

He looked up at the head table, trailing his gaze over the gathered staff. Snape looked as dour as always, back in full Hated Professor mode. Hagrid hurried in just as Harry was frowning at the half-giant's empty seat — he caught Harry's eye and offered a cheerful wink. A few other professors were staring back at him, too, he noticed, though none of them reacted.

He wondered what they thought of Dumbledore's insinuations in the *Prophet*.

The headmaster himself looked as delighted as ever at the start of a new school year, twinkling blue eyes surveying the gathering students. He didn't look Harry's way — did he still think Harry had Voldemort lurking inside his mind? Harry smirked to himself; if only he knew.

Once everyone was settled — a much smaller crowd than usual; there were definitely a high number of students absent this year — McGonagall led in the latest batch of first years ready for Sorting. They looked like a smaller crowd, too. Harry felt a pang in his chest; it couldn't be easy, starting Hogwarts at such a fraught political time.

He would do his best to keep them safe, however he possibly could.

The heartbreak cut a little deeper each time the Sorting Hat called Slytherin and a look of abject fear crossed the face of whichever child sat beneath it. Even those with names Harry recognised from historically Slytherin families looked uneasy at joining the silver and green table. Harry glanced across at Draco and Blaise, who both nodded fractionally.

Slytherin House would not fall prey to prejudice, not again. Not this year.

With so few first years, the Sorting didn't take long at all, and Dumbledore stood to welcome them for another year.

Harry's eyes went straight to the man's left hand, and he knew he wasn't the only one. Snape had *vastly* understated the condition of the headmaster's arm — the whole hand looked like it had withered and died, the fingers withered and black. It went right up beneath the sleeve of his voluminous purple robe; all the way to his elbow, Snape had told them. It had reached that far before the Potions Master had managed to dispel the curse magic.

What on Earth had possessed Dumbledore to put on that ring??

Dumbledore acted like he didn't notice half the school staring at his hand, sitting down again just as the tables filled with food.

"What happened to him?" Ginny asked, horrified. Harry pursed his lips.

"Looks like some kind of dark curse, I'd wager," he said evenly. The redhead narrowed her gaze at him, but wisely didn't ask anything more.

As they ate, it seemed everyone had an opinion on Dumbledore's gnarled hand; Harry heard everything from a duel against Voldemort himself to some sort of ritual gone wrong, to Harry himself having cursed the headmaster in retaliation for his words in the *Prophet*.