcome back! There is a time for speech-making, but this is not it. Tuck in!'

There was an appreciative laugh and an outbreak of applause as Dumbledore sat down neatly and threw his long beard over his shoulder so as to keep it out of the way of his plate - for food had appeared out of nowhere, so that the five long tables were groaning under joints and pies and dishes of vegetables, bread and sauces and flagons of pumpkin juice.

'Excellent,' said Ron, with a kind of groan of longing, and he seized the nearest plate of chops and began piling them on to his plate, watched wistfully by Nearly Headless Nick.

'What were you saying before the Sorting?' Hermione asked the ghost. 'About the Hat giving warnings?'

'Oh, yes,' said Nick, who seemed glad of a reason to turn away from Ron, who was now eating roast potatoes with almost indecent enthusiasm. 'Yes, I have heard the Hat give several warnings

before, always at times when it detects periods of great danger for the school. And always, of course, its advice is the same: stand together, be strong from within.'

'Ow kunnit nofe skusin danger ifzat?' said Ron.

His mouth was so full Harry thought it was quite an achievement for him to make any noise at all.

'I beg your pardon?' said Nearly Headless Nick politely, while Hermione looked revolted. Ron gave an enormous swallow and said, 'How can it know if the school's in danger if it's a Hat?'

'I have no idea,' said Nearly Headless Nick. 'Of course, it lives in Dumbledore's office, so I daresay it picks things up there.'

'And it wants all the houses to be friends?' said Harry, looking over at the Slytherin table, where Draco Malfoy was holding court. 'Fat chance.'

'Well, now, you shouldn't take that attitude,' said Nick reprovingly. 'Peaceful co-operation, that's the key. We ghosts, though we belong to separate houses, maintain links of friendship. In spite of the competitiveness between Gryffindor and Slytherin, I would never dream of seeking an argument with the Bloody Baron.'

'Only because you're terrified of him,' said Ron.

Nearly Headless Nick looked highly affronted.

Terrified? I hope I, Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, have never been guilty of cowardice in my life! The noble blood that runs in my veins -'

'What blood?' asked Ron. 'Surely you haven't still got -?'

'Its a figure of speech!' said Nearly Headless Nick, now so annoyed his head was trembling ominously on his partially severed neck. 'I assume I am still allowed to enjoy the use of whichever words I like, even if the pleasures of eating and drinking are denied me! But I am quite used to students poking fun at my death, I assure you!'

'Nick, he wasn't really laughing at you!' said Hermione, throwing a furious look at Ron.

Unfortunately, Ron's mouth was packed to exploding point again and all he could manage was 'Node iddum eentup sechew,' which Nick did not seem to think constituted an adequate apology. Rising into the air, he straightened his feathered hat and swept away from them to the other end of the table, coming to rest between the Creevey brothers, Colin and Dennis.

'Well done, Ron,' snapped Hermione.

'What?' said Ron indignantly, having managed, finally, to swallow his tood. 'I'm not allowed to ask a simple question?'

'Oh, forget it,' said Hermione irritably, and the pair of them spent the rest of the meal in huffy silence.

Harry was too used to their bickering to bother trying to reconcile them; he felt it was a better use of his time to eat his way steadily through his steak and kidney pie, then a large plateful of his favourite treacle tart.

When all the students had finished eating and the noise level in the Hall was starting to creep upwards again, Dumbledore got to his feet once more. Talking ceased immediately as all turned to lace the Headmaster. Harry was feeling pleasantly drowsy now. His four-poster bed was waiting somewhere above, wonderfully warm and soft...

'Well, now that we are all digesting another magnificent feast, I beg a few moments of your attention for the usual start-of-term notices,' said Dumbledore. 'First-years ought to know that the Forest in the grounds is out-of-bounds to students - and a few of our older students ought to know by now, too.' (Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged smirks.)

'Mr Filch, the caretaker, has asked me, for what he tells me is the four-hundred-and-sixty-second

time, to remind you all that magic is not permitted in corridors between classes, nor are a number of other things, all of which can be checked on the extensive list now fastened to Mr Filch's office door.

'We have had two changes in staffing this year. We are very pleased to welcome back Professor Grubbly-Plank, who will be taking Care of Magical Creatures lessons; we are also delighted to introduce Professor Umbridge, our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher.'

There was a round of polite but fairly unenthusiastic applause, during which Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged slightly panicked looks; Dumbledore had not said for how long Grubbly-Plank would be teaching.

Dumbledore continued, Tryouts for the house Quidditch teams will take place on the -'

He broke off, looking enquiringly at Professor Umbridge. As she was not much taller standing than sitting, there was a moment when nobody understood why Dumbledore had stopped talking, but then Professor Umbridge cleared her throat, 'Hem, hem,' and it became clear that she had got to her feet and was intending to make a speech.

Dumbledore only looked taken aback for a moment, then he sat down smartly and looked alertly at Professor Umbridge as though he desired nothing better than to listen to her talk. Other members of staff were not as adept at hiding their surprise. Professor Sprout's eyebrows had disappeared into her flyaway hair and Professor McGonagall's mouth was as thin as Harry had ever seen it. No new teacher had ever interrupted Dumbledore before. Many of the students were smirking; this woman obviously did not know how things were done at Hogwarts.

Thank you, Headmaster,' Professor Umbridge simpered, 'for those kind words of welcome.'

Her voice was high-pitched, breathy and little-girlish and, again, Harry felt a powerful rush of dislike that he could not explain to himself; all he knew was that he loathed everything about her, from her stupid voice to her fluffy pink cardigan. She gave another little throat-clearing cough ('hem, hem') and continued.

'Well, it is lovely to be back at Hogwarts, I must say!' She smiled, revealing very pointed teeth. 'And to see such happy little faces looking up at me!'

Harry glanced around. None of the faces he could see looked happy. On the contrary, they all looked rather taken-aback at being addressed as though they were five years old.

'I am very much looking forward to getting to know you all and I'm sure we'll be very good friends!'

Students exchanged looks at this; some of them were barely concealing grins.

'I'll be her friend as long as I don't have to borrow that cardigan,' Parvati whispered to Lavender, and both of them lapsed into silent giggles.

Professor Umbridge cleared her throat again ('hem, hem'), but when she continued, some of the breathiness had vanished from her voice. She sounded much more businesslike and now her words had a dull learned-by-heart sound to them.

The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of vital importance. The rare gifts with which you were born may come to nothing if not nurtured and honed by careful instruction. The ancient skills unique to the wizarding community must be passed down the generations lest we lose them for ever. The treasure trove of magical knowledge amassed by our ancestors must be guarded, replenished and polished by those who have been called to the noble profession of teaching.'

Professor Umbridge paused here and made a little bow to her fellow staff members, none of whom bowed back to her. Professor McGonagall's dark eyebrows had contracted so that she looked positively hawklike, and Harry distinctly saw her exchange a significant glance with Professor Sprout

as Umbridge gave another little 'hem, hem' and went on with her speech.

Every headmaster and headmistress of Hogwarts has brought something new to the weighty task of governing this historic school, and that is as it should be, for without progress there will be stagnation and decay. There again, progress for progress's sake must be discouraged, for our tried and tested traditions often require no tinkering. A balance, then, between old and new, between permanence and change, between tradition and innovation..."

Harry found his attentiveness ebbing, as though his brain was slipping in and out of tune. The quiet that always filled the Hall when Dumbledore was speaking was breaking up as students put their heads together, whispering and giggling. Over on the Ravenclaw table Cho Chang was chatting animatedly with her friends. A few seats along from Cho, Luna Lovegood had got out *The Quibbler* again. Meanwhile, at the Hufflepuff table Ernie Macmillan was one of the few still staring at Professor Umbridge, but he was glassy-eyed and Harry was sure he was only pretending to listen in an attempt to live up to the new prefect's badge gleaming on his chest.

Professor Umbridge did not seem to notice the restlessness of her audience. Harry had the impression that a full-scale riot could have broken out under her nose and she would have ploughed on with her speech. The teachers, however, were still listening very attentively, and Hermione seemed to be drinking in every word Umbridge spoke, though, judging by her expression, they were not at all to her taste.

'... because some changes will be for the better, while others will come, in the fullness of time, to be recognised as errors of judgement. Meanwhile, some old habits will be retained, and rightly so, whereas others, outmoded and outworn, must be abandoned. Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited.'

She sat down. Dumbledore clapped. The staff followed his lead, though Harry noticed that several of them brought their hands together only once or twice before stopping. A few students joined in, but most had been taken unawares by the end of the speech, not having listened to more than a few words of it, and before they could start applauding properly, Dumbledore had stood up again.

'Thank you very much, Professor Umbridge, that was most illuminating,' he said, bowing to her. 'Now, as I was saying, Quidditch tryouts will be held...'

'Yes, it certainly was illuminating,' said Hermione in a low voice.

'You're not telling me you enjoyed it?' Ron said quietly, turning a glazed face towards Hermione. 'That was about the dumbest speech I've ever heard, and I grew up with Percy.'

'I said illuminating, not enjoyable,' said Hermione. 'It explained a lot.'

'Did it?' said Harry in surprise. 'Sounded like a load of waffle to me.'

'There was some important stuff hidden in the waffle,' said Hermione grimly.

'Was there?' said Ron blankly.

'How about: "progress for progress's sake must be discouraged"? How about: "pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited"?'

'Well, what does that mean?' said Ron impatiently.

'I'll tell you what it means,' said Hermione through gritted teeth. 'It means the Ministry's interfering at Hogwarts.'

There was a great clattering and banging all around them; Dumbledore had obviously just dismissed the school, because everyone was standing up ready to leave the Hall. Hermione jumped up, looking flustered.

'Ron, we're supposed to show the first-years where to go!'

'Oh yeah,' said Ron, who had obviously forgotten. 'Hey - hey, you lot! Midgets!'

'Ron!'

'Well, they are, they're titchy...'

'I know, but you can't call them midgets! - First-years!' Hermione called commandingly along the table. This way, please!'

A group of new students walked shyly up the gap between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables, all of them trying hard not to lead the group. They did indeed seem very small; Harry was sure he had not appeared that young when he had arrived here. He grinned at them. A blond boy next to Euan Abercrombie looked petrified; he nudged Euan and whispered something in his ear. Euan Abercrombie looked equally frightened and stole a horrified look at Harry, who felt the grin slide off his face like Stinksap.

'See you later,' he said dully to Ron and Hermione and he made his way out of the Great Hall alone, doing everything he could to ignore more whispering, staring and pointing as he passed. He kept his eyes fixed ahead as he wove his way through the crowd in the Entrance Hall, then he hurried up the marble staircase, took a couple of concealed short cuts and had soon left most of the crowds behind.

He had been stupid not to expect this, he thought angrily as he walked through the much emptier upstairs corridors. Of course everyone was staring at him; he had emerged from the Triwizard maze two months previously clutching the dead body of a fellow student and claiming to have seen Lord Voldemort return to power. There had not been time last term to explain himself before they'd all had to go home - even if he had felt up to giving the whole school a detailed account of the terrible events in that graveyard.

Harry had reached the end of the corridor to the Gryffindor common room and come to a halt in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady before he realised that he did not know the new password.

'Er... ' he said glumly, staring up at the Fat Lady, who smoothed the folds of her pink satin dress and looked sternly back at him.

'No password, no entrance,' she said loftily.

'Harry, I know it!' Someone panted up behind him and he turned to see Neville jogging towards him. 'Guess what it is? I'm actually going to be able to remember it for once -' He waved the stunted little cactus he had shown them on the train. 'Mimulus mible-tonifl!'

'Correct,' said the Fat Lady, and her portrait swung open towards them like a door, revealing a circular hole in the wall behind, through which Harry and Neville now climbed.

The Gryffindor common room looked as welcoming as ever, a cosy circular tower room full of dilapidated squashy armchairs and rickety old tables. A fire was crackling merrily in the grate and a few people were warming their hands by it before going up to their dormitories; on the other side of the room Fred and George Weasley were pinning something up on the noticeboard. Harry waved goodnight to them and headed straight for the door to the boys' dormitories; he was not in much of a mood for talking at the moment. Neville followed him.

Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan had reached the dormitory first and were in the process of covering the walls beside their beds with posters and photographs. They had been talking as Harry pushed open the door but stopped abruptly the moment they saw him. Harry wondered whether they had been talking about him, then whether he was being paranoid.

'Hi,' he said, moving across to his own trunk and opening it.

'Hey, Harry,' said Dean, who was putting on a pair of pyjamas in the West Ham colours. 'Good

holiday?'

'Not bad,' muttered Harry, as a true account of his holiday would have taken most of the night to relate and he could not face it. 'You?'

'Yeah, it was OK,' chuckled Dean. 'Better than Seamus's, anyway, he was just telling me.'

'Why, what happened, Seamus?' Neville asked as he placed his *Mimulus mimbletonia* tenderly on his bedside cabinet.

Seamus did not answer immediately; he was making rather a meal of ensuring that his poster of the Kenmare Kestrels Quidditch team was quite straight. Then he said, with his back still turned to Harry, 'Me mam didn't want me to come back.'

'What?' said Harry, pausing in the act of pulling off his robes.

'She didn't want me to come back to Hogwarts.'

Seamus turned away from his poster and pulled his own pyjamas out of his trunk, still not looking at Harry.

'But - why?' said Harry, astonished. He knew that Seamus's mother was a witch and could not understand, therefore, why she should have come over so Dursleyish.

Seamus did not answer until he had finished buttoning his pyjamas.

'Well,' he said in a measured voice, 'I suppose... because of you.'

'What d'you mean?' said Harry quickly.

His heart was beating rather fast. He felt vaguely as though something was closing in on him.

'Well,' said Seamus again, still avoiding Harry's eye, 'she... er... well, it's not just you, it's Dumbledore, too...'

'She believes the Daily Prophet?' said Harry. 'She thinks I'm a liar and Dumbledore's an old fool?'

Seamus looked up at him.

'Yeah, something like that.'

Harry said nothing. He threw his wand down on to his bedside table, pulled off his robes, stuffed them angrily into his trunk and pulled on his pyjamas. He was sick of it; sick of being the person who is stared at and talked about all the time. If any of them knew, if any of them had the faintest idea what it felt like to be the one all these things had happened to... Mrs. Finnigan had no idea, the stupid woman, he thought savagely.

He got into bed and made to pull the hangings closed around him, but before he could do so, Seamus said, 'Look... what did happen that night when... you know, when... with Cedric Diggory and all?'

Seamus sounded nervous and eager at the same time. Dean, who had been bending over his trunk trying to retrieve a slipper, went oddly still and Harry knew he was listening hard.

'What are you asking me for?' Harry retorted. 'Just read the Daily Prophet like your mother, why don't you? That'll tell you all you need to know.'

'Don't you have a go at my mother,' Seamus snapped.

Til have a go at anyone who calls me a liar,' said Harry.

'Don't talk to me like that!'

Til talk to you how I want,' said Harry, his temper rising so fast he snatched his wand back from his bedside table. 'If you've got a problem sharing a dormitory with me, go and ask McGonagall if you can be moved... stop your mummy worrying -'

'Leave my mother out of this, Potter!'

'What's going on?'

Ron had appeared in the doorway. His wide eyes travelled from Harry, who was kneeling on his

bed with his wand pointing at Seamus, to Seamus, who was standing there with his fists raised.

'He's having a go at my mother!' Seamus yelled.

'What?' said Ron. 'Harry wouldn't do that — we met your mother, we liked her...'

That's before she started believing every word the stinking Daily Prophet writes about me!' said Harry at the top of his voice.

'Oh,' said Ron, comprehension dawning across his freckled face. 'Oh... right.'

'You know what?' said Seamus heatedly, casting Harry a venomous look. 'He's right, I don't want to share a dormitory with him any more, he's mad.'

'That's out of order, Seamus,' said Ron, whose ears were starting to glow red - always a danger sign.

'Out of order, am I?' shouted Seamus, who in contrast with Ron was going pale. 'You believe all the rubbish he's come out with about You-Know-Who, do you, you reckon he's telling the truth?'

'Yeah, I do!' said Ron angrily.

Then you're mad, too,' said Seamus in disgust.

'Yeah? Well, unfortunately for you, pal, I'm also a prefect!' said Ron, jabbing himself in the chest with a finger. 'So unless you want detention, watch your mouth!'

Seamus looked for a few seconds as though detention would be a reasonable price to pay to say what was going through his mind; but with a noise of contempt he turned on his heel, vaulted into bed and pulled the hangings shut with such violence that they were ripped from the bed and fell in a dusty pile to the floor. Ron glared at Seamus, then looked at Dean and Neville.

'Anyone else's parents got a problem with Harry?' he said aggressively.

'My parents are Muggles, mate,' said Dean, shrugging. They don't know nothing about no deaths at Hogwarts, because I'm not stupid enough to tell them.'

'You don't know my mother, she'd weasel anything out of anyone!' Seamus snapped at him. 'Anyway your parents don't get the Daily Prophet. They don't know our Headmaster's been sacked from the Wizengamot and the International Confederation of Wizards because he's losing his marbles - '

'My gran says that's rubbish,' piped up Neville. 'She says it's the Daily Prophet that's going downhill, not Dumbledore. She's cancelled our subscription. We believe Harry' said Neville simply. He climbed into bed and pulled the covers up to his chin, looking owlily over them at Seamus. 'My gran's always said You-Know-Who would come back one day. She says if Dumbledore says he's back, he's back.'

Harry felt a rush of gratitude towards Neville. Nobody else said anything. Seamus got out his wand, repaired the bed hangings and vanished behind them. Dean got into bed, rolled over and fell silent. Neville, who appeared to have nothing more to say either, was gazing fondly at his moonlit cactus.

Harry lay back on his pillows while Ron bustled around the next bed, putting his things away. He felt shaken by the argument with Seamus, whom he had always liked very much. How many more people were going to suggest that he was lying, or unhinged?

Had Dumbledore suffered like this all summer, as first the Wizengamot, then the International Confederation of Wizards had thrown him from their ranks? Was it anger at Harry, perhaps, that had stopped Dumbledore getting in touch with him for months? The two of them were in this together, after all; Dumbledore had believed Harry, announced his version of events to the whole school and then to the wider wizarding community. Anyone who thought Harry was a liar had to think that Dumbledore was, too, or else that Dumbledore had been hoodwinked...

They'll know we're right in the end, thought Harry miserably, as Ron got into bed and extinguished the last candle in the dormitory. But he wondered how many more attacks like Seamus's he would have to endure before that time came.