

# HARRY POTTER

*and the*  
HALF-BLOOD  
PRINCE



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J.K. ROWLING



Harry Potter

Joanne Katheline Rowling

**Harry Potter and the  
Half-Blood Prince**

«Pottermore limited»

2005

## **Rowling J.**

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"There it was, hanging in the sky above the school: the blazing green skull with a serpent tongue, the mark Death Eaters left behind whenever they had entered a building... wherever they had murdered..." When Dumbledore arrives at Privet Drive one summer night to collect Harry Potter, his wand hand is blackened and shrivelled, but he does not reveal why. Secrets and suspicion are spreading through the wizarding world, and Hogwarts itself is not safe. Harry is convinced that Malfoy bears the Dark Mark: there is a Death Eater amongst them. Harry will need powerful magic and true friends as he explores Voldemort's darkest secrets, and Dumbledore prepares him to face his destiny... Pottermore has now launched the Wizarding World Book Club. Visit Pottermore to sign up and join weekly Twitter discussions at WW Book Club.

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# **J.K. Rowling**

## **Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince**

*To Mackenzie, my beautiful daughter, I dedicate her ink and paper twin*

### **— CHAPTER ONE —**

#### **The Other Minister**

It was nearing midnight and the Prime Minister was sitting alone in his office, reading a long memo that was slipping through his brain without leaving the slightest trace of meaning behind. He was waiting for a call from the president of a far-distant country, and between wondering when the wretched man would telephone, and trying to suppress unpleasant memories of what had been a very long, tiring and difficult week, there was not much space in his head for anything else. The more he attempted to focus on the print on the page before him, the more clearly the Prime Minister could see the gloating face of one of his political opponents. This particular opponent had appeared on the news that very day, not only to enumerate all the terrible things that had happened in the last week (as though anyone needed reminding) but also to explain why each and every one of them was the government's fault.

The Prime Minister's pulse quickened at the very thought of these accusations, for they were neither fair nor true. How on earth was his government supposed to have stopped that bridge collapsing? It was outrageous for anybody to suggest that they were not spending enough on bridges. The bridge was less than ten years old, and the best experts were at a loss to explain why it had snapped cleanly in two, sending a dozen cars into the watery depths of the river below. And how dared anyone suggest that it was lack of policemen that had resulted in those two very nasty and well-publicised murders? Or that the government should have somehow foreseen the freak hurricane in the West Country that had caused so much damage to both people and property? And was it *his* fault that one of his Junior Ministers, Herbert Chorley, had chosen this week to act so peculiarly that he was now going to be spending a lot more time with his family?

'A grim mood has gripped the country,' the opponent had concluded, barely concealing his own broad grin.

And unfortunately, this was perfectly true. The Prime Minister felt it himself; people really did seem more miserable than usual. Even the weather was dismal; all this chilly mist in the middle of July ... it wasn't right, it wasn't normal ...

He turned over the second page of the memo, saw how much longer it went on, and gave it up as a bad job. Stretching his arms above his head he looked around his office mournfully. It was a handsome room, with a fine marble fireplace facing the long sash windows, firmly closed against the unseasonable chill. With a slight shiver, the Prime Minister got up and moved over to the windows, looking out at the thin mist that was pressing itself against the glass. It was then, as he stood with his back to the room, that he heard a soft cough behind him.

He froze, nose-to-nose with his own scared-looking reflection in the dark glass. He knew that cough. He had heard it before. He turned, very slowly, to face the empty room.

'Hello?' he said, trying to sound braver than he felt.

For a brief moment he allowed himself the impossible hope that nobody would answer him. However, a voice responded at once, a crisp, decisive voice that sounded as though it were reading a prepared statement. It was coming – as the Prime Minister had known at the first cough – from the froglike little man wearing a long silver wig who was depicted in a small and dirty oil-painting in the far corner of the room.

‘To the Prime Minister of Muggles. Urgent we meet. Kindly respond immediately. Sincerely, Fudge.’ The man in the painting looked enquiringly at the Prime Minister.

‘Er,’ said the Prime Minister, ‘listen ... it’s not a very good time for me ... I’m waiting for a telephone call, you see ... from the president of —’

‘That can be rearranged,’ said the portrait at once. The Prime Minister’s heart sank. He had been afraid of that.

‘But I really was rather hoping to speak —’

‘We shall arrange for the president to forget to call. He will telephone tomorrow night instead,’ said the little man. ‘Kindly respond immediately to Mr Fudge.’

‘I ... oh ... very well,’ said the Prime Minister weakly. ‘Yes, I’ll see Fudge.’

He hurried back to his desk, straightening his tie as he went. He had barely resumed his seat, and arranged his face into what he hoped was a relaxed and unfazed expression, when bright green flames burst into life in the empty grate beneath his marble mantelpiece. He watched, trying not to betray a flicker of surprise or alarm, as a portly man appeared within the flames, spinning as fast as a top. Seconds later, he had climbed out on to a rather fine antique rug, brushing ash from the sleeves of his long pinstriped cloak, a lime-green bowler hat in his hand.

‘Ah ... Prime Minister,’ said Cornelius Fudge, striding forwards with his hand outstretched. ‘Good to see you again.’

The Prime Minister could not honestly return this compliment, so said nothing at all. He was not remotely pleased to see Fudge, whose occasional appearances, apart from being downright alarming in themselves, generally meant that he was about to hear some very bad news. Furthermore, Fudge was looking distinctly careworn. He was thinner, balder and greyer, and his face had a crumpled look. The Prime Minister had seen that kind of look in politicians before, and it never boded well.

‘How can I help you?’ he said, shaking Fudge’s hand very briefly and gesturing towards the hardest of the chairs in front of the desk.

‘Difficult to know where to begin,’ muttered Fudge, pulling up the chair, sitting down and placing his green bowler upon his knees. ‘What a week, what a week ...’

‘Had a bad one too, have you?’ asked the Prime Minister stiffly, hoping to convey by this that he had quite enough on his plate already without any extra helpings from Fudge.

‘Yes, of course,’ said Fudge, rubbing his eyes wearily and looking morosely at the Prime Minister. ‘I’ve been having the same week you have, Prime Minister. The Brockdale bridge ... the Bones and Vance murders ... not to mention the ruckus in the West Country ...’

‘You – er – your – I mean to say, some of your people were – were involved in those – those things, were they?’

Fudge fixed the Prime Minister with a rather stern look.

‘Of course they were,’ he said. ‘Surely you’ve realised what’s going on?’

‘I ...’ hesitated the Prime Minister.

It was precisely this sort of behaviour that made him dislike Fudge’s visits so much. He was, after all, the Prime Minister, and did not appreciate being made to feel like an ignorant schoolboy. But of course, it had been like this from his very first meeting with Fudge on his very first evening as Prime Minister. He remembered it as though it were yesterday and knew it would haunt him until his dying day.

He had been standing alone in this very office, savouring the triumph that was his after so many years of dreaming and scheming, when he had heard a cough behind him, just like tonight, and turned to find that ugly little portrait talking to him, announcing that the Minister for Magic was about to arrive and introduce himself.

Naturally, he had thought that the long campaign and the strain of the election had caused him to go mad. He had been utterly terrified to find a portrait talking to him, though this had been nothing to how he had felt when a self-proclaimed wizard had bounced out of the fireplace and shaken his

hand. He had remained speechless throughout Fudge's kindly explanation that there were witches and wizards still living in secret all over the world, and his reassurances that he was not to bother his head about them as the Ministry of Magic took responsibility for the whole wizarding community and prevented the non-magical population from getting wind of them. It was, said Fudge, a difficult job that encompassed everything from regulations on responsible use of broomsticks to keeping the dragon population under control (the Prime Minister remembered clutching the desk for support at this point). Fudge had then patted the shoulder of the still-dumbstruck Prime Minister in a fatherly sort of way.

'Not to worry,' he had said, 'it's odds on you'll never see me again. I'll only bother you if there's something really serious going on our end, something that's likely to affect the Muggles – the non-magical population, I should say. Otherwise it's live and let live. And I must say, you're taking it a lot better than your predecessor. *He* tried to throw me out of the window, thought I was a hoax planned by the opposition.'

At this, the Prime Minister had found his voice at last.

'You're – you're *not* a hoax, then?'

It had been his last, desperate hope.

'No,' said Fudge gently. 'No, I'm afraid I'm not. Look.'

And he had turned the Prime Minister's teacup into a gerbil.

'But,' said the Prime Minister breathlessly, watching his teacup chewing on the corner of his next speech, 'but why – why has nobody told me —?'

'The Minister for Magic only reveals him or herself to the Muggle Prime Minister of the day,' said Fudge, poking his wand back inside his jacket. 'We find it the best way to maintain secrecy.'

'But then,' bleated the Prime Minister, 'why hasn't a former Prime Minister warned me —?'

At this, Fudge had actually laughed.

'My dear Prime Minister, are *you* ever going to tell anybody?'

Still chortling, Fudge had thrown some powder into the fireplace, stepped into the emerald flames and vanished with a whooshing sound. The Prime Minister had stood there, quite motionless, and realised that he would never, as long as he lived, dare mention this encounter to a living soul, for who in the wide world would believe him?

The shock had taken a little while to wear off. For a time he had tried to convince himself that Fudge had indeed been a hallucination brought on by lack of sleep during his gruelling election campaign. In a vain attempt to rid himself of all reminders of this uncomfortable encounter, he had given the gerbil to his delighted niece and instructed his Private Secretary to take down the portrait of the ugly little man who had announced Fudge's arrival. To the Prime Minister's dismay, however, the portrait had proved impossible to remove. When several carpenters, a builder or two, an art historian and the Chancellor of the Exchequer had all tried unsuccessfully to prise it from the wall, the Prime Minister had abandoned the attempt and simply resolved to hope that the thing remained motionless and silent for the rest of his term in office. Occasionally he could have sworn he saw out of the corner of his eye the occupant of the painting yawning, or else scratching his nose; even, once or twice, simply walking out of his frame and leaving nothing but a stretch of muddy-brown canvas behind. However, he had trained himself not to look at the picture very much, and always to tell himself firmly that his eyes were playing tricks on him when anything like this happened.

Then, three years ago, on a night very like tonight, the Prime Minister had been alone in his office when the portrait had once again announced the imminent arrival of Fudge, who had burst out of the fireplace, sopping wet and in a state of considerable panic. Before the Prime Minister could ask why he was dripping all over the Axminster, Fudge had started ranting about a prison the Prime Minister had never heard of, a man named 'Serious' Black, something that sounded like Hogwarts and a boy called Harry Potter, none of which made the remotest sense to the Prime Minister.

‘... I’ve just come from Azkaban,’ Fudge had panted, tipping a large amount of water out of the rim of his bowler hat into his pocket. ‘Middle of the North Sea, you know, nasty flight ... the Dementors are in uproar —’ he shuddered ‘— they’ve never had a breakout before. Anyway, I had to come to you, Prime Minister. Black’s a known Muggle killer and may be planning to rejoin You-Know-Who ... but of course, you don’t even know who You-Know-Who is!’ He had gazed hopelessly at the Prime Minister for a moment, then said, ‘Well, sit down, sit down, I’d better fill you in ... have a whisky ...’

The Prime Minister had rather resented being told to sit down in his own office, let alone offered his own whisky, but he sat nevertheless. Fudge had pulled out his wand, conjured two large glasses full of amber liquid out of thin air, pushed one of them into the Prime Minister’s hand and drawn up a chair.

Fudge had talked for over an hour. At one point, he had refused to say a certain name aloud, and wrote it instead on a piece of parchment, which he had thrust into the Prime Minister’s whisky-free hand. When at last Fudge had stood up to leave, the Prime Minister had stood up too.

‘So you think that ...’ he had squinted down at the name in his left hand, ‘Lord Vol—’  
‘*He Who Must Not Be Named!*’ snarled Fudge.

‘I’m sorry ... you think that He Who Must Not Be Named is still alive, then?’

‘Well, Dumbledore says he is,’ said Fudge, as he had fastened his pinstriped cloak under his chin, ‘but we’ve never found him. If you ask me, he’s not dangerous unless he’s got support, so it’s Black we ought to be worrying about. You’ll put out that warning, then? Excellent. Well, I hope we don’t see each other again, Prime Minister! Goodnight.’

But they had seen each other again. Less than a year later a harassed-looking Fudge had appeared out of thin air in the Cabinet Room to inform the Prime Minister that there had been a spot of bother at the Kwidditch (or that was what it had sounded like) World Cup and that several Muggles had been ‘involved’, but that the Prime Minister was not to worry, the fact that You-Know-Who’s Mark had been seen again meant nothing; Fudge was sure it was an isolated incident and the Muggle Liaison Office was dealing with all memory modifications as they spoke.

‘Oh, and I almost forgot,’ Fudge had added. ‘We’re importing three foreign dragons and a sphinx for the Triwizard Tournament, quite routine, but the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures tells me that it’s down in the rulebook that we have to notify you if we’re bringing highly dangerous creatures into the country.’

‘I – what – *dragons?*’ spluttered the Prime Minister.

‘Yes, three,’ said Fudge. ‘And a sphinx. Well, good day to you.’

The Prime Minister had hoped beyond hope that dragons and sphinxes would be the worst of it, but no. Less than two years later, Fudge had erupted out of the fire yet again, this time with the news that there had been a mass breakout from Azkaban.

‘A *mass* breakout?’ the Prime Minister had repeated hoarsely.

‘No need to worry, no need to worry!’ Fudge had shouted, already with one foot in the flames. ‘We’ll have them rounded up in no time – just thought you ought to know!’

And before the Prime Minister had been able to shout, ‘Now, wait just one moment!’ Fudge had vanished in a shower of green sparks.

Whatever the press and the opposition might say, the Prime Minister was not a foolish man. It had not escaped his notice that, despite Fudge’s assurances at their first meeting, they were now seeing rather a lot of each other, nor that Fudge was becoming more flustered with each visit. Little though he liked to think about the Minister for Magic (or, as he always called Fudge in his head, the *Other* Minister), the Prime Minister could not help but fear that the next time Fudge appeared it would be with graver news still. The sight, therefore, of Fudge stepping out of the fire once more, looking dishevelled and fretful and sternly surprised that the Prime Minister did not know exactly why he was there, was about the worst thing that had happened in the course of this extremely gloomy week.



‘How should I know what’s going on in the – er – wizarding community?’ snapped the Prime Minister now. ‘I have a country to run and quite enough concerns at the moment without —’

‘We have the same concerns,’ Fudge interrupted. ‘The Brockdale bridge didn’t wear out. That wasn’t really a hurricane. Those murders were not the work of Muggles. And Herbert Chorley’s family would be safer without him. We are currently making arrangements to have him transferred to St Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. The move should be effected tonight.’

‘What do you ... I’m afraid I ... *what?*’ blustered the Prime Minister.

Fudge took a great, deep breath and said, ‘Prime Minister, I am very sorry to have to tell you that he’s back. He Who Must Not Be Named is back.’

‘Back? When you say “back” ... he’s alive? I mean —’

The Prime Minister groped in his memory for the details of that horrible conversation of three years previously, when Fudge had told him about the wizard who was feared above all others, the wizard who had committed a thousand terrible crimes before his mysterious disappearance fifteen years earlier.

‘Yes, alive,’ said Fudge. ‘That is – I don’t know – is a man alive if he can’t be killed? I don’t really understand it, and Dumbledore won’t explain properly – but anyway, he’s certainly got a body and is walking and talking and killing, so I suppose, for the purposes of our discussion, yes, he’s alive.’

The Prime Minister did not know what to say to this, but a persistent habit of wishing to appear well-informed on any subject that came up made him cast around for any details he could remember of their previous conversations.

‘Is Serious Black with – er – He Who Must Not Be Named?’

‘Black? Black?’ said Fudge distractedly, turning his bowler rapidly in his fingers. ‘Sirius Black, you mean? Merlin’s beard, no. Black’s dead. Turns out we were – er – mistaken about Black. He was innocent after all. And he wasn’t in league with He Who Must Not Be Named either. I mean,’ he added defensively, spinning the bowler hat still faster, ‘all the evidence pointed – we had more than fifty eye-witnesses – but anyway, as I say, he’s dead. Murdered, as a matter of fact. On Ministry of Magic premises. There’s going to be an inquiry, actually ...’

To his great surprise, the Prime Minister felt a fleeting stab of pity for Fudge at this point. It was, however, eclipsed almost immediately by a glow of smugness at the thought that, deficient though he himself might be in the area of materialising out of fireplaces, there had never been a murder in any of the government departments under *his* charge ... not yet, anyway ...

While the Prime Minister surreptitiously touched the wood of his desk, Fudge continued, ‘But Black’s by-the-by now. The point is, we’re at war, Prime Minister, and steps must be taken.’

‘At war?’ repeated the Prime Minister nervously. ‘Surely that’s a little bit of an overstatement?’

‘He Who Must Not Be Named has now been joined by those of his followers who broke out of Azkaban in January,’ said Fudge, speaking more and more rapidly, and twirling his bowler so fast that it was a lime-green blur. ‘Since they have moved into the open, they have been wreaking havoc. The Brockdale bridge – he did it, Prime Minister, he threatened a mass Muggle killing unless I stood aside for him and —’

‘Good grief, so it’s *your* fault those people were killed and I’m having to answer questions about rusted rigging and corroded expansion joints and I don’t know what else!’ said the Prime Minister furiously.

‘*My* fault!’ said Fudge, colouring up. ‘Are you saying you would have caved in to blackmail like that?’

‘Maybe not,’ said the Prime Minister, standing up and striding about the room, ‘but I would have put all my efforts into catching the blackmailer before he committed any such atrocity!’

‘Do you really think I wasn’t already making every effort?’ demanded Fudge heatedly. ‘Every Auror in the Ministry was – and is – trying to find him and round up his followers, but we happen

to be talking about one of the most powerful wizards of all time, a wizard who has eluded capture for almost three decades!

‘So I suppose you’re going to tell me he caused the hurricane in the West Country, too?’ said the Prime Minister, his temper rising with every pace he took. It was infuriating to discover the reason for all these terrible disasters and not to be able to tell the public; almost worse than it being the government’s fault after all.

‘That was no hurricane,’ said Fudge miserably.

‘Excuse me!’ barked the Prime Minister, now positively stamping up and down. ‘Trees uprooted, roofs ripped off, lampposts bent, horrible injuries —’

‘It was the Death Eaters,’ said Fudge. ‘He Who Must Not Be Named’s followers. And ... and we suspect giant involvement.’

The Prime Minister stopped in his tracks as though he had hit an invisible wall.

‘What involvement?’

Fudge grimaced. ‘He used giants last time, when he wanted to go for the grand effect. The Office of Misinformation has been working round the clock, we’ve had teams of Obliviators out trying to modify the memories of all the Muggles who saw what really happened, we’ve got most of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures running around Somerset, but we can’t find the giant – it’s been a disaster.’

‘You don’t say!’ said the Prime Minister furiously.

‘I won’t deny that morale is pretty low at the Ministry,’ said Fudge. ‘What with all that, and then losing Amelia Bones.’

‘Losing who?’

‘Amelia Bones. Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. We think He Who Must Not Be Named may have murdered her in person, because she was a very gifted witch and – and all the evidence was that she put up a real fight.’

Fudge cleared his throat and, with an effort, it seemed, stopped spinning his bowler hat.

‘But that murder was in the newspapers,’ said the Prime Minister, momentarily diverted from his anger. ‘*Our* newspapers. Amelia Bones ... it just said she was a middle-aged woman who lived alone. It was a – a nasty killing, wasn’t it? It’s had rather a lot of publicity. The police are baffled, you see.’

Fudge sighed. ‘Well, of course they are. Killed in a room that was locked from the inside, wasn’t she? We, on the other hand, know exactly who did it, not that that gets us any further towards catching him. And then there was Emmeline Vance, maybe you didn’t hear about that one —’

‘Oh yes I did!’ said the Prime Minister. ‘It happened just round the corner from here, as a matter of fact. The papers had a field day with it: *Breakdown of law and order in the Prime Minister’s back yard* —’

‘And as if all that wasn’t enough,’ said Fudge, barely listening to the Prime Minister, ‘we’ve got Dementors swarming all over the place, attacking people left right and centre ...’

Once upon a happier time this sentence would have been unintelligible to the Prime Minister, but he was wiser now.

‘I thought Dementors guard the prisoners in Azkaban?’ he said cautiously.

‘They did,’ said Fudge wearily. ‘But not any more. They’ve deserted the prison and joined He Who Must Not Be Named. I won’t pretend that wasn’t a blow.’

‘But,’ said the Prime Minister, with a sense of dawning horror, ‘didn’t you tell me they’re the creatures that drain hope and happiness out of people?’

‘That’s right. And they’re breeding. That’s what’s causing all this mist.’

The Prime Minister sank, weak-kneed, into the nearest chair. The idea of invisible creatures swooping through the towns and countryside, spreading despair and hopelessness in his voters, made him feel quite faint.

‘Now see here, Fudge – you’ve got to do something! It’s your responsibility as Minister for Magic!’

‘My dear Prime Minister, you can’t honestly think I’m still Minister for Magic after all this? I was sacked three days ago! The whole wizarding community has been screaming for my resignation for a fortnight. I’ve never known them so united in my whole term of office!’ said Fudge, with a brave attempt at a smile.

The Prime Minister was momentarily lost for words. Despite his indignation at the position into which he had been placed, he still rather felt for the shrunken-looking man sitting opposite him.

‘I’m very sorry,’ he said finally. ‘If there’s anything I can do?’

‘It’s very kind of you, Prime Minister, but there is nothing. I was sent here tonight to bring you up-to-date on recent events and to introduce you to my successor. I rather thought he’d be here by now, but of course he’s very busy at the moment, with so much going on.’

Fudge looked round at the portrait of the ugly little man wearing the long curly silver wig, who was digging in his ear with the point of a quill.

Catching Fudge’s eye the portrait said, ‘He’ll be here in a moment, he’s just finishing a letter to Dumbledore.’

‘I wish him luck,’ said Fudge, sounding bitter for the first time. ‘I’ve been writing to Dumbledore twice a day for the past fortnight, but he won’t budge. If he’d just been prepared to persuade the boy, I might still be ... well, maybe Scrimgeour will have more success.’

Fudge subsided into what was clearly an aggrieved silence, but it was broken almost immediately by the portrait, which suddenly spoke in its crisp, official voice.

‘To the Prime Minister of Muggles. Requesting a meeting. Urgent. Kindly respond immediately. Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister for Magic.’

‘Yes, yes, fine,’ said the Prime Minister distractedly, and he barely flinched as the flames in the grate turned emerald-green again, rose up and revealed a second spinning wizard in their heart, disgorging him moments later on to the antique rug. Fudge got to his feet, and after a moment’s hesitation the Prime Minister did the same, watching the new arrival straighten up, dust down his long black robes and look around.

The Prime Minister’s first, foolish thought was that Rufus Scrimgeour looked rather like an old lion. There were streaks of grey in his mane of tawny hair and his bushy eyebrows; he had keen yellowish eyes behind a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles and a certain rangy, loping grace even though he walked with a slight limp. There was an immediate impression of shrewdness and toughness; the Prime Minister thought he understood why the wizarding community preferred Scrimgeour to Fudge as a leader in these dangerous times.

‘How do you do?’ said the Prime Minister politely, holding out his hand.

Scrimgeour grasped it briefly, his eyes scanning the room, then pulled out a wand from under his robes.

‘Fudge told you everything?’ he asked, striding over to the door and tapping the keyhole with his wand. The Prime Minister heard the lock click.

‘Er – yes,’ said the Prime Minister. ‘And if you don’t mind, I’d rather that door remained unlocked.’

‘I’d rather not be interrupted,’ said Scrimgeour shortly, ‘or watched,’ he added, pointing his wand at the windows so that the curtains swept across them. ‘Right, well, I’m a busy man, so let’s get down to business. First of all, we need to discuss your security.’

The Prime Minister drew himself up to his fullest height and replied, ‘I am perfectly happy with the security I’ve already got, thank you very —’

‘Well, we’re not,’ Scrimgeour cut in. ‘It’ll be a poor lookout for the Muggles if their Prime Minister gets put under the Imperius Curse. The new secretary in your outer office —’

‘I’m not getting rid of Kingsley Shacklebolt, if that’s what you’re suggesting!’ said the Prime Minister hotly. ‘He’s highly efficient, gets through twice the work the rest of them —’

‘That’s because he’s a wizard,’ said Scrimgeour, without a flicker of a smile. ‘A highly trained Auror, who has been assigned to you for your protection.’

‘Now, wait a moment!’ declared the Prime Minister. ‘You can’t just put your people into my office, I decide who works for me —’

‘I thought you were happy with Shacklebolt?’ said Scrimgeour coldly.

‘I am – that’s to say, I was —’

‘Then there’s no problem, is there?’ said Scrimgeour.

‘I ... well, as long as Shacklebolt’s work continues to be ... er ... excellent,’ said the Prime Minister lamely, but Scrimgeour barely seemed to hear him.

‘Now, about Herbert Chorley – your Junior Minister,’ he continued. ‘The one who has been entertaining the public by impersonating a duck.’

‘What about him?’ asked the Prime Minister.

‘He has clearly reacted to a poorly performed Imperius Curse,’ said Scrimgeour. ‘It’s addled his brains, but he could still be dangerous.’

‘He’s only quacking!’ said the Prime Minister weakly. ‘Surely a bit of a rest ... maybe go easy on the drink ...’

‘A team of Healers from St Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries is examining him as we speak. So far he has attempted to strangle three of them,’ said Scrimgeour. ‘I think it best that we remove him from Muggle society for a while.’

‘I ... well ... he’ll be all right, won’t he?’ said the Prime Minister anxiously. Scrimgeour merely shrugged, already moving back towards the fireplace.

‘Well, that’s really all I had to say. I will keep you posted of developments, Prime Minister – or, at least, I shall probably be too busy to come personally, in which case I shall send Fudge here. He has consented to stay on in an advisory capacity.’

Fudge attempted to smile, but was unsuccessful; he merely looked as though he had toothache. Scrimgeour was already rummaging in his pocket for the mysterious powder that turned the fire green. The Prime Minister gazed hopelessly at the pair of them for a moment, then the words he had fought to suppress all evening burst from him at last.

‘But for heaven’s sake – you’re *wizards*! You can do *magic*! Surely you can sort out – well – *anything*!’

Scrimgeour turned slowly on the spot and exchanged an incredulous look with Fudge, who really did manage a smile this time as he said kindly, ‘The trouble is, the other side can do magic too, Prime Minister.’

And with that, the two wizards stepped one after the other into the bright green fire and vanished.

## — CHAPTER TWO —

### Spinner's End

Many miles away the chilly mist that had pressed against the Prime Minister's windows drifted over a dirty river that wound between overgrown, rubbish-strewn banks. An immense chimney, relic of a disused mill, reared up, shadowy and ominous. There was no sound apart from the whisper of the black water and no sign of life apart from a scrawny fox that had slunk down the bank to nose hopefully at some old fish-and-chip wrappings in the tall grass.

But then, with a very faint *pop*, a slim hooded figure appeared out of thin air on the edge of the river. The fox froze, wary eyes fixed upon this strange new phenomenon. The figure seemed to take its bearings for a few moments, then set off with light, quick strides, its long cloak rustling over the grass.

With a second and louder *pop*, another hooded figure materialised.

'Wait!'

The harsh cry startled the fox, now crouching almost flat in the undergrowth. It leapt from its hiding place and up the bank. There was a flash of green light, a yelp, and the fox fell back to the ground, dead.

The second figure turned over the animal with its toe.

'Just a fox,' said a woman's voice dismissively from under the hood. 'I thought perhaps an Auror – Cissy, wait!'

But her quarry, who had paused and looked back at the flash of light, was already scrambling up the bank the fox had just fallen down.

'Cissy – Narcissa – listen to me —'

The second woman caught the first and seized her arm, but the other wrenched it away.

'Go back, Bella!'

'You must listen to me!'

'I've listened already. I've made my decision. Leave me alone!'

The woman called Narcissa gained the top of the bank, where a line of old railings separated the river from a narrow cobbled street. The other woman, Bella, followed at once. Side by side they stood looking across the road at the rows and rows of dilapidated brick houses, their windows dull and blind in the darkness.

'He lives here?' asked Bella in a voice of contempt. '*Here?* In this Muggle dunghill? We must be the first of our kind ever to set foot —'

But Narcissa was not listening; she had slipped through a gap in the rusty railings and was already hurrying across the road.

'Cissy, *wait!*'

Bella followed, her cloak streaming behind, and saw Narcissa darting through an alley between the houses into a second, almost identical street. Some of the street lamps were broken; the two women were running between patches of light and deep darkness. The pursuer caught up with her prey just as she turned another corner, this time succeeding in catching hold of her arm and swinging her round so that they faced each other.

'Cissy, you must not do this, you can't trust him —'

'The Dark Lord trusts him, doesn't he?'

'The Dark Lord is ... I believe ... mistaken,' Bella panted, and her eyes gleamed momentarily under her hood as she looked around to check that they were indeed alone. 'In any case, we were told not to speak of the plan to anyone. This is a betrayal of the Dark Lord's —'

'Let go, Bella!' snarled Narcissa and she drew a wand from beneath her cloak, holding it threateningly in the other's face. Bella merely laughed.



‘Cissy, your own sister? You wouldn’t —’

‘There is nothing I wouldn’t do any more!’ Narcissa breathed, a note of hysteria in her voice, and as she brought down the wand like a knife, there was another flash of light. Bella let go of her sister’s arm as though burned.

*‘Narcissa!’*

But Narcissa had rushed ahead. Rubbing her hand, her pursuer followed again, keeping her distance now, as they moved deeper into the deserted labyrinth of brick houses. At last Narcissa hurried up a street called Spinner’s End, over which the towering mill chimney seemed to hover like a giant admonitory finger. Her footsteps echoed on the cobbles as she passed boarded and broken windows, until she reached the very last house, where a dim light glimmered through the curtains in a downstairs room.

She had knocked on the door before Bella, cursing under her breath, had caught up. Together they stood waiting, panting slightly, breathing in the smell of the dirty river that was carried to them on the night breeze. After a few seconds, they heard movement behind the door and it opened a crack. A sliver of a man could be seen looking out at them, a man with long black hair parted in curtains around a sallow face and black eyes.

Narcissa threw back her hood. She was so pale that she seemed to shine in the darkness; the long blonde hair streaming down her back gave her the look of a drowned person.

‘Narcissa!’ said the man, opening the door a little wider, so that the light fell upon her and her sister too. ‘What a pleasant surprise!’

‘Severus,’ she said in a strained whisper. ‘May I speak to you? It’s urgent.’

‘But of course.’

He stood back to allow her to pass him into the house. Her still-hooded sister followed without invitation.

‘Snape,’ she said curtly as she passed him.

‘Bellatrix,’ he replied, his thin mouth curling into a slightly mocking smile as he closed the door with a snap behind them.

They had stepped directly into a tiny sitting room, which had the feeling of a dark padded cell. The walls were completely covered in books, most of them bound in old black or brown leather; a threadbare sofa, an old armchair and a rickety table stood grouped together in a pool of dim light cast by a candle-filled lamp hung from the ceiling. The place had an air of neglect, as though it were not usually inhabited.

Snape gestured Narcissa to the sofa. She threw off her cloak, cast it aside and sat down, staring at her white and trembling hands clasped in her lap. Bellatrix lowered her hood more slowly. Dark as her sister was fair, with heavily lidded eyes and a strong jaw, she did not take her gaze from Snape as she moved to stand behind Narcissa.

‘So, what can I do for you?’ Snape asked, settling himself in the armchair opposite the two sisters.

‘We ... we are alone, aren’t we?’ Narcissa asked quietly.

‘Yes, of course. Well, Wormtail’s here, but we’re not counting vermin, are we?’

He pointed his wand at the wall of books behind him and, with a bang, a hidden door flew open, revealing a narrow staircase upon which a small man stood frozen.

‘As you have clearly realised, Wormtail, we have guests,’ said Snape lazily.

The man crept hunchbacked down the last few steps and moved into the room. He had small, watery eyes, a pointed nose and wore an unpleasant simper. His left hand was caressing his right, which looked as though it were encased in a bright silver glove.

‘Narcissa!’ he said, in a squeaky voice, ‘and Bellatrix! How charming —’

‘Wormtail will get us drinks, if you’d like them,’ said Snape. ‘And then he will return to his bedroom.’

Wormtail winced as though Snape had thrown something at him.

‘I am not your servant!’ he squeaked, avoiding Snape’s eye.

‘Really? I was under the impression that the Dark Lord placed you here to assist me.’

‘To assist, yes – but not to make you drinks and – and clean your house!’

‘I had no idea, Wormtail, that you were craving more dangerous assignments,’ said Snape silkily. ‘This can be easily arranged: I shall speak to the Dark Lord —’

‘I can speak to him myself if I want to!’

‘Of course you can,’ said Snape, sneering. ‘But in the meantime, bring us drinks. Some of the elf-made wine will do.’

Wormtail hesitated for a moment, looking as though he might argue, but then turned and headed through a second hidden door. They heard banging, and a clinking of glasses. Within seconds he was back, bearing a dusty bottle and three glasses upon a tray. He dropped these on the rickety table and scurried from their presence, slamming the book-covered door behind him.

Snape poured out three glasses of blood-red wine and handed two of them to the sisters. Narcissa murmured a word of thanks, whilst Bellatrix said nothing, but continued to glower at Snape. This did not seem to discompose him; on the contrary, he looked rather amused.

‘The Dark Lord,’ he said, raising his glass and draining it.

The sisters copied him. Snape refilled their glasses.

As Narcissa took her second drink she said in a rush, ‘Severus, I’m sorry to come here like this, but I had to see you. I think you are the only one who can help me —’

Snape held up a hand to stop her, then pointed his wand again at the concealed staircase door. There was a loud bang and a squeal, followed by the sound of Wormtail scurrying back up the stairs.

‘My apologies,’ said Snape. ‘He has lately taken to listening at doors, I don’t know what he means by it ... you were saying, Narcissa?’

She took a great, shuddering breath and started again.

‘Severus, I know I ought not to be here, I have been told to say nothing to anyone, but —’

‘Then you ought to hold your tongue!’ snarled Bellatrix. ‘Particularly in present company!’

‘“Present company”?’ repeated Snape sardonically. ‘And what am I to understand by that, Bellatrix?’

‘That I don’t trust you, Snape, as you very well know!’

Narcissa let out a noise that might have been a dry sob and covered her face with her hands. Snape set his glass down upon the table and sat back again, his hands upon the arms of his chair, smiling into Bellatrix’s glowering face.

‘Narcissa, I think we ought to hear what Bellatrix is bursting to say; it will save tedious interruptions. Well, continue, Bellatrix,’ said Snape. ‘Why is it that you do not trust me?’

‘A hundred reasons!’ she said loudly, striding out from behind the sofa to slam her glass upon the table. ‘Where to start! Where were you when the Dark Lord fell? Why did you never make any attempt to find him when he vanished? What have you been doing all these years that you’ve lived in Dumbledore’s pocket? Why did you stop the Dark Lord procuring the Philosopher’s Stone? Why did you not return at once when the Dark Lord was reborn? Where were you a few weeks ago, when we battled to retrieve the prophecy for the Dark Lord? And why, Snape, is Harry Potter still alive, when you have had him at your mercy for five years?’

She paused, her chest rising and falling rapidly, the colour high in her cheeks. Behind her Narcissa sat motionless, her face still hidden in her hands.

Snape smiled.

‘Before I answer you – oh, yes, Bellatrix, I am going to answer! You can carry my words back to the others who whisper behind my back, and carry false tales of my treachery to the Dark Lord! Before I answer you, I say, let me ask a question in turn. Do you really think that the Dark Lord has

not asked me each and every one of those questions? And do you really think that, had I not been able to give satisfactory answers, I would be sitting here talking to you?”

She hesitated.

‘I know he believes you, but —’

‘You think he is mistaken? Or that I have somehow hoodwinked him? Fooled the Dark Lord, the greatest wizard, the most accomplished Legilimens the world has ever seen?’

Bellatrix said nothing, but looked, for the first time, a little discomfited. Snape did not press the point. He picked up his drink again, sipped it, and continued, ‘You ask where I was when the Dark Lord fell. I was where he had ordered me to be, at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, because he wished me to spy upon Albus Dumbledore. You know, I presume, that it was on the Dark Lord’s orders that I took up the post?’

She nodded almost imperceptibly and then opened her mouth, but Snape forestalled her.

‘You ask why I did not attempt to find him when he vanished. For the same reason that Avery, Yaxley, the Carrows, Greyback, Lucius,’ he inclined his head slightly to Narcissa, ‘and many others did not attempt to find him. I believed him finished. I am not proud of it, I was wrong, but there it is ... if he had not forgiven we who lost faith at that time, he would have very few followers left.’

‘He’d have me!’ said Bellatrix passionately. ‘I, who spent many years in Azkaban for him!’

‘Yes, indeed, most admirable,’ said Snape in a bored voice. ‘Of course, you weren’t a lot of use to him in prison, but the gesture was undoubtedly fine —’

‘Gesture!’ she shrieked; in her fury she looked slightly mad. ‘While I endured the Dementors, you remained at Hogwarts, comfortably playing Dumbledore’s pet!’

‘Not quite,’ said Snape calmly. ‘He wouldn’t give me the Defence Against the Dark Arts job, you know. Seemed to think it might, ah, bring about a relapse ... tempt me into my old ways.’

‘This was your sacrifice for the Dark Lord, not to teach your favourite subject?’ she jeered. ‘Why did you stay there all that time, Snape? Still spying on Dumbledore for a master you believed dead?’

‘Hardly,’ said Snape, ‘although the Dark Lord is pleased that I never deserted my post: I had sixteen years of information on Dumbledore to give him when he returned, a rather more useful welcome-back present than endless reminiscences of how unpleasant Azkaban is ...’

‘But you stayed —’

‘Yes, Bellatrix, I stayed,’ said Snape, betraying a hint of impatience for the first time. ‘I had a comfortable job that I preferred to a stint in Azkaban. They were rounding up the Death Eaters, you know. Dumbledore’s protection kept me out of jail, it was most convenient and I used it. I repeat: the Dark Lord does not complain that I stayed, so I do not see why you do.’

‘I think you next wanted to know,’ he pressed on, a little more loudly, for Bellatrix showed every sign of interrupting, ‘why I stood between the Dark Lord and the Philosopher’s Stone. That is easily answered. He did not know whether he could trust me. He thought, like you, that I had turned from faithful Death Eater to Dumbledore’s stooge. He was in a pitiable condition, very weak, sharing the body of a mediocre wizard. He did not dare reveal himself to a former ally if that ally might turn him over to Dumbledore or the Ministry. I deeply regret that he did not trust me. He would have returned to power three years sooner. As it was, I saw only greedy and unworthy Quirrell attempting to steal the Stone and, I admit, I did all I could to thwart him.’

Bellatrix’s mouth twisted as though she had taken an unpleasant dose of medicine.

‘But you didn’t return when he came back, you didn’t fly back to him at once when you felt the Dark Mark burn —’

‘Correct. I returned two hours later. I returned on Dumbledore’s orders.’

‘On Dumbledore’s —?’ she began, in tones of outrage.

‘Think!’ said Snape, impatient again. ‘Think! By waiting two hours, just two hours, I ensured that I could remain at Hogwarts as a spy! By allowing Dumbledore to think that I was only returning to the Dark Lord’s side because I was ordered to, I have been able to pass information on Dumbledore

and the Order of the Phoenix ever since! Consider, Bellatrix: the Dark Mark had been growing stronger for months, I knew he must be about to return, all the Death Eaters knew! I had plenty of time to think about what I wanted to do, to plan my next move, to escape like Karkaroff, didn't I?

'The Dark Lord's initial displeasure at my lateness vanished entirely, I assure you, when I explained that I remained faithful, although Dumbledore thought I was his man. Yes, the Dark Lord thought that I had left him for ever, but he was wrong.'

'But what use have you been?' sneered Bellatrix. 'What useful information have we had from you?'

'My information has been conveyed directly to the Dark Lord,' said Snape. 'If he chooses not to share it with you —'

'He shares everything with me!' said Bellatrix, firing up at once. 'He calls me his most loyal, his most faithful —'

'Does he?' said Snape, his voice delicately inflected to suggest his disbelief. 'Does he *still*, after the fiasco at the Ministry?'

'That was not my fault!' said Bellatrix, flushing. 'The Dark Lord has, in the past, entrusted me with his most precious – if Lucius hadn't —'

'Don't you dare – don't you *dare* blame my husband!' said Narcissa, in a low and deadly voice, looking up at her sister.

'There is no point apportioning blame,' said Snape smoothly. 'What is done is done.'

'But not by you!' said Bellatrix furiously. 'No, you were once again absent while the rest of us ran dangers, were you not, Snape?'

'My orders were to remain behind,' said Snape. 'Perhaps you disagree with the Dark Lord, perhaps you think that Dumbledore would not have noticed if I had joined forces with the Death Eaters to fight the Order of the Phoenix? And – forgive me – you speak of dangers ... you were facing six teenagers, were you not?'

'They were joined, as you very well know, by half of the Order before long!' snarled Bellatrix. 'And, while we are on the subject of the Order, you still claim you cannot reveal the whereabouts of their Headquarters, don't you?'

'I am not the Secret Keeper, I cannot speak the name of the place. You understand how the enchantment works, I think? The Dark Lord is satisfied with the information I have passed him on the Order. It led, as perhaps you have guessed, to the recent capture and murder of Emmeline Vance, and it certainly helped dispose of Sirius Black, though I give you full credit for finishing him off.'

He inclined his head and toasted her. Her expression did not soften.

'You are avoiding my last question, Snape. Harry Potter. You could have killed him at any point in the past five years. You have not done it. Why?'

'Have you discussed this matter with the Dark Lord?' asked Snape.

'He ... lately, we ... I am asking *you*, Snape!'

'If I had murdered Harry Potter, the Dark Lord could not have used his blood to regenerate, making him invincible —'

'You claim you foresaw his use of the boy!' she jeered.

'I do not claim it; I had no idea of his plans; I have already confessed that I thought the Dark Lord dead. I am merely trying to explain why the Dark Lord is not sorry that Potter survived, at least until a year ago ...'

'But why did you keep him alive?'

'Have you not understood me? It was only Dumbledore's protection that was keeping me out of Azkaban! Do you disagree that murdering his favourite student might have turned him against me? But there was more to it than that. I should remind you that when Potter first arrived at Hogwarts there were still many stories circulating about him, rumours that he himself was a great Dark wizard, which was how he had survived the Dark Lord's attack. Indeed, many of the Dark Lord's old followers

thought Potter might be a standard around which we could all rally once more. I was curious, I admit it, and not at all inclined to murder him the moment he set foot in the castle.

‘Of course, it became apparent to me very quickly that he had no extraordinary talent at all. He has fought his way out of a number of tight corners by a simple combination of sheer luck and more talented friends. He is mediocre to the last degree, though as obnoxious and self-satisfied as was his father before him. I have done my utmost to have him thrown out of Hogwarts, where I believe he scarcely belongs, but kill him, or allow him to be killed in front of me? I would have been a fool to risk it, with Dumbledore close at hand.’

‘And through all this we are supposed to believe Dumbledore has never suspected you?’ asked Bellatrix. ‘He has no idea of your true allegiance, he trusts you implicitly still?’

‘I have played my part well,’ said Snape. ‘And you overlook Dumbledore’s greatest weakness: he has to believe the best of people. I spun him a tale of deepest remorse when I joined his staff, fresh from my Death Eater days, and he embraced me with open arms – though, as I say, never allowing me nearer the Dark Arts than he could help. Dumbledore has been a great wizard – oh yes, he has’ (for Bellatrix had made a scathing noise) ‘the Dark Lord acknowledges it. I am pleased to say, however, that Dumbledore is growing old. The duel with the Dark Lord last month shook him. He has since sustained a serious injury because his reactions are slower than they once were. But through all these years, he has never stopped trusting Severus Snape, and therein lies my great value to the Dark Lord.’

Bellatrix still looked unhappy, though she appeared unsure how best to attack Snape next. Taking advantage of her silence, Snape turned to her sister.

‘Now ... you came to ask me for help, Narcissa?’

Narcissa looked up at him, her face eloquent with despair.

‘Yes, Severus. I—I think you are the only one who can help me, I have nowhere else to turn. Lucius is in jail and ...’

She closed her eyes and two large tears seeped from beneath her eyelids.

‘The Dark Lord has forbidden me to speak of it,’ Narcissa continued, her eyes still closed. ‘He wishes none to know of the plan. It is ... very secret. But —’

‘If he has forbidden it, you ought not to speak,’ said Snape at once. ‘The Dark Lord’s word is law.’

Narcissa gasped as though he had doused her with cold water. Bellatrix looked satisfied for the first time since she had entered the house.

‘There!’ she said triumphantly to her sister. ‘Even Snape says so: you were told not to talk, so hold your silence!’

But Snape had got to his feet and strode to the small window, peered through the curtains at the deserted street, then closed them again with a jerk. He turned round to face Narcissa, frowning.

‘It so happens that I know of the plan,’ he said in a low voice. ‘I am one of the few the Dark Lord has told. Nevertheless, had I not been in on the secret, Narcissa, you would have been guilty of great treachery to the Dark Lord.’

‘I thought you must know about it!’ said Narcissa, breathing more freely. ‘He trusts you so, Severus ...’

‘You know about the plan?’ said Bellatrix, her fleeting expression of satisfaction replaced by a look of outrage. ‘*You* know?’

‘Certainly,’ said Snape. ‘But what help do you require, Narcissa? If you are imagining I can persuade the Dark Lord to change his mind, I am afraid there is no hope, none at all.’

‘Severus,’ she whispered, tears sliding down her pale cheeks. ‘My son ... my only son ...’

‘Draco should be proud,’ said Bellatrix indifferently. ‘The Dark Lord is granting him a great honour. And I will say this for Draco: he isn’t shrinking away from his duty, he seems glad of a chance to prove himself, excited at the prospect —’

Narcissa began to cry in earnest, gazing beseechingly all the while at Snape.



‘That’s because he is sixteen and has no idea what lies in store! Why, Severus? Why my son? It is too dangerous! This is vengeance for Lucius’s mistake, I know it!’

Snape said nothing. He looked away from the sight of her tears as though they were indecent, but he could not pretend not to hear her.

‘That’s why he’s chosen Draco, isn’t it?’ she persisted. ‘To punish Lucius?’

‘If Draco succeeds,’ said Snape, still looking away from her, ‘he will be honoured above all others.’

‘But he won’t succeed!’ sobbed Narcissa. ‘How can he, when the Dark Lord himself —?’

Bellatrix gasped; Narcissa seemed to lose her nerve.

‘I only meant ... that nobody has yet succeeded ... Severus ... please ... you are, you have always been, Draco’s favourite teacher ... you are Lucius’s old friend ... I beg you ... you are the Dark Lord’s favourite, his most trusted advisor ... will you speak to him, persuade him —?’

‘The Dark Lord will not be persuaded, and I am not stupid enough to attempt it,’ said Snape flatly. ‘I cannot pretend that the Dark Lord is not angry with Lucius. Lucius was supposed to be in charge. He got himself captured, along with how many others, and failed to retrieve the prophecy into the bargain. Yes, the Dark Lord is angry, Narcissa, very angry indeed.’

‘Then I am right, he has chosen Draco in revenge!’ choked Narcissa. ‘He does not mean him to succeed, he wants him to be killed trying!’

When Snape said nothing, Narcissa seemed to lose what little self-restraint she still possessed. Standing up, she staggered to Snape and seized the front of his robes. Her face close to his, her tears falling on to his chest, she gasped, ‘You could do it. *You* could do it instead of Draco, Severus. You would succeed, of course you would, and he would reward you beyond all of us —’

Snape caught hold of her wrists and removed her clutching hands. Looking down into her tear-stained face, he said slowly, ‘He intends me to do it in the end, I think. But he is determined that Draco should try first. You see, in the unlikely event that Draco succeeds, I shall be able to remain at Hogwarts a little longer, fulfilling my useful role as spy.’

‘In other words, it doesn’t matter to him if Draco is killed!’

‘The Dark Lord is very angry,’ repeated Snape quietly. ‘He failed to hear the prophecy. You know as well as I do, Narcissa, that he does not forgive easily.’

She crumpled, falling at his feet, sobbing and moaning on the floor.

‘My only son ... my only son ...’

‘You should be proud!’ said Bellatrix ruthlessly. ‘If I had sons, I would be glad to give them up to the service of the Dark Lord!’

Narcissa gave a little scream of despair and clutched at her long blonde hair. Snape stooped, seized her by the arms, lifted her up and steered her back on to the sofa. He then poured her more wine and forced the glass into her hand.

‘Narcissa, that’s enough. Drink this. Listen to me.’

She quietened a little; slopping wine down herself, she took a shaky sip.

‘It might be possible ... for me to help Draco.’

She sat up, her face paper-white, her eyes huge.

‘Severus – oh, Severus – you would help him? Would you look after him, see he comes to no harm?’

‘I can try.’

She flung away her glass; it skidded across the table as she slid off the sofa into a kneeling position at Snape’s feet, seized his hand in both of hers and pressed her lips to it.

‘If you are there to protect him ... Severus, will you swear it? Will you make the Unbreakable Vow?’

‘The Unbreakable Vow?’ Snape’s expression was blank, unreadable: Bellatrix, however, let out a cackle of triumphant laughter.

‘Aren’t you listening, Narcissa? Oh, he’ll *try*, I’m sure ... the usual empty words, the usual slithering out of action ... oh, on the Dark Lord’s orders, of course!’

Snape did not look at Bellatrix. His black eyes were fixed upon Narcissa’s tear-filled blue ones as she continued to clutch his hand.

‘Certainly, Narcissa, I shall make the Unbreakable Vow,’ he said quietly. ‘Perhaps your sister will consent to be our Bonded.’

Bellatrix’s mouth fell open. Snape lowered himself so that he was kneeling opposite Narcissa. Beneath Bellatrix’s astonished gaze, they grasped right hands.

‘You will need your wand, Bellatrix,’ said Snape coldly.

She drew it, still looking astonished.

‘And you will need to move a little closer,’ he said.

She stepped forwards so that she stood over them, and placed the tip of her wand on their linked hands.

Narcissa spoke.

‘Will you, Severus, watch over my son Draco as he attempts to fulfil the Dark Lord’s wishes?’

‘I will,’ said Snape.

A thin tongue of brilliant flame issued from the wand and wound its way around their hands like a red-hot wire.

‘And will you, to the best of your ability, protect him from harm?’

‘I will,’ said Snape.

A second tongue of flame shot from the wand and interlinked with the first, making a fine, glowing chain.

‘And, should it prove necessary ... if it seems Draco will fail ...’ whispered Narcissa (Snape’s hand twitched within hers, but he did not draw away), ‘will you carry out the deed that the Dark Lord has ordered Draco to perform?’

There was a moment’s silence. Bellatrix watched, her wand upon their clasped hands, her eyes wide.

‘I will,’ said Snape.

Bellatrix’s astounded face glowed red in the blaze of a third tongue of flame, which shot from the wand, twisted with the others and bound itself thickly around their clasped hands, like a rope, like a fiery snake.

## – CHAPTER THREE –

### Will and Won't

Harry Potter was snoring loudly. He had been sitting in a chair beside his bedroom window for the best part of four hours, staring out at the darkening street, and had finally fallen asleep with one side of his face pressed against the cold window-pane, his glasses askew and his mouth wide open. The misty fog his breath had left on the window sparkled in the orange glare of the street lamp outside, and the artificial light drained his face of all colour so that he looked ghostly beneath his shock of untidy black hair.

The room was strewn with various possessions and a good smattering of rubbish. Owl feathers, apple cores and sweet wrappers littered the floor, a number of spellbooks lay higgledy-piggledy among the tangled robes on his bed, and a mess of newspapers sat in a puddle of light on his desk. The headline of one blared:

#### *HARRY POTTER: THE CHOSEN ONE?*

*Rumours continue to fly about the mysterious recent disturbance at the Ministry of Magic, during which He Who Must Not Be Named was sighted once more.*

*'We're not allowed to talk about it, don't ask me anything,' said one agitated Obliviator, who refused to give his name as he left the Ministry last night.*

*Nevertheless, highly placed sources within the Ministry have confirmed that the disturbance centred on the fabled Hall of Prophecy.*

*Though Ministry spokeswizards have hitherto refused even to confirm the existence of such a place, a growing number of the wizarding community believe that the Death Eaters now serving sentences in Azkaban for trespass and attempted theft were attempting to steal a prophecy. The nature of that prophecy is unknown, although speculation is rife that it concerns Harry Potter, the only person ever known to have survived the Killing Curse, and who is also known to have been at the Ministry on the night in question. Some are going so far as to call Potter the 'Chosen One', believing that the prophecy names him as the only one who will be able to rid us of He Who Must Not Be Named.*

*The current whereabouts of the prophecy, if it exists, are unknown, although (cont. page 2, column 5)*

A second newspaper lay beside the first. This one bore the headline:

#### *SCRIMGEOUR SUCCEEDS FUDGE*

Most of this front page was taken up with a large black-and-white picture of a man with a lionlike mane of thick hair and a rather ravaged face. The picture was moving – the man was waving at the ceiling.

*Rufus Scrimgeour, previously Head of the Auror Office in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, has succeeded Cornelius Fudge as Minister for Magic. The appointment has largely been greeted with enthusiasm by the wizarding community, though rumours of a rift between the new Minister and Albus Dumbledore, newly reinstated Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, surfaced within hours of Scrimgeour taking office.*

*Scrimgeour's representatives admitted that he had met with Dumbledore at once upon taking possession of the top job, but refused to comment on the topics under discussion. Albus Dumbledore is known to (cont. page 3, column 2)*

To the left of this paper sat another, which had been folded so that a story bearing the title *MINISTRY GUARANTEES STUDENTS' SAFETY* was visible.

*Newly appointed Minister for Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, spoke today of the tough new measures taken by his Ministry to ensure the safety of students returning to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this autumn.*

*'For obvious reasons, the Ministry will not be going into detail about its stringent new security plans,' said the Minister, although an insider confirmed that measures include defensive spells and charms, a complex array of counter-curses and a small task force of Aurors dedicated solely to the protection of Hogwarts School.*

*Most seem reassured by the new Minister's tough stand on student safety. Said Mrs Augusta Longbottom, 'My grandson Neville – a good friend of Harry Potter's, incidentally, who fought the Death Eaters alongside him at the Ministry in June and —*

But the rest of this story was obscured by the large birdcage standing on top of it. Inside it was a magnificent snowy owl. Her amber eyes surveyed the room imperiously, her head swivelling occasionally to gaze at her snoring master. Once or twice she clicked her beak impatiently, but Harry was too deeply asleep to hear her.

A large trunk stood in the very middle of the room. Its lid was open: it looked expectant; yet it was almost empty but for a residue of old underwear, sweets, empty ink bottles and broken quills that coated the very bottom. Nearby, on the floor, lay a purple leaflet emblazoned with the words:

*Issued on Behalf of the Ministry of Magic*

***PROTECTING YOUR HOME AND FAMILY AGAINST DARK FORCES***

*The wizarding community is currently under threat from an organisation calling itself the Death Eaters. Observing the following simple security guidelines will help protect you, your family and your home from attack.*

- 1. You are advised not to leave the house alone.*
- 2. Particular care should be taken during the hours of darkness. Wherever possible, arrange to complete journeys before night has fallen.*
- 3. Review the security arrangements around your house, making sure that all family members are aware of emergency measures such as Shield and Disillusionment Charms and, in the case of under-age family members, Side-Along-Apparition.*
- 4. Agree security questions with close friends and family so as to detect Death Eaters masquerading as others by use of Polyjuice Potion (see page 2).*
- 5. Should you feel that a family member, colleague, friend or neighbour is acting in a strange manner, contact the Magical Law Enforcement Squad at once. They may have been put under the Imperius Curse (see page 4).*
- 6. Should the Dark Mark appear over any dwelling place or other building, DO NOT ENTER, but contact the Auror Office immediately.*
- 7. Unconfirmed sightings suggest that the Death Eaters may now be using Inferi (see page 10). Any sighting of an Inferius, or encounter with same, should be reported to the Ministry IMMEDIATELY.*

Harry grunted in his sleep and his face slid down the window an inch or so, making his glasses still more lopsided, but he did not wake up. An alarm clock, repaired by Harry several years ago, ticked loudly on the sill, showing one minute to eleven. Beside it, held in place by Harry's relaxed hand, was a piece of parchment covered in thin, slanting writing. Harry had read this letter so often

since its arrival three days ago that, although it had been delivered in a tightly furled scroll, it now lay quite flat.

*Dear Harry,*

*If it is convenient to you, I shall call at number four, Privet Drive this coming Friday at eleven p.m. to escort you to The Burrow, where you have been invited to spend the remainder of your school holidays.*

*If you are agreeable, I should also be glad of your assistance in a matter to which I hope to attend on the way to The Burrow. I shall explain this more fully when I see you.*

*Kindly send your answer by return of this owl. Hoping to see you this Friday,*

*I am, yours most sincerely*

*Albus Dumbledore*

Though he already knew it by heart, Harry had been stealing glances at this missive every few minutes since seven o'clock that evening, when he had first taken up his position beside his bedroom window, which had a reasonable view of both ends of Privet Drive. He knew it was pointless to keep rereading Dumbledore's words; Harry had sent back his 'yes' with the delivering owl, as requested, and all he could do now was wait: either Dumbledore was going to come, or he was not.

But Harry had not packed. It just seemed too good to be true that he was going to be rescued from the Dursleys after a mere fortnight of their company. He could not shrug off the feeling that something was going to go wrong – his reply to Dumbledore's letter might have gone astray; Dumbledore could be prevented from collecting him; the letter might turn out not to be from Dumbledore at all, but a trick or joke or trap. Harry had not been able to face packing and then being let down and having to unpack again. The only gesture he had made to the possibility of a journey was to shut his snowy owl, Hedwig, safely in her cage.

The minute hand on the alarm clock reached the number twelve, and at that precise moment, the street lamp outside the window went out.

Harry awoke as though the sudden darkness was an alarm. Hastily straightening his glasses and unsticking his cheek from the glass, he pressed his nose against the window instead and squinted down at the pavement. A tall figure in a long, billowing cloak was walking up the garden path.

Harry jumped up as though he had received an electric shock, knocked over his chair, and started snatching anything and everything within reach from the floor and throwing it into the trunk. Even as he lobbed a set of robes, two spellbooks and a packet of crisps across the room, the doorbell rang.

Downstairs in the living room his Uncle Vernon shouted, 'Who the blazes is calling at this time of night?'

Harry froze with a brass telescope in one hand and a pair of trainers in the other. He had completely forgotten to warn the Dursleys that Dumbledore might be coming. Feeling both panicky and close to laughter, he clambered over the trunk and wrenched open his bedroom door in time to hear a deep voice say, 'Good evening. You must be Mr Dursley. I daresay Harry has told you I would be coming for him?'

Harry ran down the stairs two at a time, coming to an abrupt halt several steps from the bottom, as long experience had taught him to remain out of arm's reach of his uncle whenever possible. There in the doorway stood a tall, thin man with waist-length silver hair and beard. Half-moon spectacles were perched on his crooked nose and he was wearing a long black travelling cloak and a pointed hat. Vernon Dursley, whose moustache was quite as bushy as Dumbledore's, though black, and who was wearing a puce dressing-gown, was staring at the visitor as though he could not believe his tiny eyes.

'Judging by your look of stunned disbelief, Harry did *not* warn you that I was coming,' said Dumbledore pleasantly. 'However, let us assume that you have invited me warmly into your house. It is unwise to linger overlong on doorsteps in these troubled times.'



He stepped smartly over the threshold and closed the front door behind him.

‘It is a long time since my last visit,’ said Dumbledore, peering down his crooked nose at Uncle Vernon. ‘I must say, your agapanthuses are flourishing.’

Vernon Dursley said nothing at all. Harry did not doubt that speech would return to him, and soon – the vein pulsing in his uncle’s temple was reaching danger point – but something about Dumbledore seemed to have robbed him temporarily of breath. It might have been the blatant wizardishness of his appearance, but it might, too, have been that even Uncle Vernon could sense that here was a man whom it would be very difficult to bully.

‘Ah, good evening, Harry,’ said Dumbledore, looking up at him through his half-moon glasses with a most satisfied expression. ‘Excellent, excellent.’

These words seemed to rouse Uncle Vernon. It was clear that as far as he was concerned, any man who could look at Harry and say ‘excellent’ was a man with whom he could never see eye to eye.

‘I don’t mean to be rude —’ he began, in a tone that threatened rudeness in every syllable.

‘– yet, sadly, accidental rudeness occurs alarmingly often,’ Dumbledore finished the sentence gravely. ‘Best to say nothing at all, my dear man. Ah, and this must be Petunia.’

The kitchen door had opened, and there stood Harry’s aunt, wearing rubber gloves and a housecoat over her nightdress, clearly halfway through her usual pre-bedtime wipe-down of all the kitchen surfaces. Her rather horsy face registered nothing but shock.

‘Albus Dumbledore,’ said Dumbledore, when Uncle Vernon failed to effect an introduction. ‘We have corresponded, of course.’ Harry thought this an odd way of reminding Aunt Petunia that he had once sent her an exploding letter, but Aunt Petunia did not challenge the term. ‘And this must be your son Dudley?’

Dudley had that moment peered round the living-room door. His large, blond head rising out of the stripy collar of his pyjamas looked oddly disembodied, his mouth gaping in astonishment and fear. Dumbledore waited a moment or two, apparently to see whether any of the Dursleys were going to say anything, but as the silence stretched on he smiled.

‘Shall we assume that you have invited me into your sitting room?’

Dudley scrambled out of the way as Dumbledore passed him. Harry, still clutching the telescope and trainers, jumped the last few stairs and followed Dumbledore, who had settled himself in the armchair nearest the fire and was taking in the surroundings with an expression of benign interest. He looked quite extraordinarily out of place.

‘Aren’t – aren’t we leaving, sir?’ Harry asked anxiously.

‘Yes, indeed we are, but there are a few matters we need to discuss first,’ said Dumbledore. ‘And I would prefer not to do so in the open. We shall trespass upon your aunt and uncle’s hospitality only a little longer.’

‘You will, will you?’

Vernon Dursley had entered the room, Petunia at his shoulder and Dudley skulking behind them both.

‘Yes,’ said Dumbledore simply, ‘I shall.’

He drew his wand so rapidly that Harry barely saw it; with a casual flick, the sofa zoomed forwards and knocked the knees out from under all three of the Dursleys so that they collapsed upon it in a heap. Another flick of the wand and the sofa zoomed back to its original position.

‘We may as well be comfortable,’ said Dumbledore pleasantly.

As he replaced his wand in his pocket, Harry saw that his hand was blackened and shrivelled; it looked as though his flesh had been burned away.

‘Sir – what happened to your —?’

‘Later, Harry,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Please sit down.’

Harry took the remaining armchair, choosing not to look at the Dursleys, who seemed stunned into silence.

‘I would assume that you were going to offer me refreshment,’ Dumbledore said to Uncle Vernon, ‘but the evidence so far suggests that that would be optimistic to the point of foolishness.’

A third twitch of the wand and a dusty bottle and five glasses appeared in midair. The bottle tipped and poured a generous measure of honey-coloured liquid into each of the glasses, which then floated to each person in the room.

‘Madam Rosmerta’s finest, oak-matured mead,’ said Dumbledore, raising his glass to Harry, who caught hold of his own and sipped. He had never tasted anything like it before, but enjoyed it immensely. The Dursleys, after quick, scared looks at each other, tried to ignore their glasses completely, a difficult feat, as they were nudging them gently on the sides of their heads. Harry could not suppress a suspicion that Dumbledore was rather enjoying himself.

‘Well, Harry,’ said Dumbledore, turning towards him, ‘a difficulty has arisen which I hope you will be able to solve for us. By us, I mean the Order of the Phoenix. But first of all I must tell you that Sirius’s will was discovered a week ago and that he left you everything he owned.’

Over on the sofa, Uncle Vernon’s head turned, but Harry did not look at him, nor could he think of anything to say except, ‘Oh. Right.’

‘This is, in the main, fairly straightforward,’ Dumbledore went on. ‘You add a reasonable amount of gold to your account at Gringotts and you inherit all of Sirius’s personal possessions. The slightly problematic part of the legacy —’

‘His godfather’s dead?’ said Uncle Vernon loudly from the sofa. Dumbledore and Harry both turned to look at him. The glass of mead was now knocking quite insistently on the side of Vernon’s head; he attempted to beat it away. ‘He’s dead? His godfather?’

‘Yes,’ said Dumbledore. He did not ask Harry why he had not confided in the Dursleys. ‘Our problem,’ he continued to Harry, as if there had been no interruption, ‘is that Sirius also left you number twelve, Grimmauld Place.’

‘He’s been left a house?’ said Uncle Vernon greedily, his small eyes narrowing, but nobody answered him.

‘You can keep using it as Headquarters,’ said Harry. ‘I don’t care. You can have it, I don’t really want it.’ Harry never wanted to set foot in number twelve, Grimmauld Place again if he could help it. He thought he would be haunted for ever by the memory of Sirius prowling its dark musty rooms alone, imprisoned within the place he had wanted so desperately to leave.

‘That is generous,’ said Dumbledore. ‘We have, however, vacated the building temporarily.’

‘Why?’

‘Well,’ said Dumbledore, ignoring the mutterings of Uncle Vernon, who was now being rapped smartly over the head by the persistent glass of mead, ‘Black family tradition decreed that the house was handed down the direct line, to the next male with the name of Black. Sirius was the very last of the line as his younger brother, Regulus, predeceased him and both were childless. While his will makes it perfectly plain that he wants you to have the house, it is nevertheless possible that some spell or enchantment has been set upon the place to ensure that it cannot be owned by anyone other than a pure-blood.’

A vivid image of the shrieking, spitting portrait of Sirius’s mother that hung in the hall of number twelve, Grimmauld Place flashed into Harry’s mind. ‘I bet there has,’ he said.

‘Quite,’ said Dumbledore. ‘And if such an enchantment exists, then the ownership of the house is most likely to pass to the eldest of Sirius’s living relatives, which would mean his cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange.’

Without realising what he was doing, Harry sprang to his feet; the telescope and trainers in his lap rolled across the floor. Bellatrix Lestrange, Sirius’s killer, inherit his house?

‘No,’ he said.

‘Well, obviously we would prefer that she didn’t get it, either,’ said Dumbledore calmly. ‘The situation is fraught with complications. We do not know whether the enchantments we ourselves have

placed upon it, for example, making it unplotable, will hold now that ownership has passed from Sirius's hands. It might be that Bellatrix will arrive on the doorstep at any moment. Naturally we had to move out until such time as we have clarified the position.'

'But how are you going to find out if I'm allowed to own it?'

'Fortunately,' said Dumbledore, 'there is a simple test.'

He placed his empty glass on a small table beside his chair, but before he could do anything else, Uncle Vernon shouted, '*Will you get these ruddy things off us?*'

Harry looked round; all three of the Dursleys were cowering with their arms over their heads as their glasses bounced up and down on their skulls, the contents flying everywhere.

'Oh, I'm so sorry,' said Dumbledore politely, and he raised his wand again. All three glasses vanished. 'But it would have been better manners to drink it, you know.'

It looked as though Uncle Vernon was bursting with any number of unpleasant retorts, but he merely shrank back into the cushions with Aunt Petunia and Dudley and said nothing, keeping his small piggy eyes on Dumbledore's wand.

'You see,' Dumbledore said, turning back to Harry and again speaking as though Uncle Vernon had not uttered, 'if you have indeed inherited the house, you have also inherited —'

He flicked his wand for a fifth time. There was a loud *crack* and a house-elf appeared, with a snout for a nose, giant bat's ears and enormous bloodshot eyes, crouching on the Dursleys' shagpile carpet and covered in grimy rags. Aunt Petunia let out a hair-raising shriek: nothing this filthy had entered her house in living memory; Dudley drew his large bare pink feet off the floor and sat with them raised almost above his head, as though he thought the creature might run up his pyjama trousers, and Uncle Vernon bellowed, 'What the *hell* is that?'

'Kreacher,' finished Dumbledore.

'Kreacher won't, Kreacher won't, Kreacher won't!' croaked the house-elf, quite as loudly as Uncle Vernon, stamping his long gnarled feet and pulling his ears. 'Kreacher belongs to Miss Bellatrix, oh, yes, Kreacher belongs to the Blacks, Kreacher wants his new mistress, Kreacher won't go to the Potter brat, Kreacher won't, won't, won't —'

'As you can see, Harry,' said Dumbledore loudly, over Kreacher's continued croaks of 'won't, won't, won't', 'Kreacher is showing a certain reluctance to pass into your ownership.'

'I don't care,' said Harry again, looking with disgust at the writhing, stamping house-elf. 'I don't want him.'

'*Won't, won't, won't, won't —*'

'You would prefer him to pass into the ownership of Bellatrix Lestrange? Bearing in mind that he has lived at the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix for the past year?'

'*Won't, won't, won't, won't —*'

Harry stared at Dumbledore. He knew that Kreacher could not be permitted to go and live with Bellatrix Lestrange, but the idea of owning him, of having responsibility for the creature that had betrayed Sirius, was repugnant.

'Give him an order,' said Dumbledore. 'If he has passed into your ownership, he will have to obey. If not, then we shall have to think of some other means of keeping him from his rightful mistress.'

'*Won't, won't, won't, WON'T!*'

Kreacher's voice had risen to a scream. Harry could think of nothing to say, except, 'Kreacher, shut up!'

It looked for a moment as though Kreacher was going to choke. He grabbed his throat, his mouth still working furiously, his eyes bulging. After a few seconds of frantic gulping, he threw himself face forwards on to the carpet (Aunt Petunia whimpered) and beat the floor with his hands and feet, giving himself over to a violent, but entirely silent, tantrum.

‘Well, that simplifies matters,’ said Dumbledore cheerfully. ‘It seems that Sirius knew what he was doing. You are the rightful owner of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and of Kreacher.’

‘Do I – do I have to keep him with me?’ Harry asked, aghast, as Kreacher thrashed around at his feet.

‘Not if you don’t want to,’ said Dumbledore. ‘If I might make a suggestion, you could send him to Hogwarts to work in the kitchen there. In that way, the other house-elves could keep an eye on him.’

‘Yeah,’ said Harry in relief, ‘yeah, I’ll do that. Er – Kreacher – I want you to go to Hogwarts and work in the kitchens there with the other house-elves.’

Kreacher, who was now lying flat on his back with his arms and legs in the air, gave Harry one upside-down look of deepest loathing and, with another loud *crack*, vanished.

‘Good,’ said Dumbledore. ‘There is also the matter of the Hippogriff, Buckbeak. Hagrid has been looking after him since Sirius died, but Buckbeak is yours now, so if you would prefer to make different arrangements —’

‘No,’ said Harry at once, ‘he can stay with Hagrid. I think Buckbeak would prefer that.’

‘Hagrid will be delighted,’ said Dumbledore, smiling. ‘He was thrilled to see Buckbeak again. Incidentally, we have decided, in the interests of Buckbeak’s safety, to rechristen him Witherwings for the time being, though I doubt that the Ministry would ever guess he is the Hippogriff they once sentenced to death. Now, Harry, is your trunk packed?’

‘Erm ...’

‘Doubtful that I would turn up?’ Dumbledore suggested shrewdly.

‘I’ll just go and – er – finish off,’ said Harry hastily, hurrying to pick up his fallen telescope and trainers.

It took him a little over ten minutes to track down everything he needed; at last he had managed to extract his Invisibility Cloak from under the bed, screwed the top back on his jar of Colour-Change Ink and forced the lid of his trunk shut on his cauldron. Then, heaving his trunk in one hand and holding Hedwig’s cage in the other, he made his way back downstairs.

He was disappointed to discover that Dumbledore was not waiting in the hall, which meant that he had to return to the living room.

Nobody was talking. Dumbledore was humming quietly, apparently quite at his ease, but the atmosphere was thicker than cold custard and Harry did not dare look at the Dursleys as he said, ‘Professor – I’m ready now.’

‘Good,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Just one last thing, then.’ And he turned to speak to the Dursleys once more. ‘As you will no doubt be aware, Harry comes of age in a year’s time —’

‘No,’ said Aunt Petunia, speaking for the first time since Dumbledore’s arrival.

‘I’m sorry?’ said Dumbledore politely.

‘No, he doesn’t. He’s a month younger than Dudley, and Dudders doesn’t turn eighteen until the year after next.’

‘Ah,’ said Dumbledore pleasantly, ‘but in the wizarding world, we come of age at seventeen.’

Uncle Vernon muttered ‘preposterous’, but Dumbledore ignored him.

‘Now, as you already know, the wizard called Lord Voldemort has returned to this country. The wizarding community is currently in a state of open warfare. Harry, whom Lord Voldemort has already attempted to kill on a number of occasions, is in even greater danger now than the day when I left him upon your doorstep fifteen years ago, with a letter explaining about his parents’ murder and expressing the hope that you would care for him as though he were your own.’

Dumbledore paused, and although his voice remained light and calm, and he gave no obvious sign of anger, Harry felt a kind of chill emanating from him and noticed that the Dursleys drew very slightly closer together.

‘You did not do as I asked. You have never treated Harry as a son. He has known nothing but neglect and often cruelty at your hands. The best that can be said is that he has at least escaped the appalling damage you have inflicted upon the unfortunate boy sitting between you.’

Both Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon looked around instinctively, as though expecting to see someone other than Dudley squeezed between them.

‘Us – mistreat Dudders? What d’you —?’ began Uncle Vernon furiously, but Dumbledore raised his finger for silence, a silence which fell as though he had struck Uncle Vernon dumb.

‘The magic I evoked fifteen years ago means that Harry has powerful protection while he can still call this house home. However miserable he has been here, however unwelcome, however badly treated, you have at least, grudgingly, allowed him houseroom. This magic will cease to operate the moment that Harry turns seventeen; in other words, the moment he becomes a man. I ask only this: that you allow Harry to return, once more, to this house, before his seventeenth birthday, which will ensure that the protection continues until that time.’

None of the Dursleys said anything. Dudley was frowning slightly, as though he was still trying to work out when he had ever been mistreated. Uncle Vernon looked as though he had something stuck in his throat; Aunt Petunia, however, was oddly flushed.

‘Well, Harry ... time for us to be off,’ said Dumbledore at last, standing up and straightening his long black cloak. ‘Until we meet again,’ he said to the Dursleys, who looked as though that moment could wait for ever as far as they were concerned, and after doffing his hat, he swept from the room.

‘Bye,’ said Harry hastily to the Dursleys, and followed Dumbledore, who paused beside Harry’s trunk, upon which Hedwig’s cage was perched.

‘We do not want to be encumbered by these just now,’ he said, pulling out his wand again. ‘I shall send them to The Burrow to await us there. However, I would like you to bring your Invisibility Cloak ... just in case.’

Harry extracted his Cloak from his trunk with some difficulty, trying not to show Dumbledore the mess within. When he had stuffed it into an inside pocket of his jacket, Dumbledore waved his wand and the trunk, cage and Hedwig vanished. Dumbledore then waved his wand again and the front door opened on to cool, misty darkness.

‘And now, Harry, let us step out into the night and pursue that flighty temptress, adventure.’



## – CHAPTER FOUR –

### Horace Slughorn

Despite the fact that he had spent every waking moment of the past few days hoping desperately that Dumbledore would indeed come to fetch him, Harry felt distinctly awkward as they set off down Privet Drive together. He had never had a proper conversation with his headmaster outside Hogwarts before; there was usually a desk between them. The memory of their last face-to-face encounter kept intruding, too, and it rather heightened Harry's sense of embarrassment; he had shouted a lot on that occasion, not to mention doing his best to smash several of Dumbledore's most prized possessions.

Dumbledore, however, seemed completely relaxed.

'Keep your wand at the ready, Harry,' he said brightly.

'But I thought I'm not allowed to use magic outside school, sir?'

'If there is an attack,' said Dumbledore, 'I give you permission to use any counter-jinx or – curse that might occur to you. However, I do not think you need worry about being attacked tonight.'

'Why not, sir?'

'You are with me,' said Dumbledore simply. 'This will do, Harry.'

He came to an abrupt halt at the end of Privet Drive.

'You have not, of course, passed your Apparition test?' he said.

'No,' said Harry. 'I thought you had to be seventeen?'

'You do,' said Dumbledore. 'So you will need to hold on to my arm very tightly. My left, if you don't mind – as you have noticed, my wand arm is a little fragile at the moment.'

Harry gripped Dumbledore's proffered forearm.

'Very good,' said Dumbledore. 'Well, here we go.'

Harry felt Dumbledore's arm twist away from him and redoubled his grip: the next thing he knew, everything went black; he was being pressed very hard from all directions; he could not breathe, there were iron bands tightening around his chest; his eyeballs were being forced back into his head; his eardrums were being pushed deeper into his skull, and then –

He gulped great lungfuls of cold night air and opened his streaming eyes. He felt as though he had just been forced through a very tight rubber tube. It was a few seconds before he realised that Privet Drive had vanished. He and Dumbledore were now standing in what appeared to be a deserted village square, in the centre of which stood an old war memorial and a few benches. His comprehension catching up with his senses, Harry realised that he had just Apparated for the first time in his life.

'Are you all right?' asked Dumbledore, looking down at him solicitously. 'The sensation does take some getting used to.'

'I'm fine,' said Harry, rubbing his ears, which felt as though they had left Privet Drive rather reluctantly. 'But I think I might prefer brooms.'

Dumbledore smiled, drew his travelling cloak a little more tightly around his neck and said, 'This way.'

He set off at a brisk pace, past an empty inn and a few houses. According to a clock on a nearby church, it was almost midnight.

'So tell me, Harry,' said Dumbledore. 'Your scar ... has it been hurting at all?'

Harry raised a hand unconsciously to his forehead and rubbed the lightning-shaped mark.

'No,' he said, 'and I've been wondering about that. I thought it would be burning all the time now Voldemort's getting so powerful again.'

He glanced up at Dumbledore and saw that he was wearing a satisfied expression.

‘I, on the other hand, thought otherwise,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Lord Voldemort has finally realised the dangerous access to his thoughts and feelings you have been enjoying. It appears that he is now employing Occlumency against you.’

‘Well, I’m not complaining,’ said Harry, who missed neither the disturbing dreams nor the startling flashes of insight into Voldemort’s mind.

They turned a corner, passing a telephone box and a bus shelter. Harry looked sideways at Dumbledore again.

‘Professor?’

‘Harry?’

‘Er – where exactly are we?’

‘This, Harry, is the charming village of Budleigh Babberton.’

‘And what are we doing here?’

‘Ah, yes, of course, I haven’t told you,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Well, I have lost count of the number of times I have said this in recent years, but we are, once again, one member of staff short. We are here to persuade an old colleague of mine to come out of retirement and return to Hogwarts.’

‘How can I help with that, sir?’

‘Oh, I think we’ll find a use for you,’ said Dumbledore vaguely. ‘Left here, Harry.’

They proceeded up a steep, narrow street lined with houses. All the windows were dark. The odd chill that had lain over Privet Drive for two weeks persisted here, too. Thinking of Dementors, Harry cast a look over his shoulder and grasped his wand reassuringly in his pocket.

‘Professor, why couldn’t we just Apparate directly into your old colleague’s house?’

‘Because it would be quite as rude as kicking down the front door,’ said Dumbledore. ‘Courtesy dictates that we offer fellow wizards the opportunity of denying us entry. In any case, most wizarding dwellings are magically protected from unwanted Apparators. At Hogwarts, for instance —’

‘– you can’t Apparate anywhere inside the buildings or grounds,’ said Harry quickly. ‘Hermione Granger told me.’

‘And she is quite right. We turn left again.’

The church clock chimed midnight behind them. Harry wondered why Dumbledore did not consider it rude to call on his old colleague so late, but now that conversation had been established, he had more pressing questions to ask.

‘Sir, I saw in the *Daily Prophet* that Fudge has been sacked ...’

‘Correct,’ said Dumbledore, now turning up a steep side-street. ‘He has been replaced, as I am sure you also saw, by Rufus Scrimgeour, who used to be Head of the Auror Office.’

‘Is he ... do you think he’s good?’ asked Harry.

‘An interesting question,’ said Dumbledore. ‘He is able, certainly. A more decisive and forceful personality than Cornelius.’

‘Yes, but I meant —’

‘I know what you meant. Rufus is a man of action and, having fought Dark wizards for most of his working life, does not underestimate Lord Voldemort.’

Harry waited, but Dumbledore did not say anything about the disagreement with Scrimgeour that the *Daily Prophet* had reported, and he did not have the nerve to pursue the subject, so he changed it.

‘And ... sir ... I saw about Madam Bones.’

‘Yes,’ said Dumbledore quietly. ‘A terrible loss. She was a great witch. Just up here, I think – ouch.’

He had pointed with his injured hand.

‘Professor, what happened to your —?’

‘I have no time to explain now,’ said Dumbledore. ‘It is a thrilling tale, I wish to do it justice.’

He smiled at Harry, who understood that he was not being snubbed, and that he had permission to keep asking questions.

‘Sir – I got a Ministry of Magic leaflet by owl, about security measures we should all take against the Death Eaters ...’

‘Yes, I received one myself,’ said Dumbledore, still smiling. ‘Did you find it useful?’

‘Not really.’

‘No, I thought not. You have not asked me, for instance, what is my favourite flavour of jam, to check that I am indeed Professor Dumbledore, and not an impostor.’

‘I didn’t ...’ Harry began, not entirely sure whether he was being reprimanded or not.

‘For future reference, Harry, it is raspberry ... although of course, if I were a Death Eater, I would have been sure to research my own jam-preferences before impersonating myself.’

‘Er ... right,’ said Harry. ‘Well, on that leaflet, it said something about Inferi. What exactly are they? The leaflet wasn’t very clear.’

‘They are corpses,’ said Dumbledore calmly. ‘Dead bodies that have been bewitched to do a Dark wizard’s bidding. Inferi have not been seen for a long time, however, not since Voldemort was last powerful ... he killed enough people to make an army of them, of course. This is the place, Harry, just here ...’

They were nearing a small, neat stone house set in its own garden. Harry was too busy digesting the horrible idea of Inferi to have much attention left for anything else, but as they reached the front gate Dumbledore stopped dead and Harry walked into him.

‘Oh dear. Oh dear, dear, dear.’

Harry followed his gaze up the carefully tended front path and felt his heart sink. The front door was hanging off its hinges.

Dumbledore glanced up and down the street. It seemed quite deserted.

‘Wand out and follow me, Harry,’ he said quietly.

He opened the gate and walked swiftly and silently up the garden path, Harry at his heels, then pushed the front door very slowly, his wand raised and at the ready.

*‘Lumos.’*

Dumbledore’s wand-tip ignited, casting its light up a narrow hallway. To the left, another door stood open. Holding his illuminated wand aloft, Dumbledore walked into the sitting room with Harry right behind him.

A scene of total devastation met their eyes. A grandfather clock lay splintered at their feet, its face cracked, its pendulum lying a little further away like a dropped sword. A piano was on its side, its keys strewn across the floor. The wreckage of a fallen chandelier glittered nearby. Cushions lay deflated, feathers oozing from slashes in their sides; fragments of glass and china lay like powder over everything. Dumbledore raised his wand even higher, so that its light was thrown upon the walls, where something darkly red and glutinous was spattered over the wallpaper. Harry’s small intake of breath made Dumbledore look round.

‘Not pretty, is it,’ he said heavily. ‘Yes, something horrible has happened here.’

Dumbledore moved carefully into the middle of the room, scrutinising the wreckage at his feet. Harry followed, gazing around, half scared of what he might see hidden behind the wreck of the piano or the overturned sofa, but there was no sign of a body.

‘Maybe there was a fight and – and they dragged him off, Professor?’ Harry suggested, trying not to imagine how badly wounded a man would have to be to leave those stains spattered halfway up the walls.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Dumbledore quietly, peering behind an overstuffed armchair lying on its side.

‘You mean he’s —?’

‘Still here somewhere? Yes.’

And without warning, Dumbledore swooped, plunging the tip of his wand into the seat of the overstuffed armchair, which yelled, 'Ouch!'

'Good evening, Horace,' said Dumbledore, straightening up again.

Harry's jaw dropped. Where a split second before there had been an armchair, there now crouched an enormously fat, bald old man who was massaging his lower belly and squinting up at Dumbledore with an aggrieved and watery eye.

'There was no need to stick the wand in that hard,' he said gruffly, clambering to his feet. 'It hurt.'

The wand-light sparkled on his shiny pate, his prominent eyes, his enormous, silver walrus-like moustache, and the highly polished buttons on the maroon velvet jacket he was wearing over a pair of lilac silk pyjamas. The top of his head barely reached Dumbledore's chin.

'What gave it away?' he grunted as he staggered to his feet, still rubbing his lower belly. He seemed remarkably unabashed for a man who had just been discovered pretending to be an armchair.

'My dear Horace,' said Dumbledore, looking amused, 'if the Death Eaters really had come to call, the Dark Mark would have been set over the house.'

The wizard clapped a pudgy hand to his vast forehead.

'The Dark Mark,' he muttered. 'Knew there was something ... ah well. Wouldn't have had time, anyway. I'd only just put the finishing touches to my upholstery when you entered the room.'

He heaved a great sigh that made the ends of his moustache flutter.

'Would you like my assistance clearing up?' asked Dumbledore politely.

'Please,' said the other.

They stood back to back, the tall thin wizard and the short round one, and waved their wands in one identical sweeping motion.

The furniture flew back to its original place; ornaments re-formed in midair; feathers zoomed into their cushions; torn books repaired themselves as they landed upon their shelves; oil lanterns soared on to side tables and reignited; a vast collection of splintered silver picture frames flew glittering across the room and alighted, whole and untarnished, upon a desk; rips, cracks and holes healed everywhere; and the walls wiped themselves clean.

'What kind of blood was that, incidentally?' asked Dumbledore loudly over the chiming of the newly unsmashed grandfather clock.

'On the walls? Dragon,' shouted the wizard called Horace as, with a deafening grinding and tinkling, the chandelier screwed itself back into the ceiling.

There was a final *plunk* from the piano, and silence.

'Yes, dragon,' repeated the wizard conversationally. 'My last bottle, and prices are sky-high at the moment. Still, it might be reusable.'

He stumped over to a small crystal bottle standing on top of a sideboard and held it up to the light, examining the thick liquid within.

'Hm. Bit dusty.'

He set the bottle back on the sideboard and sighed. It was then that his gaze fell upon Harry.

'Oho,' he said, his large round eyes flying to Harry's forehead and the lightning-shaped scar it bore. 'Oho!'

'This,' said Dumbledore, moving forwards to make the introduction, 'is Harry Potter. Harry, this is an old friend and colleague of mine, Horace Slughorn.'

Slughorn turned on Dumbledore, his expression shrewd.

'So that's how you thought you'd persuade me, is it? Well, the answer's no, Albus.'

He pushed past Harry, his face turned resolutely away with the air of a man trying to resist temptation.

'I suppose we can have a drink, at least?' asked Dumbledore. 'For old times' sake?'

Slughorn hesitated.

‘All right then, one drink,’ he said ungraciously.

Dumbledore smiled at Harry and directed him towards a chair not unlike the one that Slughorn had so recently impersonated, which stood right beside the newly burning fire and a brightly glowing oil lamp. Harry took the seat with the distinct impression that Dumbledore, for some reason, wanted to keep him as visible as possible. Certainly when Slughorn, who had been busy with decanters and glasses, turned to face the room again, his eyes fell immediately upon Harry.

‘Humph,’ he said, looking away quickly as though frightened of hurting his eyes. ‘Here —’ He gave a drink to Dumbledore, who had sat down without invitation, thrust the tray at Harry and then sank into the cushions of the repaired sofa and a disgruntled silence. His legs were so short that they did not touch the floor.

‘Well, how have you been keeping, Horace?’ Dumbledore asked.

‘Not so well,’ said Slughorn at once. ‘Weak chest. Wheezy. Rheumatism too. Can’t move like I used to. Well, that’s to be expected. Old age. Fatigue.’

‘And yet you must have moved fairly quickly to prepare such a welcome for us at such short notice,’ said Dumbledore. ‘You can’t have had more than three minutes’ warning?’

Slughorn said, half irritably, half proudly, ‘Two. Didn’t hear my Intruder Charm go off, I was taking a bath. Still,’ he added sternly, seeming to pull himself back together again, ‘the fact remains that I’m an old man, Albus. A tired old man who’s earned the right to a quiet life and a few creature comforts.’

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