

HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN

'That man!' Harry said, forgetting his troubles for a moment. 'He was on the Muggle news!'

Stanley turned to the front page and chuckled.

'Sirius Black,' he said, nodding. ''Course 'e was on the Muggle news, Neville. Where you been?'

He gave a superior sort of chuckle at the blank look on Harry's face, removed the front page and handed it to Harry.

'You oughta read the papers more, Neville.'

Harry held the paper up to the candlelight and read:

BLACK STILL AT LARGE

Sirius Black, possibly the most infamous prisoner ever to be held in Azkaban fortress, is still eluding capture, the Ministry of Magic confirmed today.

'We are doing all we can to recapture Black,' said the Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, this morning, 'and we beg the magical community to remain calm.'

Fudge has been criticised by some members of the International Federation of



Warlocks for informing the Muggle Prime Minister of the crisis.

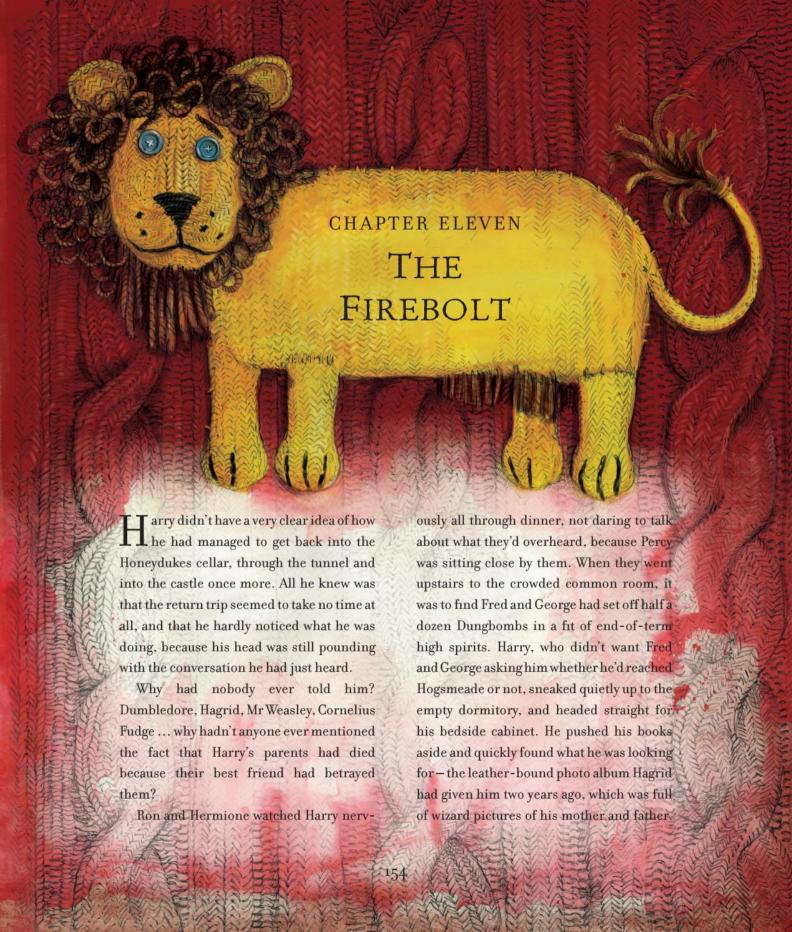
'Well, really, I had to, don't you know,' said an irritable Fudge. 'Black is mad. He's a danger to anyone who crosses him, magic or Muggle. I have the Prime Minister's assurance that he will not breathe a word of Black's true identity to anyone. And let's face it — who'd believe him if he did?'

While Muggles have been told that Black is carrying a gun

(a kind of metal wand which Muggles use to kill each other), the magical community lives in fear of a massacre like that of twelve years ago, when Black murdered thirteen people with a single curse.

Harry looked into the shadowed eyes of Sirius Black, the only part of the sunken face that seemed alive. Harry had never met a vampire, but he had seen pictures of them in his Defence Against the Dark Arts classes, and Black, with his waxy white skin, looked just like one.





He sat down on his bed, drew the hangings around him, and started turning the pages, searching, until ...

He stopped on a picture of his parents' wedding day. There was his father waving up at him, beaming, the untidy black hair Harry had inherited standing up in all directions. There was his mother, alight with happiness, arm in arm with his dad. And there ... that must be him. Their best man ... Harry had never given him a thought before.

If he hadn't known it was the same person, he would never have guessed it was Black in this old photograph. His face wasn't sunken and waxy, but handsome, full of laughter. Had he already been working for Voldemort when this picture had been taken? Was he already planning the deaths of the two people next to him? Did he realise he was facing twelve years in Azkaban, twelve years which would make him unrecognisable?

But the Dementors don't affect him, Harry thought, staring into the handsome, laughing face. He doesn't have to hear my mum screaming if they get too close —

Harry slammed the album shut, reached over and stuffed it back into his cabinet, took off his robes and glasses and got into bed, making sure the hangings were hiding him from view.

The dormitory door opened.

'Harry?' said Ron's voice uncertainly.

But Harry lay still, pretending to be

asleep. He heard Ron leave again, and rolled over on his back, his eyes wide open.

A hatred such as he had never known before was coursing through Harry like poison. He could see Black laughing at him through the darkness, as though somebody had pasted the picture from the album over his eyes. He watched, as though somebody was playing him a piece of film, Sirius Black blasting Peter Pettigrew (who resembled Neville Longbottom) into a thousand pieces. He could hear (though he had no idea what Black's voice might sound like) a low, excited mutter. 'It has happened, my Lord ... the Potters have made me their Secret Keeper ...' And then came another voice, laughing shrilly, the same laugh that Harry heard inside his head whenever the Dementors drew near ...

'Harry, you - you look terrible.'

Harry hadn't got to sleep until daybreak. He had awoken to find the dormitory deserted, dressed and gone down the spiral staircase to a common room that was completely empty except for Ron, who was eating a Peppermint Toad and massaging his stomach, and Hermione, who had spread her homework over three tables.

'Where is everyone?' said Harry.

'Gone! It's the first day of the holidays, remember?' said Ron, watching Harry closely. 'It's nearly lunchtime, I was going to come and wake you up in a minute.'

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you see them? They've even got the axe ready! This isn't justice!'

'Ron, your dad works for the Ministry. You can't go saying things like that to his boss!' said Hermione, but she, too, looked very upset. 'As long as Hagrid keeps his head this time, and argues his case properly, they can't possibly execute Buckbeak ...'

But Harry could tell Hermione didn't really believe what she was saying. All around them, people were talking excitedly as they ate their lunch, happily anticipating the end of exams that afternoon, but Harry, Ron and Hermione, lost in worry about Hagrid and Buckbeak, didn't join in.

Harry and Ron's last exam was Divination; Hermione's, Muggle Studies. They walked up the marble staircase together. Hermione left them on the first floor and Harry and Ron proceeded all the way up to the seventh, where many of their class were sitting on the spiral staircase to Professor Trelawney's classroom, trying to cram in a bit of lastminute revision.

'She's seeing us all separately,' Neville informed them, as they went to sit down next to him. He had his copy of *Unfogging the Future* open on his lap at the pages devoted to crystal-gazing. 'Have either of you ever seen *anything* in a crystal ball?' he asked them unhappily.

'Nope,' said Ron, in an offhand voice. He kept checking his watch; Harry knew that he was counting down the time until Buckbeak's appeal started.

The queue of people outside the class-





room shortened very slowly. As each person climbed back down the silver ladder, the rest of the class hissed, 'What did she ask? Was it OK?'

But they all refused to say.

'She says the crystal ball's told her that, if

She hurried off down the spiral staircase towards Lavender.

'Ronald Weasley,' said the familiar, misty voice from over their heads. Ron grimaced at Harry, and climbed the silver ladder out of sight. Harry was now the only person left to be tested. He settled himself on the floor with his back against the wall, listening to a fly buzzing in the sunny window, his mind across the grounds with Hagrid.

