

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

J.K.Rowling-HarryPotterandtheOrderofthePhoenixFULLRippedbymany,CompiledbyT`

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Chapter 1 - Dudley Demented

The hottest day of the summer so far was drawing to a close and a drowsy silence lay over the large, square houses of Privet Drive. Cars that were usually gleaming stood dusty in their drives and lawns that were once emerald green lay parched and yellowing -for the use of hosepipes had been banned due to drought. Deprived of their usual car-washing and lawn-mowing pursuits, the inhabitants of Privet Drive had retreated into the shade of their cool houses, windows thrown wide in the hope of tempting in a nonexistent breeze. The only person left outdoors was a teenage boy who was lying flat on his back in a flowerbed outside number four.

He was a skinny, black-haired, bespectacled boy who had the pinched, slightly unhealthy look of someone who has grown a lot in a short space of time. His jeans were torn and dirty, his T-shirt baggy and faded, and the soles of his trainers were peeling away from the uppers. Harry Potter's appearance did not endear him to the neighbors, who were the sort of people who thought scruffiness ought to be punishable by law, but as he had hidden himself behind a large hydrangea bush this evening he was quite invisible to passers-by. In fact, the only way he would be spotted was if his Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia stuck their heads out of the living-room window and looked straight down into the flowerbed below.

On the whole, Harry thought he was to be congratulated on his idea of hiding here. He was not, perhaps, very comfortable lying on the hot, hard earth but, on the other hand, nobody was glaring at him, grinding their teeth so loudly that he could not hear the news, or shooting nasty questions at him, as had happened every time he had tried sitting down in the living room to watch television with his aunt and uncle.

Almost as though this thought had fluttered through the open window, Vernon Dursley, Harry's uncle, suddenly spoke.

'Glad to see the boy's stopped trying to butt in. Where is he, anyway?'

'I don't know,' said Aunt Petunia, unconcerned. 'Not in the house.'

Uncle Vernon grunted.

'Watching the news ...' he said scathingly. 'I'd like to know what he's really up to. As if a normal boy cares what's on the news -Dudley hasn't got a clue what's going on; doubt he knows who the Prime Minister is! Anyway, it's not as if there'd be anything about his lot on our news — '

'Vernon, shh!' said Aunt Petunia. The window's open!'

'Oh - yes - sorry, dear.'

The Dursleys fell silent. Harry listened to a jingle about Fruit 'n' Bran breakfast cereal while he watched Mrs. Figg, a batty cat-loving old lady from nearby Wisteria Walk, amble slowly past. She was frowning and muttering to herself. Harry was very pleased he was concealed behind the bush, as Mrs. Figg had recently taken to asking him round for tea whenever she met him in the street. She had rounded the corner and vanished from view before Uncle Vernon's voice floated out of the window again.

'Dudders out for tea?'

'At the Polkisses', said Aunt Petunia fondly. 'He's got so many little friends, he's so popular

Harry suppressed a snort with difficulty. The Dursleys really were astonishingly stupid about their son, Dudley. They had swallowed all his dim-witted lies about having tea with a different member of his gang every night of the summer holidays. Harry knew perfectly well that Dudley had not been to tea anywhere; he and his gang spent every evening vandalising the play park, smoking on street corners and throwing stones at passing cars and children. Harry had seen them at it during his evening walks around Little Whinging; he had spent most of the holidays wandering the streets, scavenging newspapers from bins along the way.

The opening notes of the music that heralded the seven o'clock news reached Harry's ears and his stomach turned over. Perhaps tonight - after a month of waiting - would be the night.

'Record numbers of stranded holiday makers fill airports as the Spanish baggage-handlers' strike reaches its second week -

'Give 'em a lifelong siesta, I would,' snarled Uncle Vernon over the end of the newsreader's sentence, but no matter: outside in the flowerbed, Harry's stomach seemed to unclench. If anything had happened, it would surely have been the first item on the news; death and destruction were more important than stranded holidaymakers.

He let out a long, slow breath and stared up at the brilliant blue sky. Every day this summer had been the same: the tension, the expectation, the temporary relief, and then mounting tension again... and always, growing more insistent all the time, the question of why nothing had happened yet.

He kept listening, just in case there was some small clue, not recognised for what it really was by the Muggles - an unexplained disappearance, perhaps, or some strange accident... but the baggage-handlers' strike was followed by news about the drought in the Southeast ('I hope he's listening next door!' bellowed Uncle Vernon. 'Him with his sprinklers on at three in the morning!'), then a helicopter that had almost crashed in a field in Surrey, then a famous actress's divorce from her famous husband ('As if we're interested in their sordid affairs,' sniffed Aunt Petunia, who had followed the case obsessively in every magazine she could lay her bony hands on).

Harry closed his eyes against the now blazing evening sky as the newsreader said, '- and finally, Bungy the budgie has found a novel way of keeping cool this summer. Bungy, who lives at the Five Feathers in Barnsley, has learned to water ski! Mary Dorkins went to find out more.'

Harry opened his eyes. If they had reached water-skiing budgerigars, there would be nothing else worth hearing. He rolled cautiously on to his front and raised himself on to his knees and elbows, preparing to crawl out from under the window.

He had moved about two inches when several things happened in very quick succession.

A loud, echoing crack broke the sleepy silence like a gunshot; a cat streaked out from under a parked car and flew out of sight; a shriek, a bellowed oath and the sound of breaking china came from the Dursleys' living room, and as though this was the signal Harry had been waiting for he jumped to his feet, at the same time pulling from the waistband of his jeans a thin wooden wand as if he were unsheathing a sword - but before he could draw himself up to full height, the top of his head collided with the Dursleys' open window. The resultant crash made Aunt Petunia scream even louder.

Harry felt as though his head had been split in two. Eyes streaming, he swayed, trying to focus on the street to spot the source of the noise, but he had barely staggered upright when two large purple hands reached through the open window and closed tightly around his throat.

'Put - it - away!' Uncle Vernon snarled into Harry's ear. 'Now.' Before - anyone - sees!

'Get - off - me!' Harry gasped. For a few seconds they struggled, Harry pulling at his uncles sausage-like fingers with his left hand, his right maintaining a firm grip on his raised wand; then, as the pain in the top of Harry's head gave a particularly nasty throb, Uncle Vernon yelped and released Harry as though he had received an electric shock. Some invisible force seemed to have surged through his nephew, making him impossible to hold.

Panting, Harry fell forwards over the hydrangea bush, straightened up and stared around. There was no sign of what had caused the loud cracking noise, but there were several faces peering through various nearby windows. Harry stuffed his wand hastily back into his jeans and tried to look innocent.

'Lovely evening!' shouted Uncle Vernon, waving at Mrs. Number Seven opposite, who was

glaring from behind her net curtains. 'Did you hear that car backfire just now? Gave Petunia and me quite a turn!'

He continued to grin in a horrible, manic way until all the curious neighbours had disappeared from their various windows, then the grin became a grimace of rage as he beckoned Harry back towards him.

Harry moved a few steps closer, taking care to stop just short of the point at which Uncle Vernon's outstretched hands could resume their strangling.

'What the devil do you mean by it, boy?' asked Uncle Vernon in a croaky voice that trembled with fury.

'What do I mean by what?' said Harry coldly. He kept looking left and right up the street, still hoping to see the person who had made the cracking noise.

'Making a racket like a starting pistol right outside our -

'I didn't make that noise,' said Harry firmly.

Aunt Petunia's thin, horsy face now appeared beside Uncle Vernon's wide, purple one. She looked livid.

'Why were you lurking under our window?'

'Yes - yes, good point, Petunia! What were you doing under our window, boy?'

'Listening to the news,' said Harry in a resigned voice.

His aunt and uncle exchanged looks of outrage.

'Listening to the news! Again?'

'Well, it changes every day, you see,' said Harry.

'Don't you be clever with me, boy! I want to know what you're really up to - and don't give me any more of this listening to the news tosh! You know perfectly well that your lot -

'Careful, Vernon!' breathed Aunt Petunia, and Uncle Vernon lowered his voice so that Harry could barely hear him, '- that your lot don't get on our news!'

'That's all you know,' said Harry.

The Dursleys goggled at him for a few seconds, then Aunt Petunia said, 'You're a nasty little liar. What are all those -' she, too, lowered her voice so that Harry had to lip-read the next word, '- owls doing if they're not bringing you news?'

'Aha!' said Uncle Vernon in a triumphant whisper. 'Get out of that one, boy! As if we didn't know you get all your news from those pestilential birds!'

Harry hesitated for a moment. It cost him something to tell the truth this time, even though his aunt and uncle could not possibly know how bad he felt at admitting it.

'The owls... aren't bringing me news,' he said tonelessly.

'I don't believe it,' said Aunt Petunia at once.

'No more do I,' said Uncle Vernon forcefully.

'We know you're up to something funny,' said Aunt Petunia.

'We're not stupid, you know,' said Uncle Vernon.

'Well, that's news to me,' said Harry, his temper rising, and before the Dursleys could call him back, he had wheeled about, crossed the front lawn, stepped over the low garden wall and was striding off up the street.

He was in trouble now and he knew it. He would have to face his aunt and uncle later and pay the price for his rudeness, but he did not care very much just at the moment; he had much more pressing matters on his mind.

Harry was sure the cracking noise had been made by someone Apparating or Disapparating. It

was exactly the sound Dobby the house-elf made when he vanished into thin air. Was it possible that Dobby was here in Privet Drive? Could Dobby be following him right at this very moment? As this thought occurred he wheeled around and stared back down Privet Drive, but it appeared to be completely deserted and Harry was sure that Dobby did not know how to become invisible.

He walked on, hardly aware of the route he was taking, for he had pounded these streets so often lately that his feet carried him to his favourite haunts automatically. Every few steps he glanced back over his shoulder. Someone magical had been near him as he lay among Aunt Petunia's dying begonias, he was sure of it. Why hadn't they spoken to him, why hadn't they made contact, why were they hiding now?

And then, as his feeling of frustration peaked, his certainty leaked away.

Perhaps it hadn't been a magical sound after all. Perhaps he was so desperate for the tiniest sign of contact from the world to which he belonged that he was simply overreacting to perfectly ordinary noises. Could he be sure it hadn't been the sound of something breaking inside a neighbour's house?

Harry felt a dull, sinking sensation in his stomach and before he knew it the feeling of hopelessness that had plagued him all summer rolled over him once again.

Tomorrow morning he would be woken by the alarm at five o'clock so he could pay the owl that delivered the Daily Prophet -but was there any point continuing to take it? Harry merely glanced at the front page before throwing it aside these days; when the idiots who ran the paper finally realised that Voldemort was back it would be headline news, and that was the only kind Harry cared about.

If he was lucky, there would also be owls carrying letters from his best friends Ron and Hermione, though any expectation he'd had that their letters would bring him news had long since been dashed.

We can't say much about you-know-what, obviously... We've been told not to say anything important in case our letters go astray... We're quite busy but I can't give you details here... There's a fair amount going on, we'll tell you everything when we see you...

But when were they going to see him? Nobody seemed too bothered with a precise date. Hermione had scribbled I expect we'll be seeing you quite soon inside his birthday card, but how soon was soon? As far as Harry could tell from the vague hints in their letters, Hermione and Ron were in the same place, presumably at Ron's parents' house. He could hardly bear to think of the pair of them having fun at The Burrow when he was stuck in Privet Drive. In fact, he was so angry with them he had thrown away, unopened, the two boxes of Honeydukes chocolates they'd sent him for his birthday. He'd regretted it later, after the wilted salad Aunt Petunia had provided for dinner that night.

And what were Ron and Hermione busy with? Why wasn't he, Harry, busy? Hadn't he proved himself capable of handling much more than them? Had they all forgotten what he had done? Hadn't it been he who had entered that graveyard and watched Cedric being murdered, and been tied to that tombstone and nearly killed?

Don't think about that, Harry told himself sternly for the hundredth time that summer. It was bad enough that he kept revisiting the graveyard in his nightmares, without dwelling on it in his waking moments too.

He turned a corner into Magnolia Crescent; halfway along he passed the narrow alleyway down the side of a garage where he had first clapped eyes on his godfather. Sirius, at least, seemed to understand how Harry was feeling. Admittedly, his letters were just as empty of proper news as Ron and Hermione's, but at least they contained words of caution and consolation instead of tantalising hints:

I know this must be frustrating for you... Keep your nose clean and everything will be OK... Be

careful and don't do anything rash...

Well, thought Harry, as he crossed Magnolia Crescent, turned into Magnolia Road and headed towards the darkening play park, he had (by and large) done as Sirius advised. He had at least resisted the temptation to tie his trunk to his broomstick and set off for The Burrow by himself. In fact, Harry thought his behaviour had been very good considering how frustrated and angry he felt at being stuck in Privet Drive so long, reduced to hiding in flowerbeds in the hope of hearing something that might point to what Lord Voldemort was doing. Nevertheless, it was quite galling to be told not to be rash by a man who had served twelve years in the wizard prison, Azkaban, escaped, attempted to commit the murder he had been convicted for in the first place, then gone on the run with a stolen Hippogriff.

Harry vaulted over the locked park gate and set off across the parched grass. The park was as empty as the surrounding streets. When he reached the swings he sank on to the only one that Dudley and his friends had not yet managed to break, coiled one arm around the chain and stared moodily at the ground. He would not be able to hide in the Dursleys' flowerbed again. Tomorrow, he would have to think of some fresh way of listening to the news. In the meantime, he had nothing to look forward to but another restless, disturbed night, because even when he escaped the nightmares about Cedric he had unsettling dreams about long dark corridors, all finishing in dead ends and locked doors, which he supposed had something to do with the trapped feeling he had when he was awake. Often the old scar on his forehead prickled uncomfortably, but he did not fool himself that Ron or Hermione or Sirius would find that very interesting any more. In the past, his scar hurting had warned that Voldemort was getting stronger again, but now that Voldemort was back they would probably remind him that its regular irritation was only to be expected... nothing to worry about... old news...

The injustice of it all welled up inside him so that he wanted to yell with fury. If it hadn't been for him, nobody would even have known Voldemort was back! And his reward was to be stuck in Little Whinging for four solid weeks, completely cut off from the magical world, reduced to squatting among dying begonias so that he could hear about water-skiing budgerigars! How could Dumbledore have forgotten him so easily? Why had Ron and Hermione got together without inviting him along, too? How much longer was he supposed to endure Sirius telling him to sit tight and be a good boy; or resist the temptation to write to the stupid Daily Prophet and point out that Voldemort had returned? These furious thoughts whirled around in Harry's head, and his insides writhed with anger as a sultry, velvety night fell around him, the air full of the smell of warm, dry grass, and the only sound that of the low grumble of traffic on the road beyond the park railings.

He did not know how long he had sat on the swing before the sound of voices interrupted his musings and he looked up. The streetlamps from the surrounding roads were casting a misty glow strong enough to silhouette a group of people making their way across the park. One of them was singing a loud, crude song. The others were laughing. A soft ticking noise came from several expensive racing bikes that they were wheeling along.

Harry knew who those people were. The figure in front was unmistakably his cousin, Dudley Dursley, wending his way home, accompanied by his faithful gang.

Dudley was as vast as ever, but a year's hard dieting and the discovery of a new talent had wrought quite a change in his physique. As Uncle Vernon delightedly told anyone who would listen, Dudley had recently become the Junior Heavyweight Inter-School Boxing Champion of the Southeast. The noble sport', as Uncle Vernon called it, had made Dudley even more formidable than he had seemed to Harry in their primary school days when he had served as Dudley's first punchball. Harry was not remotely afraid of his cousin any more but he still didn't think that Dudley learning to punch

harder and more accurately was cause for celebration. Neighbourhood children all around were terrified of him - even more terrified than they were of 'that Potter boy' who, they had been warned, was a hardened hooligan and attended St Brutus's Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys.

Harry watched the dark figures crossing the grass and wondered who they had been beating up tonight. Look round, Harry found himself thinking as he watched them. Come on... look round... I'm sitting here all alone... come and have a go...

If Dudley's friends saw him sitting here, they would be sure to make a beeline for him, and what would Dudley do then? He wouldn't want to lose face in front of the gang, but he'd be terrified of provoking Harry... it would be really fun to watch Dudley's dilemma, to taunt him, watch him, with him powerless to respond... and if any of the others tried hitting Harry, he was ready - he had his wand. Let them try... he'd love to vent some of his frustration on the boys who had once made his life hell.

But they didn't turn around, they didn't see him, they were almost at the railings. Harry mastered the impulse to call after them... seeking a fight was not a smart move... he must not use magic... he would be risking expulsion again.

The voices of Dudley's gang died away; they were out of sight, heading along Magnolia Road.

There you go, Sirius, Harry thought dully. Nothing rash. Kept my nose clean. Exactly the opposite of what you'd have done.

He got to his feet and stretched. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon seemed to feel that whenever Dudley turned up was the right time to be home, and any time after that was much too late. Uncle Vernon had threatened to lock Harry in the shed if he came home after Dudley ever again, so, stifling a yawn, and still scowling, Harry set off towards the park gate.

Magnolia Road, like Privet Drive, was full of large, square houses with perfectly manicured lawns, all owned by large, square owners who drove very clean cars similar to Uncle Vernon's. Harry preferred Little Whinging by night, when the curtained windows made patches of jewel-bright colour in the darkness and he ran no danger of hearing disapproving mutters about his 'delinquent' appearance when he passed the householders. He walked quickly, so that halfway along Magnolia Road Dudley's gang came into view again; they were saying their farewells at the entrance to Magnolia Crescent. Harry stepped into the shadow of a large lilac tree and waited.

'... squealed like a pig, didn't he?' Malcolm was saying, to guffaws from the others.

'Nice right hook, Big D,' said Piers.

'Same time tomorrow?' said Dudley.

'Round at my place, my parents will be out,' said Gordon.

'See you then,' said Dudley.

'Bye, Dud!'

'See ya, Big D!'

Harry waited for the rest of the gang to move on before setting off again. When their voices had faded once more he headed around the corner into Magnolia Crescent and by walking very quickly he soon came within hailing distance of Dudley, who was strolling along at his ease, humming tunelessly.

'Hey, Big D!'

Dudley turned.

'Oh,' he grunted. 'It's you.'

'How long have you been "Big D" then?' said Harry.

'Shut it,' snarled Dudley, turning away.

'Cool name,' said Harry, grinning and falling into step beside his cousin. 'But you'll always be

"Ickle Diddykins" to me.'

'I said, SHUT IT!' said Dudley, whose ham-like hands had curled into fists.

'Don't the boys know that's what your mum calls you?'

'Shut your face.'

'You don't tell her to shut her face. What about "Popkin" and "Dinky Diddydums", can I use them then?'

Dudley said nothing. The effort of keeping himself from hitting Harry seemed to demand all his self-control.

'So who've you been beating up tonight?' Harry asked, his grin fading. 'Another ten-year-old? I know you did Mark Evans two nights ago -

'He was asking for it,' snarled Dudley.

'Oh yeah?'

'He cheeked me.'

'Yeah? Did he say you look like a pig that's been taught to walk on its hind legs? 'Cause that's not cheek, Dud, that's true.'

A muscle was twitching in Dudley's jaw. It gave Harry enormous satisfaction to know how furious he was making Dudley; he felt as though he was siphoning off his own frustration into his cousin, the only outlet he had.

They turned right down the narrow alleyway where Harry had first seen Sirius and which formed a short cut between Magnolia Crescent and Wisteria Walk. It was empty and much darker than the streets it linked because there were no streetlamps. Their footsteps were muffled between garage walls on one side and a high fence on the other.

Think you're a big man carrying that thing, don't you?' Dudley said after a few seconds.

'What thing?'

'That - that thing you are hiding.'

Harry grinned again.

'Not as stupid as you look, are you, Dud? But I's'pose, if you were, you wouldn't be able to walk and talk at the same time.'

Harry pulled out his wand. He saw Dudley look sideways at it.

'You're not allowed,' Dudley said at once. 'I know you're not. You'd get expelled from that freak school you go to.'

'How d'you know they haven't changed the rules, Big D?'

They haven't,' said Dudley, though he didn't sound completely convinced.

Harry laughed softly.

'You haven't got the guts to take me on without that thing, have you?' Dudley snarled.

'Whereas you just need four mates behind you before you can beat up a ten year old. You know that boxing title you keep banging on about? How old was your opponent? Seven? Eight?'

'He was sixteen, for your information,' snarled Dudley, 'and he was out cold for twenty minutes after I'd finished with him and he was twice as heavy as you. You just wait till I tell Dad you had that thing out -

'Running to Daddy now, are you? Is his ickle boxing champ frightened of nasty Harry's wand?'

'Not this brave at night, are you?' sneered Dudley.

This is night, Diddykins. That's what we call it when it goes all dark like this.'

'I mean when you're in bed!' Dudley snarled.

He had stopped walking. Harry stopped too, staring at his cousin.

From the little he could see of Dudley's large face, he was wearing a strangely triumphant look.

'What d'you mean, I'm not brave when I'm in bed?' said Harry, completely nonplussed. 'What am I supposed to be frightened of, pillows or something?'

'I heard you last night,' said Dudley breathlessly. Talking in your sleep. Moaning.'

'What d'you mean?' Harry said again, but there was a cold, plunging sensation in his stomach. He had revisited the graveyard last night in his dreams.

Dudley gave a harsh bark of laughter, then adopted a high-pitched whimpering voice.

"Don't kill Cedric! Don't kill Cedric!" Who's Cedric - your boyfriend?'

'I - you're lying,' said Harry automatically. But his mouth had gone dry. He knew Dudley wasn't lying - how else would he know about Cedric?

"Dad! Help me, Dad! He's going to kill me, Dad! Boo hoo!"

'Shut up,' said Harry quietly. 'Shut up, Dudley, I'm warning you!'

"Come and help me, Dad! Mum, come and help me! He's killed Cedric! Dad, help me! He's going to -" Don't you point that thing at me!"

Dudley backed into the alley wall. Harry was pointing the wand directly at Dudley's heart. Harry could feel fourteen years' hatred of Dudley pounding in his veins - what wouldn't he give to strike now, to jinx Dudley so thoroughly he'd have to crawl home like an insect, struck dumb, sprouting feelers...

'Don't ever talk about that again,' Harry snarled. 'D'you understand me?'

'Point that thing somewhere else!'

'I said, do you understand me?'

'Point it somewhere else!'

'DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?'

'GET THAT THING AWAY FROM -'

Dudley gave an odd, shuddering gasp, as though he had been doused in icy water.

Something had happened to the night. The star-strewn indigo sky was suddenly pitch black and lightless - the stars, the moon, the misty streetlamps at either end of the alley had vanished. The distant rumble of cars and the whisper of trees had gone. The balmy evening was suddenly piercingly, biting cold. They were surrounded by total, impenetrable, silent darkness, as though some giant hand had dropped a thick, icy mantle over the entire alleyway, blinding them.

For a split second Harry thought he had done magic without meaning to, despite the fact that he'd been resisting as hard as he could - then his reason caught up with his senses - he didn't have the power to turn off the stars. He turned his head this way and that, trying to see something, but the darkness pressed on his eyes like a weightless veil.

Dudley's terrified voice broke in Harry's ear.

'W-what are you d-doing? St-stop it!'

'I'm not doing anything! Shut up and don't move!'

'I c-can't see! I've g-gone blind! I -'

'I said shut up!'

Harry stood stock still, turning his sightless eyes left and right. The cold was so intense he was shivering all over; goose bumps had erupted up his arms and the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up - he opened his eyes to their fullest extent, staring blankly around, unseeing.

It was impossible... they couldn't be here... not in Little Whinging... he strained his ears... he would hear them before he saw them...

'I'll't-tell Dad!' Dudley whimpered. 'W-where are you? What are you d-do—?'

'Will you shut up?' Harry hissed, 'I'm trying to lis—'

But he fell silent. He had heard just the thing he had been dreading.

There was something in the alleyway apart from themselves, something that was drawing long, hoarse, rattling breaths. Harry felt a horrible jolt of dread as he stood trembling in the freezing air.

'C-cut it out! Stop doing it! I'll h-hit you, I swear I will!'

'Dudley, shut—'

WHAM.

A fist made contact with the side of Harry's head, lifting him off his feet. Small white lights popped in front of his eyes. For the second time in an hour Harry felt as though his head had been cleaved in two; next moment, he had landed hard on the ground and his wand had flown out of his hand.

'You moron, Dudley!' Harry yelled, his eyes watering with pain as he scrambled to his hands and knees, feeling around frantically in the blackness. He heard Dudley blundering away, hitting the alley fence, stumbling.

'DUDLEY, COME BACK! YOU'RE RUNNING RIGHT AT IT!'

There was a horrible squealing yell and Dudley's footsteps stopped. At the same moment, Harry felt a creeping chill behind him that could mean only one thing. There was more than one.

'DUDLEY, KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT! WHATEVER YOU DO, KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT! Wand!' Harry muttered frantically, his hands flying over the ground like spiders. 'Where's - wand - come on - lumos!'

He said the spell automatically, desperate for light to help him in his search - and to his disbelieving relief, light flared inches from his right hand - the wand tip had ignited. Harry snatched it up, scrambled to his feet and turned around.

His stomach turned over.

A towering, hooded figure was gliding smoothly towards him, hovering over the ground, no feet or face visible beneath its robes, sucking on the night as it came.

Stumbling backwards, Harry raised his wand.

'Expecto patronum!'

A silvery wisp of vapour shot from the tip of the wand and the Dementor slowed, but the spell hadn't worked properly; tripping over his own feet, Harry retreated further as the Dementor bore down upon him, panic fogging his brain - concentrate -

A pair of grey, slimy, scabbed hands slid from inside the Dementor's robes, reaching for him. A rushing noise filled Harry's ears.

'Expecto patronum!'

His voice sounded dim and distant. Another wisp of silver smoke, feebler than the last, drifted from the wand - he couldn't do it any more, he couldn't work the spell.

There was laughter inside his own head, shrill, high-pitched laughter... he could smell the Dementor's putrid, death-cold breath filling his own lungs, drowning him - think... something happy...

But there was no happiness in him... the Dementor's icy fingers were closing on his throat - the high-pitched laughter was growing louder and louder, and a voice spoke inside his head: 'Bow to death, Harry... it might even be painless... I would not know ... I have never died ...'

He was never going to see Ron and Hermione again -

And their faces burst clearly into his mind as he fought for breath.

'EXPECTO PATRONUM!'

An enormous silver stag erupted from the tip of Harry's wand; its antlers caught the Dementor in the place where the heart should have been; it was thrown backwards, weightless as darkness, and as the stag charged, the Dementor swooped away, bat-like and defeated.

'THIS WAY!' Harry shouted at the stag. Wheeling around, he sprinted down the alleyway, holding the lit wand aloft. 'DUDLEY? DUDLEY!'

He had run barely a dozen steps when he reached them: Dudley was curled up on the ground, his arms clamped over his face. A second Dementor was crouching low over him, gripping his wrists in its slimy hands, prising them slowly almost lovingly apart, lowering its hooded head towards Dudley's face as though about to kiss him.

'GET IT!' Harry bellowed, and with a rushing, roaring sound, the silver stag he had conjured came galloping past him. The Dementor's eyeless face was barely an inch from Dudley's when the silver antlers caught it; the thing was thrown up into the air and, like its fellow, it soared away and was absorbed into the darkness; the stag cantered to the end of the alleyway and dissolved into silver mist.

Moon, stars and streetlamps burst back into life. A warm breeze swept the alleyway. Trees rustled in neighbouring gardens and the mundane rumble of cars in Magnolia Crescent filled the air again.

Harry stood quite still, all his senses vibrating, taking in the abrupt return to normality. After a moment, he became aware that his T-shirt was sticking to him; he was drenched in sweat.

He could not believe what had just happened. Dementors here, in Little Whinging.

Dudley lay curled up on the ground, whimpering and shaking. Harry bent down to see whether he was in a fit state to stand up, but then he heard loud, running footsteps behind him. Instinctively raising his wand again, he span on his heel to face the newcomer.

Mrs. Figg, their batty old neighbour, came panting into sight. Her grizzled grey hair was escaping from its hairnet, a clanking string shopping bag was swinging from her wrist and her feet were halfway out of her tartan carpet slippers. Harry made to stow his wand hurriedly out of sight, but -

'Don't put it away idiot boy!' she shrieked. 'What if there are more of them around? Oh, I'm going to kill Mundungus Fletcher!'

Chapter 2 - A Peck of Owls

'What?' said Harry blankly.

'He left!' said Mrs. Figg, wringing her hands. 'Left to see someone about a batch of cauldrons that fell off the back of a broom! I told him I'd flay him alive if he went, and now look! Dementors! It's just lucky I put Mr Tibbies on the case! But we haven't got time to stand around! Hurry, now, we've got to get you back! Oh, the trouble this is going to cause! I will kill him!'

'But -' The revelation that his batty old cat-obsessed neighbour knew what Dementors were was almost as big a shock to Harry as meeting two of them down the alleyway. 'You're - you're a witch?'

'I'm a Squib, as Mundungus knows full well, so how on earth was I supposed to help you fight off Dementors? He left you completely without cover when I'd warned him -'

This Mundungus has been following me? Hang on - it was him! He Disapparated from the front of my house!'

'Yes, yes, yes, but luckily I'd stationed Mr Tibbies under a car just in case, and Mr Tibbies came and warned me, but by the time I got to your house you'd gone - and now - oh, what's Dumbledore going to say? You!' she shrieked at Dudley, still supine on the alley floor. 'Get your fat bottom off the ground, quick!'

'You know Dumbledore?' said Harry, staring at her.

'Of course I know Dumbledore, who doesn't know Dumbledore? But come on - I'll be no help if

they come back, I've never so much as Transfigured a teabag.'

She stooped down, seized one of Dudley's massive arms in her wizened hands and tugged.

'Get up, you useless lump, get up!'

But Dudley either could not or would not move. He remained on the ground, trembling and ashen-faced, his mouth shut very tight.

'I'll do it.' Harry took hold of Dudley's arm and heaved. With an enormous effort he managed to hoist him to his feet. Dudley seemed to be on the point of fainting. His small eyes were rolling in their sockets and sweat was beading his face; the moment Harry let go of him he swayed dangerously.

'Hurry up!' said Mrs. Figg hysterically.

Harry pulled one of Dudley's massive arms around his own shoulders and dragged him towards the road, sagging slightly under the weight. Mrs. Figg tottered along in front of them, peering anxiously around the corner.

'Keep your wand out,' she told Harry, as they entered Wisteria Walk. 'Never mind the Statute of Secrecy now, there's going to be hell to pay anyway, we might as well be hanged for a dragon as an egg. Talk about the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery... this was exactly what Dumbledore was afraid of - What's that at the end of the street? Oh, it's just Mr Prentice... don't put your wand away, boy, don't I keep telling you I'm no use?'

It was not easy to hold a wand steady and haul Dudley along at the same time. Harry gave his cousin an impatient dig in the ribs, but Dudley seemed to have lost all desire for independent movement. He was slumped on Harry's shoulder, his large feet dragging along the ground.

'Why didn't you tell me you're a Squib, Mrs. Figg?' asked Harry, panting with the effort to keep walking. 'All those times I came round your house - why didn't you say anything?'

'Dumbledore's orders. I was to keep an eye on you but not say anything, you were too young. I'm sorry I gave you such a miserable time, Harry, but the Dursleys would never have let you come if they'd thought you enjoyed it. It wasn't easy, you know... but oh my word,' she said tragically, wringing her hands once more, 'when Dumbledore hears about this - how could Mundungus have left, he was supposed to be on duty until midnight - where is he? How am I going to tell Dumbledore what's happened? I can't Apparate.'

'I've got an owl, you can borrow her.' Harry groaned, wondering whether his spine was going to snap under Dudley's weight.

'Harry, you don't understand! Dumbledore will need to act as quickly as possible, the Ministry have their own ways of detecting underage magic, they'll know already, you mark my words.'

'But I was getting rid of Dementors, I had to use magic - they're going to be more worried about what Dementors were doing floating around Wisteria Walk, surely?'

'Oh, my dear, I wish it were so, but I'm afraid - MUNDUNGUS FLETCHER, I AM GOING TO KILL YOU!'

There was a loud crack and a strong smell of drink mingled with stale tobacco filled the air as a squat, unshaven man in a tattered overcoat materialised right in front of them. He had short, bandy legs, long straggly ginger hair and bloodshot, baggy eyes that gave him the doleful look of a basset hound. He was also clutching a silvery bundle that Harry recognised at once as an Invisibility Cloak.

'S'up, Figgy?' he said, staring from Mrs. Figg to Harry and Dudley. 'What 'appened to staying undercover?'

'Til give you undercover]' cried Mrs. Figg. 'Dementors, you useless, skiving sneak thief!'

'Dementors?' repeated Mundungus, aghast. 'Dementors, 'ere?'

'Yes, here, you worthless pile of bat droppings, here!' shrieked Mrs. Figg. 'Dementors attacking

the boy on your watch!

'Blimey,' said Mundungus weakly, looking from Mrs. Figg to Harry, and back again. 'Blimey, I -'

'And you off buying stolen cauldrons! Didn't I tell you not to go? Didn't IT

'I - well, I -' Mundungus looked deeply uncomfortable. 'It — it was a very good business opportunity, see -'

Mrs. Figg raised the arm from which her string bag dangled and whacked Mundungus around the face and neck with it; judging by the clanking noise it made it was full of cat food.

'Ouch - gerroff - gerroff, you mad old bat! Someone's gotta tell Dumbledore!'

'Yes - they - have!' yelled Mrs. Figg, swinging the bag of cat food at every bit of Mundungus she could reach. 'And - it - had

- better - be - you - and - you - can - tell - him - why - you - weren't - there - to - help!'

'Keep your 'airnet on!' said Mundungus, his arms over his head, cowering. 'I'm going, I'm going!'

And with another loud crack, he vanished.

'I hope Dumbledore murders him!' said Mrs. Figg furiously. 'Now come on, Harry, what are you waiting for?'

Harry decided not to waste his remaining breath on pointing out that he could barely walk under Dudley's bulk. He gave the semi-conscious Dudley a heave and staggered onwards.

'I'll take you to the door,' said Mrs. Figg, as they turned into Privet Drive. 'Just in case there are more of them around... oh my word, what a catastrophe... and you had to fight them off yourself... and Dumbledore said we were to keep you from doing magic at all costs... well, it's no good crying over spilt potion, I suppose... but the cat's among the pixies now.'

'So,' Harry panted, 'Dumbledore's... been having... me followed?'

'Of course he has,' said Mrs. Figg impatiently. 'Did you expect him to let you wander around on your own after what happened in June? Good Lord, boy, they told me you were intelligent... right... get inside and stay there,' she said, as they reached number four. 'I expect someone will be in touch with you soon enough.'

'What are you going to do?' asked Harry quickly.

'I'm going straight home,' said Mrs. Figg, staring around the dark street and shuddering. 'I'll need to wait for more instructions. Just stay in the house. Goodnight.'

'Hang on, don't go yet! I want to know -

But Mrs. Figg had already set off at a trot, carpet slippers flopping, string bag clanking.

'Wait!' Harry shouted after her. He had a million questions to ask anyone who was in contact with Dumbledore; but within seconds Mrs. Figg was swallowed by the darkness. Scowling, Harry readjusted Dudley on his shoulder and made his slow, painful way up number four's garden path.

The hall light was on. Harry stuck his wand back inside the waistband of his jeans, rang the bell and watched Aunt Petunia's outline grow larger and larger, oddly distorted by the rippling glass in the front door.

'Diddy! About time too, I was getting quite - quite - Diddy, what's the matter!'

Harry looked sideways at Dudley and ducked out from under his arm just in time. Dudley swayed on the spot for a moment, his face pale green... then he opened his mouth and vomited all over the doormat.

'DIDDY! Diddy, what's the matter with you? Vernon? VERNON!'

Harry's uncle came galumphing out of the living room, walrus moustache blowing hither and thither as it always did when he was agitated. He hurried forwards to help Aunt Petunia negotiate a weak-kneed Dudley over the threshold while avoiding stepping in the pool of sick.

'He's ill, Vernon!'

'What is it, son? What's happened? Did Mrs. Polkiss give you something foreign for tea?'

'Why are you all covered in dirt, darling? Have you been lying on the ground?'

'Hang on - you haven't been mugged, have you, son?'

Aunt Petunia screamed.

'Phone the police, Vernon! Phone the police! Diddy, darling, speak to Mummy! What did they do to you?'

In all the kerfuffle nobody seemed to have noticed Harry, which suited him perfectly. He managed to slip inside just before Uncle Vernon slammed the door and, while the Dursleys made their noisy progress down the hall towards the kitchen, Harry moved carefully and quietly towards the stairs.

'Who did it, son? Give us names. We'll get them, don't worry.'

'Shh! He's trying to say something, Vernon! What is it, Diddy? Tell Mummy!'

Harry's foot was on the bottom-most stair when Dudley found his voice.

'Him.'

Harry froze, foot on the stair, face screwed up, braced for the explosion.

'BOY! COME HERE!'

With a feeling of mingled dread and anger, Harry removed his foot slowly from the stair and turned to follow the Dursleys.

The scrupulously clean kitchen had an oddly unreal glitter after the darkness outside. Aunt Petunia was ushering Dudley into a chair; he was still very green and clammy-looking. Uncle Vernon standing in front of the draining board, glaring at Harry through tiny, narrowed eyes.

'What have you done to my son?' he said in a menacing growl.

'Nothing,' said Harry, knowing perfectly well that Uncle Vernon wouldn't believe him.

'What did he do to you, Diddy?' Aunt Petunia said in a quavering voice, now sponging sick from the front of Dudley's leather jacket. 'Was it - was it you-know-what, darling? Did he use - his thing?'

Slowly, tremulously, Dudley nodded.

'I didn't!' Harry said sharply, as Aunt Petunia let out a wail and

Uncle Vernon raised his fists. 'I didn't do anything to him, it wasn't me, it was -

But at that precise moment a screech owl swooped in through the kitchen window. Narrowly missing the top of Uncle Vernon's head, it soared across the kitchen, dropped the large parchment envelope it was carrying in its beak at Harry's feet, turned gracefully, the tips of its wings just brushing the top of the fridge, then zoomed outside again and off across the garden.

'OWLS!' bellowed Uncle Vernon, the well-worn vein in his temple pulsing angrily as he slammed the kitchen window shut. 'OWLS AGAIN! I WILL NOT HAVE ANY MORE OWLS IN MY HOUSE!'

But Harry was already ripping open the envelope and pulling out the letter inside, his heart pounding somewhere in the region of his Adam's apple.

Dear Mr Potter,

We have received intelligence that you performed the Patronus Charm at twenty-three minutes past nine this evening in a Muggle-inhabited area and in the presence of a Muggle.

The severity of this breach of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery has resulted in your expulsion

from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Ministry representatives will be calling at your place of residence shortly to destroy your wand.

As you have already received an official warning for a previous offence under Section 13 of the International Confederation of Warlocks' Statute of Secrecy, we regret to inform you that your

presence is required at a disciplinary hearing at the Ministry of Magic at 9 a.m. on the twelfth of August.

Hoping you are well,
Yours sincerely,
Mafalda Hopkirk
Improper Use of Magic Office
Ministry of Magic

Harry read the letter through twice. He was only vaguely aware of Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia talking. Inside his head, all was icy and numb. One fact had penetrated his consciousness like a paralysing dart. He was expelled from Hogwarts. It was all over. He was never going back.

He looked up at the Dursleys. Uncle Vernon was purple-faced, shouting, his fists still raised; Aunt Petunia had her arms around Dudley, who was retching again.

Harry's temporarily stupefied brain seemed to reawaken. Ministry representatives will be calling at your place of residence shortly to destroy your wand. There was only one thing for it. He would have to run - now. Where he was going to go, Harry didn't know, but he was certain of one thing: at Hogwarts or outside it, he needed his wand. In an almost dreamlike state, he pulled his wand out and turned to leave the kitchen.

'Where d'you think you're going?' yelled Uncle Vernon. When Harry didn't reply, he pounded across the kitchen to block the doorway into the hall. 'I haven't finished with you, boy!'

'Get out of the way,' said Harry quietly.

'You're going to stay here and explain how my son —'

'If you don't get out of the way I'm going to jinx you,' said Harry, raising the wand.

'You can't pull that one on me!' snarled Uncle Vernon. 'I know you're not allowed to use it outside that madhouse you call a school!'

The madhouse has chucked me out,' said Harry. 'So I can do whatever I like. You've got three seconds. One - two -'

A resounding CRACK filled the kitchen. Aunt Petunia screamed,

I hide Vernon yelled and ducked, but for the third time that night Harry was searching for the source of a disturbance he had not made. He spotted it at once: a dazed and ruffled-looking barn owl was sitting outside on the kitchen sill, having just collided with the closed window.

Ignoring Uncle Vernon's anguished yell of 'OWLS!' Harry crossed the room at a run and wrenched the window open. The owl stuck out its leg, to which a small roll of parchment was tied, shook its leathers, and took off the moment Harry had taken the letter. Hands shaking, Harry unfurled the second message, which was written very hastily and blotchily in black ink.

Harry - Dumbledore's just arrived at the Ministry and he's trying to sort it all out. DO NOT LEAVE YOUR AUNT AND UNCLE'S HOUSE. DO NOT DO ANY MORE MAGIC. DO NOT SURRENDER YOUR WAND. Arthur Weasley

Dumbledore was trying to sort it all out... what did that mean? How much power did Dumbledore have to override the Ministry of Magic? Was there a chance that he might be allowed back to Hogwarts, then? A small shoot of hope burgeoned in Harry's chest, almost immediately strangled by panic - how was he supposed to refuse to surrender his wand without doing magic? He'd have to duel with the Ministry representatives, and if he did that, he'd be lucky to escape Azkaban, let alone expulsion.

His mind was racing... he could run for it and risk being cap-lured by the Ministry, or stay put and wait for them to find him here. He was much more tempted by the former course, but he knew Mr

Weasley had his best interests at heart... and after all, Dumbledore had sorted out much worse than this before.

'Right,' Harry said, 'I've changed my mind, I'm staying.' He flung himself down at the kitchen table and faced Dudley and Aunt Petunia. The Dursleys appeared taken aback at his abrupt change of mind. Aunt Petunia glanced despairingly at Uncle Vernon. The vein in his purple temple was throbbing worse than ever.

'Who are all these ruddy owls from?' he growled.

The first one was from the Ministry of Magic, expelling me,' said Harry calmly. He was straining his ears to catch any noises outside, in case the Ministry representatives were approaching, and it was easier and quieter to answer Uncle Vernon's questions than to have him start raging and bellowing. 'The second one was from my friend Ron's dad, who works at the Ministry.'

'Ministry of Magic?' bellowed Uncle Vernon. 'People like you in government! Oh, this explains everything, everything, no wonder the country's going to the dogs.'

When Harry did not respond, Uncle Vernon glared at him, then spat out, 'And why have you been expelled?'

'Because I did magic.'

'AHA!' roared Uncle Vernon, slamming his fist down on top of the fridge, which sprang open; several of Dudley's low-fat snacks toppled out and burst on the floor. 'So you admit it! What did you do to Dudley?'

'Nothing,' said Harry, slightly less calmly. 'That wasn't me -'

'Was,' muttered Dudley unexpectedly, and Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia instantly made flapping gestures at Harry to quieten him while they both bent low over Dudley.

'Go on, son,' said Uncle Vernon, 'what did he do?'

Tell us, darling,' whispered Aunt Petunia.

'Pointed his wand at me,' Dudley mumbled.

'Yeah, I did, but I didn't use -' Harry began angrily, but -

'SHUT UP!' roared Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia in unison.

'Go on, son,' repeated Uncle Vernon, moustache blowing about furiously.

'All went dark,' Dudley said hoarsely, shuddering. 'Everything dark. And then I h-heard... things. Inside m-my head.'

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia exchanged looks of utter horror. If their least favourite thing in the world was magic - closely followed by neighbours who cheated more than they did on the hosepipe ban - people who heard voices were definitely in the bottom ten. They obviously thought Dudley was losing his mind.

'What sort of things did you hear, Popkin?' breathed Aunt Petunia, very white-faced and with tears in her eyes.

But Dudley seemed incapable of saying. He shuddered again and shook his large blond head, and despite the sense of numb dread that had settled on Harry since the arrival of the first owl, he felt a certain curiosity. Dementors caused a person to relive the worst moments of their life. What would spoiled, pampered, bullying Dudley have been forced to hear?

'How come you fell over, son?' said Uncle Vernon, in an unnaturally quiet voice, the kind of voice he might adopt at the bedside of a very ill person.

'T-tripped,' said Dudley shakily. 'And then -'

He gestured at his massive chest. Harry understood. Dudley was remembering the clammy cold that filled the lungs as hope and happiness were sucked out of you.

'Horrible,' croaked Dudley. 'Cold. Really cold.'

'OK,' said Uncle Vernon, in a voice of forced calm, while Aunt Petunia laid an anxious hand on Dudley's forehead to feel his temperature. 'What happened then, Dudders?'

'Felt... felt... felt... as if... as if...'

'As if you'd never be happy again,' Harry supplied dully.

'Yes,' Dudley whispered, still trembling.

'So!' said Uncle Vernon, voice restored to full and considerable volume as he straightened up. 'You put some crackpot spell on my son so he'd hear voices and believe he was - was doomed to misery, or something, did you?'

'How many times do I have to tell you?' said Harry, temper and voice both rising. 'It wasn't me! It was a couple of Dementors!'

'A couple of - what's this codswallop?'

'De - men - tors,' said Harry slowly and clearly. 'Two of them.'

'And what the ruddy hell are Dementors?'

'They guard the wizard prison, Azkaban,' said Aunt Petunia.

Two seconds of ringing silence followed these words before Aunt Petunia clapped her hand over her mouth as though she had let slip a disgusting swear word. Uncle Vernon was goggling at her. Harry's brain reeled. Mrs. Figg was one thing - but Aunt Petunia?'

'How d'you know that?' he asked her, astonished.

Aunt Petunia looked quite appalled with herself. She glanced at Uncle Vernon in fearful apology, then lowered her hand slightly to reveal her horsy teeth.

'I heard - that awful boy - telling her about them - years ago,' she said jerkily.

'If you mean my mum and dad, why don't you use their names?' said Harry loudly, but Aunt Petunia ignored him. She seemed horribly flustered.

Harry was stunned. Except for one outburst years ago, in the course of which Aunt Petunia had screamed that Harry's mother had been a freak, he had never heard her mention her sister. He was astounded that she had remembered this scrap of information about the magical world for so long, when she usually put all her energies into pretending it didn't exist.

Uncle Vernon opened his mouth, closed it again, opened it once more, shut it, then, apparently struggling to remember how to talk, opened it for a third time and croaked, 'So - so - they - er - they - er - they actually exist, do they - er - Dementy-whatsits?'

Aunt Petunia nodded.

Uncle Vernon looked from Aunt Petunia to Dudley to Harry as if hoping somebody was going to shout 'April Fool!' When nobody did, he opened his mouth yet again, but was spared the struggle to find more words by the arrival of the third owl of the evening. It zoomed through the still-open window like a feathery cannon-ball and landed with a clatter on the kitchen table, causing all three of the Dursleys to jump with fright. Harry tore a second official-looking envelope from the owl's beak and ripped it open as the owl swooped back out into the night.

'Enough - effing - owls,' muttered Uncle Vernon distractedly, stomping over to the window and slamming it shut again.

Dear Mr Potter,

Further to our letter of approximately twenty-two minutes ago, the

Ministry of Magic has revised its decision to destroy your wand forthwith. You may retain your wand until your disciplinary hearing on the twelfth of August, at which time an official decision will be taken.

Following discussions with the Headmaster of Hogwarts School o/ Witchcraft and Wizardry, the Ministry has agreed that the question of your expulsion will also be decided at that time. You should therefore consider yourself suspended from school pending further enquiries.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

Improper Use of Magic Office

Ministry of Magic

Harry read this letter through three times in quick succession. The miserable knot in his chest loosened slightly with the relief of Knowing he was not yet definitely expelled, though his fears were by no means banished. Everything seemed to hang on this hearing on the twelfth of August.

'Well?' said Uncle Vernon, recalling Harry to his surroundings. 'What now? Have they sentenced you to anything? Do your lot have the death penalty?' he added as a hopeful afterthought.

'I've got to go to a hearing,' said Harry.

'And they'll sentence you there?'

'I suppose so.'

'I won't give up hope, then,' said Uncle Vernon nastily.

'Well, if that's all,' said Harry, getting to his feet. He was desperate to be alone, to think, perhaps to send a letter to Ron, Hermione or Sirius.

'NO, IT RUDDY WELL IS NOT ALL!' bellowed Uncle Vernon. 'SIT BACK DOWN!'

'What now?' said Harry impatiently.

'DUDLEY!' roared Uncle Vernon. 'I want to know exactly what happened to my son!'

'FINE!' yelled Harry, and in his temper, red and gold sparks shot out of the end of his wand, still clutched in his hand. All three Dursleys flinched, looking terrified.

'Dudley and I were in the alleyway between Magnolia Crescent and Wisteria Walk,' said Harry, speaking fast, fighting to control his temper. 'Dudley thought he'd be smart with me, I pulled out my wand but didn't use it. Then two Dementors turned up —'

'But what ARE Dementoids?' asked Uncle Vernon furiously. 'What do they DO?'

'I told you - they suck all the happiness out of you,' said Harry, 'and if they get the chance, they kiss you -'

'Kiss you?' said Uncle Vernon, his eyes popping slightly. 'Kiss you?'

'It's what they call it when they suck the soul out of your mouth.'

Aunt Petunia uttered a soft scream.

'His soul? They didn't take - he's still got his -'

She seized Dudley by the shoulders and shook him, as though testing to see whether she could hear his soul rattling around inside him.

'Of course they didn't get his soul, you'd know if they had,' said Harry, exasperated.

'Fought 'em off, did you, son?' said Uncle Vernon loudly, with the appearance of a man struggling to bring the conversation back on to a plane he understood. 'Gave 'em the old one-two, did you?'

'You can't give a Dementor the old one-two,' said Harry through clenched teeth.

'Why's he all right, then?' blustered Uncle Vernon. 'Why isn't he all empty, then?'

'Because I used the Patronus -'

WHOOSH. With a clattering, a whirring of wings and a soft fall of dust, a fourth owl came shooting out of the kitchen fireplace.

'FOR GOD'SSAKE!' roared Uncle Vernon, pulling great clumps of hair out of his moustache,

something he hadn't been driven to do in a long time. 'I WILL NOT HAVE OWLS HERE, I WILL NOT TOLERATE THIS, I TELL YOU!'

But Harry was already pulling a roll of parchment from the owl's leg. He was so convinced that this letter had to be from Dumbledore, explaining everything - the Dementors, Mrs. Figg, what the Ministry was up to, how he, Dumbledore, intended to sort everything out - that for the first time in his life he was disappointed to see Sirius's handwriting. Ignoring Uncle Vernon's ongoing rant about owls, and narrowing his eyes against a second cloud of dust as the most recent owl took off back up the chimney, Harry read Sirius's message.

Arthur has just told us what's happened. Don't leave the house again, whatever you do.

Harry found this such an inadequate response to everything that had happened tonight that he turned the piece of parchment over, looking for the rest of the letter, but there was nothing else.

And now his temper was rising again. Wasn't anybody going to say 'well done' for fighting off two Dementors single-handed? Both Mr Weasley and Sirius were acting as though he'd misbehaved, and were saving their tellings-off until they could ascertain how much damage had been done.

'... a peck, I mean, pack of owls shooting in and out of my house. I won't have it, boy, I won't -'

'I can't stop the owls coming,' Harry snapped, crushing Sirius's letter in his fist.

I want the truth about what happened tonight!' barked Uncle Vernon. 'If it was Dementors who hurt Dudley, how come you've been expelled? You did you-know-what, you've admitted it!'

Harry took a deep, steadying breath. His head was beginning to ache again. He wanted more than anything to get out of the kitchen, and away from the Dursleys.

'I did the Patronus Charm to get rid of the Dementors,' he said, forcing himself to remain calm. 'It's the only thing that works against them.'

'But what were Dementors doing in Little Whinging?' said Uncle Vernon in an outraged tone.

'Couldn't tell you,' said Harry wearily. 'No idea.'

His head was pounding in the glare of the strip-lighting now. His anger was ebbing away. He felt drained, exhausted. The Dursleys were all staring at him.

'It's you,' said Uncle Vernon forcefully. 'It's got something to do with you, boy, I know it. Why else would they turn up here? Why else would they be down that alleyway? You've got to be the only - the only -' Evidently, he couldn't bring himself to say the word 'wizard'. The only you-know-what for miles.'

'I don't know why they were here.'

But at Uncle Vernon's words, Harry's exhausted brain had ground back into action. Why had the Dementors come to Little Whinging? How could it be coincidence that they had arrived in the alleyway where Harry was? Had they been sent? Had the Ministry of Magic lost control of the Dementors? Had they deserted Azkaban and joined Voldemort, as Dumbledore had predicted they would?

These Dementors guard some weirdo prison?' asked Uncle Vernon, lumbering along in the wake of Harry's train of thought.

'Yes,' said Harry.

If only his head would stop hurting, if only he could just leave the kitchen and get to his dark bedroom and think...

'Oho! They were coming to arrest you!' said Uncle Vernon, with the triumphant air of a man reaching an unassailable conclusion. That's it, isn't it, boy? You're on the run from the law!'

'Of course I'm not,' said Harry, shaking his head as though to scare off a fly, his mind racing now. Then why -?'

'He must have sent them,' said Harry quietly, more to himself than to Uncle Vernon.

'What's that? Who must have sent them?'

'Lord Voldemort,' said Harry.

He registered dimly how strange it was that the Dursleys, who flinched, winced and squawked if they heard words like 'wizard', 'magic' or 'wand', could hear the name of the most evil wizard of all time without the slightest tremor.

'Lord - hang on,' said Uncle Vernon, his face screwed up, a look of dawning comprehension coming into his piggy eyes. 'I've heard that name... that was the one who —'

'Murdered my parents, yes,' Harry said dully.

'But he's gone,' said Uncle Vernon impatiently, without the slightest sign that the murder of Harry's parents might be a painful topic. That giant bloke said so. He's gone.'

'He's back,' said Harry heavily.

It felt very strange to be standing here in Aunt Petunia's surgically clean kitchen, beside the top-of-the-range fridge and the wide-screen television, talking calmly of Lord Voldemort to Uncle Vernon. The arrival of the Dementors in Little Whinging seemed to have breached the great, invisible wall that divided the relentlessly non-magical world of Privet Drive and the world beyond, Harry's two lives had somehow become fused and everything had been turned upside-down; the Dursleys were asking for details about the magical world, and Mrs. Figg knew Albus Dumbledore; Dementors were soaring around Little Whinging, and he might never return to Hogwarts. Harry's head throbbed more painfully.

'Back?' whispered Aunt Petunia.

She was looking at Harry as she had never looked at him before. And all of a sudden, for the very first time in his life, Harry fully appreciated that Aunt Petunia was his mother's sister. He could not have said why this hit him so very powerfully at this moment. All he knew was that he was not the only person in the room who had an inkling of what Lord Voldemort being back might mean. Aunt Petunia had never in her life looked at him like that before. Her large, pale eyes (so unlike her sister's) were not narrowed in dislike or anger, they were wide and fearful. The furious pretence that Aunt Petunia had maintained all Harry's life - that there was no magic and no world other than the world she inhabited with Uncle Vernon - seemed to have fallen away.

'Yes,' Harry said, talking directly to Aunt Petunia now. 'He came back a month ago. I saw him.'

Her hands found Dudley's massive leather-clad shoulders and clutched them.

'Hang on,' said Uncle Vernon, looking from his wife to Harry and back again, apparently dazed and confused by the unprece-dented understanding that seemed to have sprung up between them. 'Hang on. This Lord Voldything's back, you say.'

'Yes.'

The one who murdered your parents.'

'Yes.'

'And now he's sending Dismembers after you?'

'Looks like it,' said Harry.

'I see,' said Uncle Vernon, looking from his white-faced wife to Harry and hitching up his trousers. He seemed to be swelling, his great purple face stretching before Harry's eyes. 'Well, that settles it,' he said, his shirt front straining as he inflated himself, 'you can get out of this house, boy!'

'What?' said Harry.

'You heard me - OUT!' Uncle Vernon bellowed, and even Aunt Petunia and Dudley jumped. 'OUT! OUT! I should've done this years ago! Owls treating the place like a rest home, puddings exploding,

half the lounge destroyed, Dudley's tail, Marge bobbing around on the ceiling and that flying Ford Anglia - OUT! OUT! You've had it! You're history! You're not staying here if some loony's after you, you're not endangering my wife and son, you're not bringing trouble down on us. If you're going the same way as your useless parents, I've had it! OUT!

Harry stood rooted to the spot. The letters from the Ministry, Mr Weasley and Sirius were all crushed in his left hand. Don't leave the house again, whatever you do. DO NOT LEAVE YOUR AUNT AND UNCLE'S HOUSE.

'You heard me!' said Uncle Vernon, bending forwards now, his massive purple face coming so close to Harry's, he actually felt flecks of spit hit his face. 'Get going! You were all keen to leave half an hour ago! I'm right behind you! Get out and never darken our doorstep again! Why we ever kept you in the first place, I don't know, Marge was right, it should have been the orphanage. We were too damn soft for our own good, thought we could squash it out of you, thought we could turn you normal, but you've been rotten from the beginning and I've had enough - owls!'

The fifth owl zoomed down the chimney so fast it actually hit the floor before zooming into the air again with a loud screech. Harry raised his hand to seize the letter, which was in a scarlet envelope, but it soared straight over his head, flying directly at Aunt Petunia, who let out a scream and ducked, her arms over her face. The owl dropped the red envelope on her head, turned, and flew straight back up the chimney.

Harry darted forwards to pick up the letter, but Aunt Petunia beat him to it.

'You can open it if you like,' said Harry, 'but I'll hear what it says anyway. That's a Howler.'

'Let go of it, Petunia!' roared Uncle Vernon. 'Don't touch it, it could be dangerous!'

'It's addressed to me,' said Aunt Petunia in a shaking voice. 'It's addressed to me, Vernon, look! Mrs. Petunia Dursley, The Kitchen, Number Four, Privet Drive -

She caught her breath, horrified. The red envelope had begun to smoke.

'Open it!' Harry urged her. 'Get it over with! It'll happen anyway.'

'No.'

Aunt Petunia's hand was trembling. She looked wildly around the kitchen as though looking for an escape route, but too late -the envelope burst into flames. Aunt Petunia screamed and dropped it.

An awful voice filled the kitchen, echoing in the confined space, issuing from the burning letter on the table.

'Remember my last, Petunia.'

Aunt Petunia looked as though she might faint. She sank into the chair beside Dudley, her face in her hands. The remains of the envelope smouldered into ash in the silence.

'What is this?' Uncle Vernon said hoarsely. 'What - I don't -Petunia?'

Aunt Petunia said nothing. Dudley was staring stupidly at his mother, his mouth hanging open. The silence spiralled horribly. Harry was watching his aunt, utterly bewildered, his head throbbing fit to burst.

'Petunia, dear?' said Uncle Vernon timidly. 'P-Petunia?'

She raised her head. She was still trembling. She swallowed.

'The boy - the boy will have to stay, Vernon,' she said weakly.

'W-what?'

'He stays,' she said. She was not looking at Harry. She got to her feet again.

'He... but Petunia...'

'If we throw him out, the neighbours will talk,' she said. She was rapidly regaining her usual brisk, snappish manner, though she was still very pale. They'll ask awkward questions, they'll want to

know where he's gone. We'll have to keep him.'

Uncle Vernon was deflating like an old tyre.

'But Petunia, dear -

Aunt Petunia ignored him. She turned to Harry. 'You're to stay in your room,' she said. 'You're not to leave the house. Now get to bed.' Harry didn't move. 'Who was that Howler from?'

'Don't ask questions,' Aunt Petunia snapped. 'Are you in touch with wizards?'

'I told you to get to bed!'

'What did it mean? Remember the last what?'

'Go to bed!'

'How come -?'

'YOU HEARD YOUR AUNT, NOW GO UP TO BED!'