

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

Chapter 25 - The Beetle at Bay

Harry's question was answered the very next morning. When Hermione's Daily Prophet arrived she smoothed it out, gazed for a moment at the front page and gave a yelp that caused everyone in the vicinity to stare at her.

'What?' said Harry and Ron together.

For answer she spread the newspaper on the table in front of them and pointed at ten black-and-white photographs that filled the whole of the front page, nine showing wizards' faces and the tenth, a witch's. Some of the people in the photographs were silently jeering; others were tapping their fingers on the frame of their pictures, looking insolent. Each picture was captioned with a name and the crime for which the person had been sent to Azkaban.

Antonin Dolohov, read the legend beneath a wizard with a long, pale, twisted face who was sneering up at Harry, convicted of the brutal murders of Gideon and Fabian Prewett.

Algernon Rookwood, said the caption beneath a pockmarked man with greasy hair who was leaning against the edge of his picture, looking bored, convicted of leaking Ministry of Magic secrets to He Who Must Not Be Named.

But Harry's eyes were drawn to the picture of the witch. Her face had leapt out at him the moment he had seen the page. She had long, dark hair that looked unkempt and straggly in the picture, though he had seen it sleek, thick and shining. She glared up at him through heavily lidded eyes, an arrogant, disdainful smile playing around her thin mouth. Like Sirius, she retained vestiges of great good looks, but something - perhaps Azkaban - had taken most of her beauty.

Bellatrix Lestrange, convicted of the torture and permanent inca-pacitation of Frank and Alice Longbottom.

Hermione nudged Harry and pointed at the headline over the pictures, which Harry, concentrating on Bellatrix, had not yet read.

MASS BREAKOUT FROM AZKABAN

MINISTRY FEARS BLACK IS 'RALLYING POINT'

FOR OLD DEATH EATERS

'Black?' said Harry loudly. 'Not -?'

'Shhh!' whispered Hermione desperately. 'Not so loud - just read it!'

The Ministry of Magic announced late last night that there has been a mass breakout from Azkaban.

Speaking to reporters in his private office, Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic, confirmed that ten high-security prisoners escaped in the early hours of yesterday evening and that he has already informed the Muggle Prime Minister of the dangerous nature of these individuals.

'We find ourselves, most unfortunately, in the same position we were two and a half years ago when the murderer Sinus Black escaped,' said Fudge last night. 'Nor do we think the two breakouts are unrelated. An escape of this magnitude suggests outside help, and we must remember that Black, as the first person ever to break out of Azkaban, would be ideally placed to help others follow in his footsteps. We think it likely that these individuals, who include Black's cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange, have rallied around Black as their leader. We are, however, doing all we can to round up the criminals, and we beg the magical community to remain alert and cautious. On no account should any of these individuals be approached.'

There you are, Harry,' said Ron, looking awestruck. That's why he was happy last night.'

'I don't believe this,' snarled Harry, 'Fudge is blaming the breakout on Sinus?'

'What other options does he have?' said Hermione bitterly. 'He can hardly say, "Sorry, everyone, Dumbledore warned me this might happen, the Azkaban guards have joined Lord Voldemort" - stop whimpering, Ron - "and now Voldemort's worst supporters have broken out, too." I mean, he's spent a good six months telling everyone you and Dumbledore are liars, hasn't he?'

Hermione ripped open the newspaper and began to read the report inside while Harry looked around the Great Hall. He could not understand why his fellow students were not looking scared or at least discussing the terrible piece of news on the front page, but very few of them took the newspaper every day like Hermione. There they all were, talking about homework and Quidditch and who knew what other rubbish, when outside these walls ten more Death Eaters had swollen Voldemort's ranks.

He glanced up at the staff table. It was a different story there: Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall were deep in conversation, both looking extremely grave. Professor Sprout had the Prophet propped against a bottle of ketchup and was reading the front page with such concentration that she was not noticing the gentle drip of egg yolk falling into her lap from her stationary spoon. Meanwhile, at the far end of the table, Professor Umbridge was tucking into a bowl of porridge. For once her pouchy toad's eyes were not sweeping the Great Hall looking for misbehaving students. She scowled as she gulped down her food and every now and then she shot a malevolent glance up the table to where Dumbledore and McGonagall were talking so intently.

'Oh my -' said Hermione wonderingly, still staring at the newspaper.

'What now?' said Harry quickly; he was feeling jumpy.

'It's... horrible,' said Hermione, looking shaken. She folded back page ten of the newspaper and handed it to Harry and Ron.

TRAGIC DEMISE OF MINISTRY OF MAGIC WORKER St Mungo's Hospital promised a full inquiry last night after Ministry of Magic worker Broderick Bode, 49, was discovered dead in his bed, strangled by a pot plant. Healers called to the scene were unable to revive Mr Bode, who had been injured in a workplace accident some weeks prior to his death.

Healer Miriam Strout, who was in charge of Mr Bode's ward at the time of the incident, has been suspended on full pay and was unavailable for comment yesterday, but a spokeswizard for the hospital said in a statement:

'St Mungo's deeply regrets the death of Mr Bode, whose health was improving steadily prior to this tragic accident.

'We have strict guidelines on the decorations permitted on our wards but it appears that Healer Strout, busy over the Christmas period, overlooked the dangers of the plant on Mr Bode's bedside table. As his speech and mobility improved, Healer Strout encouraged Mr Bode to look after the plant himself, unaware that it was not an innocent Flitterbloom, but a cutting of Devil's Snare which, when touched by the convalescent Mr Bode, throttled him instantly.

'St Mungo's is as yet unable to account for the presence of the plant on the ward and asks any witch or wizard with information to come forward.'

'Bode...' said Ron. 'Bode. It rings a bell...'

'We saw him,' Hermione whispered. 'In St Mungo's, remember? He was in the bed opposite Lockhart's, just lying there, staring at the ceiling. And we saw the Devil's Snare arrive. She - the Healer - said it was a Christmas present.'

Harry looked back at the story. A feeling of horror was rising like bile in his throat.

'How come we didn't recognise Devil's Snare? We've seen it before... we could've stopped this

from happening.'

'Who expects Devils Snare to turn up in a hospital disguised as a pot plant?' said Ron sharply. 'It's not our fault, whoever sent it to the bloke is to blame! They must be a real prat, why didn't they check what they were buying?'

'Oh, come on, Ron!' said Hermione shakily. 'I don't think anyone could put Devils Snare in a pot and not realise it tries to kill whoever touches it? This - this was murder... a clever murder, as well... if the plant was sent anonymously, how's anyone ever going to find out who did it?'

Harry was not thinking about Devil's Snare. He was remembering taking the lift down to the ninth level of the Ministry on the day of his hearing and the sallow-faced man who had got in on the. Atrium level. •»

'I met Bode,' he said slowly. 'I saw him at the Ministry with your= dad.' :•

Rons mouth fell open.

'I've heard Dad talk about him at home! He was an Unspeakable - he worked in the Department of Mysteries!'

They looked at each other for a moment, then Hermione pulled the newspaper back towards her, closed it, glared for a moment at the pictures of the ten escaped Death Eaters on the front, then leapt to her feet.

'Where are you going?' said Ron, startled.

To send a letter,' said Hermione, swinging her bag on to her shoulder. 'It... well, I don't know whether... but it's worth trying... and I'm the only one who can.'

'I hate it when she does that,' grumbled Ron, as he and Harry got up from the table and made their own, slower way out of the Great Hall. 'Would it kill her to tell us what she's up to for once? It'd take her about ten more seconds - hey, Hagrid!'

Hagrid was standing beside the doors into the Entrance Hall, waiting for a crowd of Ravenclaws to pass. He was still as heavily bruised as he had been on the day he had come back from his mission to the giants and there was a new cut right across the bridge of his nose.

'All righ', you two?' he said, trying to muster a smile but managing only a kind of pained grimace.

'Are you OK, Hagrid?' asked Harry, following him as he lumbered after the Ravenclaws.

'Fine, fine,' said Hagrid with a feeble assumption of airiness; he waved a hand and narrowly missed concussing a frightened-looking Professor Vector, who was passing. 'Jus' busy, yeh know, usual stuff

- lessons ter prepare - couple o' salamanders got scale rot - an' I'm on probation,' he mumbled.

'You're on probation?' said Ron very loudly, so that many of the passing students looked around curiously. 'Sorry - I mean - you're on probation?' he whispered.

'Yeah,' said Hagrid. 'S'no more'n I expected, ter tell yeh the truth. Yeh migh' not've picked up on it, bu' that inspection didn' go too well, yeh know... anyway,' he sighed deeply. 'Bes' go an' rub a bit more chilli powder on them salamanders or their tails'll be hangin' off 'em next. See yeh, Harry... Ron...'

He trudged away, out of the front doors and down the stone steps into the damp grounds. Harry watched him go, wondering how much more bad news he could stand.

*

The fact that Hagrid was now on probation became common knowledge within the school over the next few days, but to Harry's indignation, hardly anybody appeared to be upset about it; indeed, some people, Draco Malfoy prominent among them, seemed positively gleeful. As for the freakish death of an obscure Department of Mysteries employee in St Mungo's, Harry, Ron and Hermione

seemed to be the only people who knew or cared. There was only one topic of conversation in the corridors now: the ten escaped Death Eaters, whose story had finally filtered through the school from those few people who read the newspapers. Rumours were flying that some of the convicts had been spotted in Hogsmeade, that they were supposed to be hiding out in the Shrieking Shack and that they were going to break into Hogwarts, just as Sirius Black had once done.

Those who came from wizarding families had grown up hearing the names of these Death Eaters spoken with almost as much fear as Voldemorts; the crimes they had committed during the days of Voldemort's reign of terror were legendary. There were relatives of their victims among the Hogwarts students, who now found themselves the unwilling objects of a gruesome sort of reflected fame as they walked the corridors: Susan Bones, whose uncle, aunt and cousins had all died at the hands of one of the ten, said miserably during Herbology that she now had a good idea what it felt like to be Harry.

'And I don't know how you stand it - it's horrible,' she said bluntly, dumping far too much dragon manure on her tray of Screechsnap seedlings, causing them to wriggle and squeak in discomfort.

It was true that Harry was the subject of much renewed muttering and pointing in the corridors these days, yet he thought he detected a slight difference in the tone of the whisperers' voices. They sounded curious rather than hostile now, and once or twice he was sure he overheard snatches of conversation that suggested that the speakers were not satisfied with the Prophets version of how and why ten Death Eaters had managed to break out of the Azkaban fortress. In their confusion and fear, these doubters now seemed to be turning to the only other explanation available to them: the one that Harry and Dumbledore had been expounding since the previous year.

It was not only the students' mood that had changed. It was now quite common to come across two or three teachers conversing in low, urgent whispers in the corridors, breaking off their conversations the moment they saw students approaching.

'They obviously can't talk freely in the staff room any more,' said Hermione in a low voice, as she, Harry and Ron passed Professors McGonagall, Flitwick and Sprout huddled together outside the Charms classroom one day. 'Not with Umbridge there.'

'Reckon they know anything new?' said Ron, gazing back over his shoulder at the three teachers.

'If they do, we're not going to hear about it, are we?' said Harry angrily. 'Not after Decree... what number are we on now?' For new notices had appeared on the house noticeboards the morning after news of the Azkaban breakout: ^

BY ORDER OF THE HIGH INQUISITOR OF HOGWARTS ^

Teachers are hereby banned from giving students any information •" that is not strictly related to the subjects they are paid to teach.

The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-six.

Signed: Dolores Jane Umbridge, High Inquisitor

This latest Decree had been the subject of a great number of jokes among the students. Lee Jordan had pointed out to Umbridge that by the terms of the new rule she was not allowed to tell Fred and George off for playing Exploding Snap in the back of the class.

'Exploding Snap's got nothing to do with Defence Against the Dark Arts, Professor! That's not information relating to your subject!'

When Harry next saw Lee, the back of his hand was bleeding rather badly. Harry recommended essence of Murtlap.

Harry had thought the breakout from Azkaban might have humbled Umbridge a little, that she might have been abashed at the catastrophe that had occurred right under the nose of her beloved

Fudge. It seemed, however, to have only intensified her furious desire to bring every aspect of life at Hogwarts under her personal control. She seemed determined at the very least to achieve a sacking before long, and the only question was whether it would be Professor Trelawney or Hagrid who went first.

Every single Divination and Care of Magical Creatures lesson was now conducted in the presence of Umbridge and her clipboard. She lurked by the fire in the heavily perfumed tower room, interrupting Professor Trelawney's increasingly hysterical talks with difficult questions about ornithomancy and heptomology, insisting that she predicted students' answers before they gave them and demanding that she demonstrate her skill at the crystal ball, the tea leaves and the rune stones in turn. Harry thought Professor Trelawney might soon crack under the strain. Several times he passed her in the corridors - in itself a very unusual occurrence as she generally remained in her tower room - muttering wildly to herself, wringing her hands and shooting terrified glances over her shoulder, and all the while giving off a powerful smell of cooking sherry. If he had not been so worried about Hagrid, he would have felt sorry for her - but if one of them was to be ousted from their job, there could be only one choice for Harry as to who should remain.

Unfortunately, Harry could not see that Hagrid was putting up a better show than Trelawney. Though he seemed to be following Hermione's advice and had shown them nothing more frightening than a Crup — a creature indistinguishable from a Jack Russell terrier except for its forked tail - since before Christmas, he too seemed to have lost his nerve. He was oddly distracted and jumpy during lessons, losing the thread of what he was saying to the class, answering questions wrongly, and all the time glancing anxiously at Umbridge. He was also more distant with Harry, Ron and Hermione than he had ever been before, and had expressly forbidden them to visit him after dark.

'If she catches yeh, it'll be all of our necks on the line,' he told them flatly, and with no desire to do anything that might jeopardise his job further they abstained from walking down to his hut in the evenings.

It seemed to Harry that Umbridge was steadily depriving him of everything that made his life at Hogwarts worth living: visits to Hagrid's house, letters from Sirius, his Firebolt and Quidditch. He took his revenge the only way he could - by redoubling his efforts for the DA.

Harry was pleased to see that all of them, even Zacharias Smith, had been spurred on to work harder than ever by the news that ten more Death Eaters were now on the loose, but in nobody was this improvement more pronounced than in Neville. The news of his parents' attackers' escape had wrought a strange and even slightly alarming change in him. He had not once mentioned his meeting with Harry, Ron and Hermione on the closed ward in St Mungo's and, taking their lead from him, they had kept quiet about it too. Nor had he said anything on the subject of Bellatrix and her fellow torturers' escape. In fact, Neville barely spoke during the DA meetings any more, but worked relentlessly on every new jinx and counter-curse Harry taught them, his plump face screwed up in concentration, apparently indifferent to injuries or accidents and working harder than anyone else in the room. He was improving so fast it was quite unnerving and when Harry taught them the Shield Charm - a means of deflecting minor jinxes so that they rebounded upon the attacker - only Hermione mastered the charm faster than Neville.

Harry would have given a great deal to be making as much progress at Occlumency as Neville was making during the DA meetings. Harry's sessions with Snape, which had started badly enough, were not improving. On the contrary Harry felt he was getting worse with every lesson.

Before he had started studying Occlumency, his scar had prickled occasionally, usually during the night, or else following one of those strange flashes of Voldemort's thoughts or mood that he

experienced every now and then. Nowadays, however, his scar hardly ever stopped prickling, and he often felt lurches of annoyance or cheerfulness that were unrelated to what was happening to him at the time, which were always accompanied by a particularly painful twinge from his scar. He had the horrible impression that he was slowly turning into a kind of aerial that was tuned in to tiny fluctuations in Voldemort's mood, and he was sure he could date this increased sensitivity firmly from his first Occlumency lesson with Snape. What was more, he was now dreaming about walking down the corridor towards the entrance to the Department of Mysteries almost every night, dreams which always culminated in him standing longingly in front of the plain black door.

'Maybe it's a bit like an illness,' said Hermione, looking concerned when Harry confided in her and Ron. 'A fever or something. It has to get worse before it gets better.'

The lessons with Snape are making it worse,' said Harry flatly. 'I'm getting sick of my scar hurting and I'm getting bored with walking down that corridor every night.' He rubbed his forehead angrily. 'I just wish the door would open, I'm sick of standing staring at it -'

That's not funny,' said Hermione sharply. 'Dumbledore doesn't want you to have dreams about that corridor at all, or he wouldn't have asked Snape to teach you Occlumency. You're just going to have to work a bit harder in your lessons.'

'I am working!' said Harry nettled. 'You try it some time - Snape trying to get inside your head - it's not a bundle of laughs, you know!'

'Maybe...' said Ron slowly.

'Maybe what?' said Hermione, rather snappishly.

'Maybe it's not Harry's fault he can't close his mind,' said Ron darkly.

'What do you mean?' said Hermione.

'Well, maybe Snape isn't really trying to help Harry...'

Harry and Hermione stared at him. Ron looked darkly and meaningfully from one to the other.

'Maybe,' he said again, in a lower voice, 'he's actually trying to open Harry's mind a bit wider... make it easier for You-Know—'

'Shut up, Ron,' said Hermione angrily. 'How many times have you suspected Snape, and when have you ever been right? Dumbledore trusts him, he works for the Order, that ought to be enough.'

'He used to be a Death Eater,' said Ron stubbornly. 'And we've never seen proof that he really swapped sides.'

'Dumbledore trusts him,' Hermione repeated. 'And if we can't trust Dumbledore, we can't trust anyone.'

*

With so much to worry about and so much to do - startling amounts of homework that frequently kept the fifth-years working until past midnight, secret DA sessions and regular classes with Snape - January seemed to be passing alarmingly fast. Before Harry knew it, February had arrived, bringing with it wetter and warmer weather and the prospect of the second Hogsmeade visit of the year. Harry had had very little time to spare for conversations with Cho since they had agreed to visit the village together, but suddenly found himself facing a Valentine's Day spent entirely in her company.

On the morning of the fourteenth he dressed particularly carefully. He and Ron arrived at breakfast just in time for the arrival of the post owls. Hedwig was not there - not that Harry had expected her - but Hermione was tugging a letter from the beak of an unfamiliar brown owl as they sat down.

'And about time! If it hadn't come today...' she said, eagerly tearing open the envelope and pulling out a small piece of parchment. Her eyes sped from left to right as she read through the message and a

grimly pleased expression spread across her face.

'Listen, Harry,' she said, looking up at him, 'this is really important. Do you think you could meet me in the Three Broomsticks around midday?'

'Well... I dunno,' said Harry uncertainly. 'Cho might be expecting me to spend the whole day with her. We never said what we were going to do.'

'Well, bring her along if you must,' said Hermione urgently. 'But will you come?'

'Well... all right, but why?'

'I haven't got time to tell you now, I've got to answer this quickly.'

And she hurried out of the Great Hall, the letter clutched in one hand and a piece of toast in the other.

'Are you coming?' Harry asked Ron, but he shook his head, looking glum.

'I can't come into Hogsmeade at all; Angelina wants a full day's training. Like it's going to help; we're the worst team I've ever seen. You should see Sloper and Kirke, they're pathetic, even worse than I am.' He heaved a great sigh. 'I dunno why Angelina won't just let me resign.'

'It's because you're good when you're on form, that's why,' said Harry irritably.

He found it very hard to be sympathetic to Ron's plight, when he himself would have given almost anything to be playing in the forthcoming match against Hufflepuff. Ron seemed to have noticed Harry's tone, because he did not mention Quidditch again during breakfast, and there was a slight frostiness in the way they said goodbye to each other shortly afterwards. Ron departed for the Quidditch pitch and Harry, after attempting to flatten his hair while staring at his reflection in the back of a teaspoon, proceeded alone to the Entrance Hall to meet Cho, feeling very apprehensive and wondering what on earth they were going to talk about.

She was waiting for him a little to the side of the oak front doors, looking very pretty with her hair tied back in a long pony-tail. Harry's feet seemed to be too big for his body as he walked towards her and he was suddenly horribly aware of his arms and how stupid they must look swinging at his sides.

'Hi,' said Cho slightly breathlessly.

'Hi,' said Harry.

They stared at each other for a moment, then Harry said, 'Well - er — shall we go, then?'

'Oh - yes...'

They joined the queue of people being signed out by Filch, occasionally catching each other's eye and grinning shiftily, but not talking to each other. Harry was relieved when they reached the fresh air, finding it easier to walk along in silence than just stand about looking awkward. It was a fresh, breezy sort of a day and as they passed the Quidditch stadium Harry glimpsed Ron and

Ginny skimming along over the stands and felt a horrible pang that he was not up there with them.

'You really miss it, don't you?' said Cho.

He looked round and saw her watching him.

'Yeah,' sighed Harry. 'I do.'

'Remember the first time we played against each other, in the third year?' she asked him.

'Yeah,' said Harry, grinning. 'You kept blocking me.'

'And Wood told you not to be a gentleman and knock me off my broom if you had to,' said Cho, smiling reminiscently. 'I heard he got taken on by Pride of Portree, is that right?'

'Nah, it was Puddlemere United; I saw him at the World Cup last year.'

'Oh, I saw you there, too, remember? We were on the same campsite. It was really good, wasn't it?'

The subject of the Quidditch World Cup carried them all the way down the drive and out through

the gates. Harry could hardly believe how easy it was to talk to her - no more difficult, in fact, than talking to Ron and Hermione - and he was just starting to feel confident and cheerful when a large gang of Slytherin girls passed them, including Pansy Parkinson.

'Potter and Chang!' screeched Pansy, to a chorus of snide giggles. 'Urgh, Chang, I don't think much of your taste... at least Diggory was good-looking!'

The girls sped up, talking and shrieking in a pointed fashion with many exaggerated glances back at Harry and Cho, leaving an embarrassed silence in their wake. Harry could think of nothing else to say about Quidditch, and Cho, slightly flushed, was watching her feet.

'So... where d'you want to go?' Harry asked as they entered Hogsmeade. The High Street was full of students ambling up and down, peering into the shop windows and messing about together on the pavements.

'Oh... I don't mind,' said Cho, shrugging. 'Urn... shall we just have a look in the shops or something?'

They wandered towards Dervish and Banges. A large poster had been stuck up in the window and a few Hogsmeaders were looking at it. They moved aside when Harry and Cho approached and Harry found himself staring once more at the pictures of the ten escaped Death Eaters. The poster, 'By Order of the Ministry of Magic', offered a thousand-Galleon reward to any witch or wizard with information leading to the recapture of any of the convicts pictured.

'It's funny, isn't it,' said Cho in a low voice, gazing up at the pictures of the Death Eaters, 'remember when that Sirius Black escaped, and there were Dementors all over Hogsmeade looking for him? And now ten Death Eaters are on the loose and there are no Dementors anywhere...'

'Yeah,' said Harry, tearing his eyes away from Bellatrix Lestrange's face to glance up and down the High Street. 'Yeah, that is weird.'

He wasn't sorry that there were no Dementors nearby, but now he came to think of it, their absence was highly significant. They had not only let the Death Eaters escape, they weren't bothering to look for them... it looked as though they really were outside Ministry control now.

The ten escaped Death Eaters were staring out of every shop window he and Cho passed. It started to rain as they passed Scrivenshaft's; cold, heavy drops of water kept hitting Harry's face and the back of his neck.

'Urn... d'you want to get a coffee?' said Cho tentatively, as the rain began to fall more heavily.

'Yeah, all right,' said Harry, looking around. 'Where?'

'Oh, there's a really nice place just up here; haven't you ever been to Madam Puddifoot's?' she said brightly, leading him up a side road and into a small teashop that Harry had never noticed before. It was a cramped, steamy little place where everything seemed to have been decorated with frills or bows. Harry was reminded unpleasantly of Umbridge's office.

'Cute, isn't it?' said Cho happily.

'Er... yeah,' said Harry untruthfully.

'Look, she's decorated it for Valentine's Day!' said Cho, indicating a number of golden cherubs that were hovering over each of the small, circular tables, occasionally throwing pink confetti over the occupants.

'Aaah...'

They sat down at the last remaining table, which was over by the steamy window. Roger Davies, the Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain, was sitting about a foot and a half away with a pretty blonde girl. They were holding hands. The sight made Harry feel uncomfortable, particularly when, looking around the teashop, he saw that it was full of nothing but couples, all of them holding hands. Perhaps

Cho would expect him to hold her hand.

'What can I get you, m'dears?' said Madam Puddifoot, a very stout woman with a shiny black bun, squeezing between their table and Roger Davies's with great difficulty. '

Two coffees, please,' said Cho.

In the time it took for their coffees to arrive, Roger Davies and his girlfriend had started kissing over their sugar bowl. Harry wished they wouldn't; he felt that Davies was setting a standard with which Cho would soon expect him to compete. He felt his face growing hot and tried staring out of the window, but it was so steamed up he couldn't see the street outside. To postpone the moment when he would have to look at Cho, he stared up at the ceiling as though examining the paintwork and received a handful of confetti in the face from their hovering cherub.

After a few more painful minutes, Cho mentioned Umbridge. Harry seized on the subject with relief and they passed a few happy moments abusing her, but the subject had already been so thoroughly canvassed during DA meetings it did not last very long. Silence fell again. Harry was very conscious of the slurping noises coming from the table next door and cast wildly around for something else to say.

'Er... listen, d'you want to come with me to the Three Broomsticks at lunchtime? I'm meeting Hermione Granger there.'

Cho raised her eyebrows.

'You're meeting Hermione Granger? Today?'

'Yeah. Well, she asked me to, so I thought I would. D'you want to come with me? She said it wouldn't matter if you did.'

'Oh... well... that was nice of her.'

But Cho did not sound as though she thought it was nice at all. On the contrary, her tone was cold and all of a sudden she looked rather forbidding.

A few more minutes passed in total silence, Harry drinking his coffee so fast that he would soon need a fresh cup. Beside them,

Roger Davies and his girlfriend seemed glued together at the lips.

Cho's hand was lying on the table beside her coffee and Harry was feeling a mounting pressure to take hold of it. Just do it, he told himself, as a fount of mingled panic and excitement surged up inside his chest, just reach out and grab it. Amazing, how much more difficult it was to extend his arm twelve inches and touch her hand than it was to snatch a speeding Snitch from midair...

But just as he moved his hand forwards, Cho took hers off the table. She was now watching Roger Davies kissing his girlfriend with a mildly interested expression.

'He asked me out, you know,' she said in a quiet voice. 'A couple of weeks ago. Roger. I turned him down, though.'

Harry, who had grabbed the sugar bowl to excuse his sudden lunging movement across the table, could not think why she was telling him this. If she wished she were sitting at the next table being heartily kissed by Roger Davies, why had she agreed to come out with him?

He said nothing. Their cherub threw another handful of confetti over them; some of it landed in the last cold dregs of coffee Harry had been about to drink.

'I came in here with Cedric last year,' said Cho.

In the second or so it took for him to take in what she had said, Harry's insides had become glacial. He could not believe she wanted to talk about Cedric now, while kissing couples surrounded them and a cherub floated over their heads.

Cho's voice was rather higher when she spoke again.

'I've been meaning to ask you for ages... did Cedric - did he - in - in - mention me at all before he died?'

This was the very last subject on earth Harry wanted to discuss, and least of all with Cho.

'Well - no -' he said quietly. There - there wasn't time for him to say anything. Erm... so... d'you... d'you get to see a lot of Quidditch in the holidays? You support the Tornados, right?'

His voice sounded falsely bright and cheery. To his horror, he saw that her eyes were swimming with tears again, just as they had been after the last DA meeting before Christmas.

'Look,' he said desperately, leaning in so that nobody else could overhear, 'let's not talk about Cedric right now... let's talk about something else

But this, apparently, was quite the wrong thing to say.

'I thought,' she said, tears spattering down on to the table, 'I thought you'd u - u - understand! I need to talk about it! Surely you n - need to talk about it - too! I mean, you saw it happen, d - didn't you?'

Everything was going nightmarishly wrong; Roger Davies's girlfriend had even unglued herself to look round at Cho crying.

'Well - I have talked about it,' Harry said in a whisper, 'to Ron and Hermione, but -'

'Oh, you'll talk to Hermione Granger!' she said shrilly, her face now shining with tears. Several more kissing couples broke apart to stare. 'But you won't talk to me! P - perhaps it would be best if we just... just p - paid and you went and met up with Hermione G - Granger, like you obviously want to!'

Harry stared at her, utterly bewildered, as she seized a frilly napkin and dabbed at her shining face with it.

'Cho?' he said weakly, wishing Roger would seize his girlfriend and start kissing her again to stop her goggling at him and Cho.

'Go on, leave!' she said, now crying into the napkin. 'I don't know why you asked me out in the first place if you're going to make arrangements to meet other girls right after me... how many are you meeting after Hermione?'

'It's not like that!' said Harry, and he was so relieved at finally understanding what she was annoyed about that he laughed, which he realised a split second too late was also a mistake.

Cho sprang to her feet. The whole tearoom was quiet and everybody was watching them now.

'Til see you around, Harry' she said dramatically, and hiccoughing slightly she dashed to the door, wrenched it open and hurried off into the pouring rain.

'Cho!' Harry called after her, but the door had already swung shut behind her with a tuneful tinkle.

There was total silence within the teashop. Every eye was on Harry. He threw a Galleon down on to the table, shook pink confetti out of his hair, and followed Cho out of the door.

It was raining hard now and she was nowhere to be seen. He simply did not understand what had happened; half an hour ago they had been getting along fine.

'Women!' he muttered angrily, sloshing down the rain-washed street with his hands in his pockets. 'What did she want to talk about Cedric for, anyway? Why does she always want to drag up a subject that makes her act like a human hosepipe?'

He turned right and broke into a splashy run, and within minutes he was turning into the doorway of the Three Broomsticks. He knew he was too early to meet Hermione, but he thought it likely there would be someone in here with whom he could spend the intervening time. He shook his wet hair out of his eyes and looked around. Hagrid was sitting alone in a corner, looking morose.

'Hi, Hagrid!' he said, when he had squeezed through the crammed tables and pulled up a chair beside him.

Hagrid jumped and looked down at Harry as though he barely recognised him. Harry saw that he had two fresh cuts on his face and several new bruises.

'Oh, it's yeh, Harry,' said Hagrid. 'Yeh all righT

'Yeah, I'm fine,' lied Harry; but, next to this battered and mournful-looking Hagrid, he felt he didn't really have much to complain about. 'Er - are you OK?'

'Me?' said Hagrid. 'Oh yeah, I'm grand, Harry, grand.'

He gazed into the depths of his pewter tankard, which was the size of a large bucket, and sighed. Harry didn't know what to say to him. They sat side by side in silence for a moment. Then Hagrid said abruptly, 'In the same boat, yeh an' me, aren' we, 'Arry?'

'Er -' said Harry.

'Yeah... I've said it before... both outsiders, like,' said Hagrid, nodding wisely. 'An' both orphans. Yeah... both orphans.'

He took a great swig from his tankard.

'Makes a diff'rence, havin' a decent family,' he said. 'Me dad was decent. An' your mum an' dad were decent. If they'd lived, life woulda bin diff'rent, eh?'

'Yeah... I's'pose,' said Harry cautiously. Hagrid seemed to be in a very strange mood.

'Family,' said Hagrid gloomily. 'Whatever yeh say, blood's important...'

And he wiped a trickle of it out of his eye.

'Hagrid,' said Harry, unable to stop himself, 'where are you getting all these injuries?'

'Eh?' said Hagrid, looking startled. 'Wha' injuries?'

'All those!' said Harry, pointing at Hagrid's face.

'Oh... tha's jus' normal bumps an' bruises, Harry,' said Hagrid dismissively, 'I got a rough job.'

He drained his tankard, set it back on the table and got to his feet.

Til be seein' yeh, Harry... take care now.'

And he lumbered out of the pub looking wretched, and disappeared into the torrential rain. Harry watched him go, feeling miserable. Hagrid was unhappy and he was hiding something, but he seemed determined not to accept help. What was going on? But before Harry could think about it any further, he heard a voice calling his name.

'Harry! Harry, over here!'

Hermione was waving at him from the other side of the room. He got up and made his way towards her through the crowded pub. He was still a few tables away when he realised that Hermione was not alone. She was sitting at a table with the unlikeliest pair of drinking mates he could ever have imagined: Luna Lovegood and none other than Rita Skeeter, ex-journalist on the Daily Prophet and one of Hermione's least favourite people in the world.

'You're early!' said Hermione, moving along to give him room to sit down. 'I thought you were with Cho, I wasn't expecting you for another hour at least!'

'Cho?' said Rita at once, twisting round in her seat to stare avidly at Harry. 'A girl?'

She snatched up her crocodile-skin handbag and groped within it.

'It's none of your business if Harry's been with a hundred girls,' Hermione told Rita coolly. 'So you can put that away right now.'

Rita had been on the point of withdrawing an acid-green quill from her bag. Looking as though she had been forced to swallow Stinksap, she snapped her bag shut again.

'What are you up to?' Harry asked, sitting down and staring from Rita to Luna to Hermione.

'Little Miss Perfect was just about to tell me when you arrived,' said Rita, taking a large slurp of her drink. 'I suppose I'm allowed to talk to him, am I?' she shot at Hermione.

'Yes, I suppose you are,' said Hermione coldly.

Unemployment did not suit Rita. The hair that had once been set in elaborate curls now hung lank and unkempt around her face. The scarlet paint on her two-inch talons was chipped and there were a couple of false jewels missing from her winged glasses. She took another great gulp of her drink and said out of the corner of her mouth, 'Pretty girl, is she, Harry?'

'One more word about Harry's love life and the deal's off and that's a promise,' said Hermione irritably.

'What deal?' said Rita, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. 'You haven't mentioned a deal yet, Miss Prissy, you just told me to turn up. Oh, one of these days...' She took a deep shuddering breath.

'Yes, yes, one of these days you'll write more horrible stories about Harry and me,' said Hermione indifferently. 'Find someone who cares, why don't you?'

'They've run plenty of horrible stories about Harry this year without my help,' said Rita, shooting a sideways look at him over the top of her glass and adding in a rough whisper, 'How has that made you feel, Harry? Betrayed? Distraught? Misunderstood?'

'He feels angry, of course,' said Hermione in a hard, clear voice. 'Because he's told the Minister for Magic the truth and the Minister's too much of an idiot to believe him.'

'So you actually stick to it, do you, that He Who Must Not Be Named is back?' said Rita, lowering her glass and subjecting Harry to a piercing stare while her finger strayed longingly to the clasp of the crocodile bag. 'You stand by all this garbage Dumbledore's been telling everybody about You-Know-Who returning and you being the sole witness?'

'I wasn't the sole witness,' snarled Harry. There were a dozen-odd Death Eaters there as well. Want their names?'

'I'd love them,' breathed Rita, now fumbling in her bag once more and gazing at him as though he was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. 'A great bold headline: "Potter Accuses..." A sub-heading, "Harry Potter Names Death Eaters Still Among Us". And then, beneath a nice big photograph of you, "Disturbed teenage survivor of You-Know-Who's attack, Harry Potter, 15, caused outrage yesterday by accusing respectable and prominent members of the wizarding community of being Death Eaters ..."'

The Quick-Quotes Quill was actually in her hand and halfway to her mouth when the rapturous expression on her face died.

'But of course,' she said, lowering the quill and looking daggers at Hermione, 'Little Miss Perfect wouldn't want that story out there, would she?'

'As a matter of fact,' said Hermione sweetly, 'that's exactly what Little Miss Perfect does want.'

Rita stared at her. So did Harry. Luna, on the other hand, sang 'Weasley is our King' dreamily under her breath and stirred her drink with a cocktail onion on a stick.

'You want me to report what he says about He Who Must Not Be Named?' Rita asked Hermione in a hushed voice.

'Yes, I do,' said Hermione. The true story. All the facts. Exactly as Harry reports them. He'll give you all the details, he'll tell you the names of the undiscovered Death Eaters he saw there, he'll tell you what Voldemort looks like now - oh, get a grip on yourself,' she added contemptuously, throwing a napkin across the table, for, at the sound of Voldemort's name, Rita had jumped so badly she had slopped half her glass of Firewhisky down herself.

Rita blotted the front of her grubby raincoat, still staring at Hermione. Then she said baldly, 'The Prophet wouldn't print it. In case you haven't noticed, nobody believes his cock-and-bull story.'

Everyone thinks he's delusional. Now, if you let me write the story from that angle -'

'We don't need another story about how Harry's lost his marbles!' said Hermione angrily. We've had plenty of those already, thank you! I want him given the opportunity to tell the truth!

There's no market for a story like that,' said Rita coldly.

'You mean the Prophet won't print it because Fudge won't let them,' said Hermione irritably.

Rita gave Hermione a long, hard look. Then, leaning forwards across the table towards her, she said in a businesslike tone, 'All right, Fudge is leaning on the Prophet, but it comes to the same thing. They won't print a story that shows Harry in a good light. Nobody wants to read it. It's against the public mood. This last Azkaban breakout has got people quite worried enough. People just don't want to believe You-Know-Whos back.'

'So the Daily Prophet exists to tell people what they want to hear, does it?' said Hermione scathingly.

Rita sat up straight again, her eyebrows raised, and drained her glass of Firewhisky.

The Prophet exists to sell itself, you silly girl,' she said coldly.

'My dad thinks it's an awful paper,' said Luna, chipping into the conversation unexpectedly. Sucking on her cocktail onion, she gazed at Rita with her enormous, protuberant, slightly mad eyes. 'He publishes important stories he thinks the public needs to know. He doesn't care about making money.'

Rita looked disparagingly at Luna.

'I'm guessing your father runs some stupid little village newsletter?' she said. 'Probably, Twenty-Five Ways to Mingle With Muggles and the dates of the next Bring and Fly Sale?'

'No,' said Luna, dipping her onion back into her Gillywater, 'he's the editor of The Quibbler.'

Rita snorted so loudly that people at a nearby table looked round in alarm.

"'Important stories he thinks the public needs to know'", eh?' she said witheringly. 'I could manure my garden with the contents of that rag.'

'Well, this is your chance to raise the tone of it a bit, isn't it?' said Hermione pleasantly. 'Luna says her father's quite happy to take Harry's interview. That's who'll be publishing it.'

Rita stared at them both for a moment, then let out a great whoop of laughter.

'The Quibbler!' she said, cackling. 'You think people will take him seriously if he's published in The Quibbler?'

'Some people won't,' said Hermione in a level voice. 'But the Daily Prophet's version of the Azkaban breakout had some gaping holes in it. I think a lot of people will be wondering whether there isn't a better explanation of what happened, and if there's an alternative story available, even if it is published in a -' she glanced sideways at Luna, 'in a - well, an unusual magazine - I think they might be rather keen to read it.'

Rita didn't say anything for a while, but eyed Hermione shrewdly, her head a little to one side.

'All right, let's say for a moment I'll do it,' she said abruptly. 'What kind of fee am I going to get?'

'I don't think Daddy exactly pays people to write for the magazine,' said Luna dreamily. They do it because it's an honour and, of course, to see their names in print.'

Rita Skeeter looked as though the taste of Stinksap was strong in her mouth again as she rounded on Hermione.

'I'm supposed to do this/or/ree?'

'Well, yes,' said Hermione calmly, taking a sip of her drink. 'Otherwise, as you very well know, I will inform the authorities that you are an unregistered Animagus. Of course, the Prophet might give you rather a lot for an insider's account of life in Azkaban.'

Rita looked as though she would have liked nothing better than to seize the paper umbrella sticking out of Hermione's drink and thrust it up her nose.

'I don't suppose I've got any choice, have I?' said Rita, her voice shaking slightly. She opened her crocodile bag once more, withdrew a piece of parchment, and raised her Quick-Quotes Quill.

'Daddy will be pleased,' said Luna brightly. A muscle twitched in Rita's jaw.

'OK, Harry?' said Hermione, turning to him. 'Ready to tell the public the truth?'

'I suppose,' said Harry, watching Rita balancing the Quick-Quotes Quill at the ready on the parchment between them.

'Tire away, then, Rita,' said Hermione serenely, fishing a cherry out from the bottom of her glass.