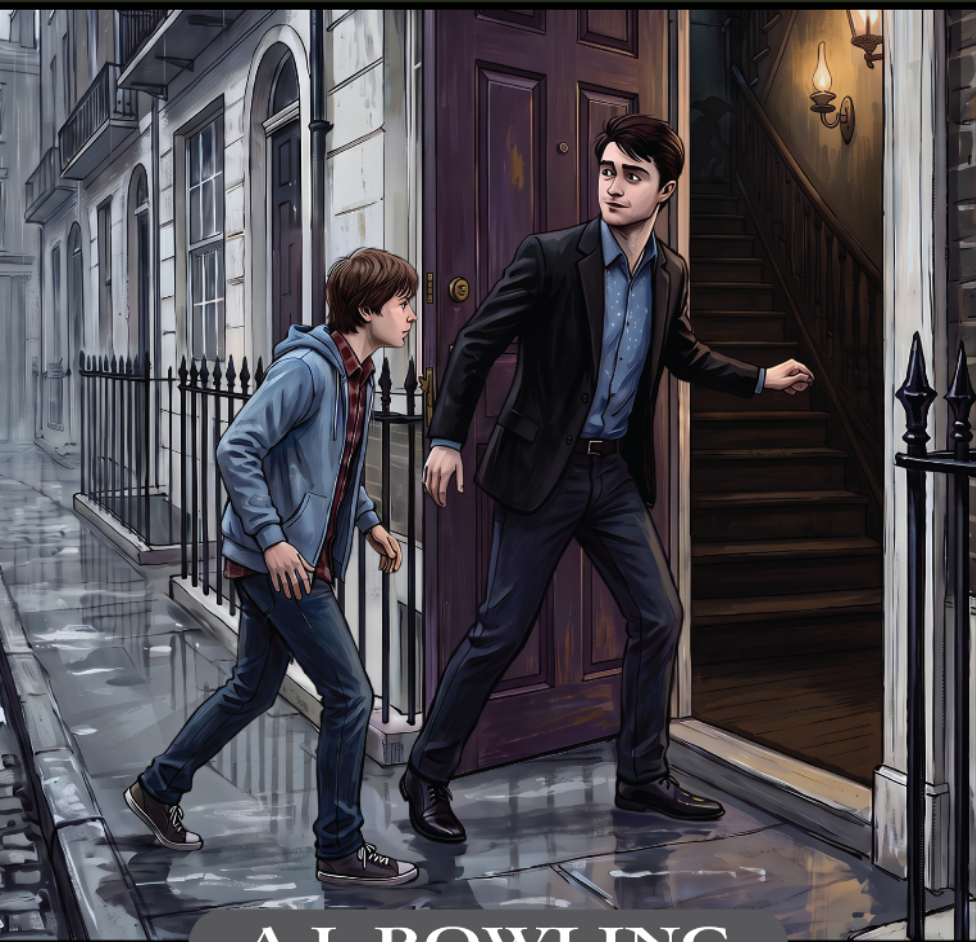


# HARRY POTTER

*and the Tapestry*



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LLM-GENERATED

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## — CHAPTER ONE —

# *The Last Summer*

The kitchen table had disappeared under two trunks, a stack of French phrasebooks nobody was going to open, and Ginny's rolled-up Prophet press badge, which kept getting buried and dug out again like something living.

"Albus. The green jumper, not the grey one. The grey one's got a hole."

"It's a small hole."

"It's a Bulgaria-shaped hole and you know it." Ginny didn't look up from the trunk. "Lily, socks."

"I have socks."

"Enough socks."

Harry leaned against the worktop with a mug of tea going cold in his hand and watched them orbit each other — Ginny fast and certain, the way she moved on a pitch; Albus trailing after her with the jumper balled under one arm, already resigned; Lily crouched by the back door lacing her trainers twice because the first knot hadn't satisfied her. He still mostly just watched, mornings like this.

James was the only one sitting still. He had a Quidditch almanac open on his knees, not reading it so much as holding it, thumb pressed against a page he'd already turned past.

"You'll miss the match," Ginny told him, not for the first time that morning.

"It's not a match. It's a friendly. Against a French club nobody's heard of." James didn't look up. "Last year's World Cup shows France has no chances. There's no point going to watch them lose to someone smaller."

"There's relatives, James."

"There's relatives I've met like — what — twice?"

Ginny gave up on that one with the particular sigh she kept for arguments she'd already lost twice this summer. Lily, from the doorway, wasn't bothering

to hide how pleased she was about any of it — the match, the relatives, the whole idea of France.

"Victoire says her grandparents have a dog the size of a Grim," she said. "A real one. Not scary, you know. Just enormous."

"You said that yesterday."

"I'm saying it again because it's still true."

Albus had stopped resisting the jumper question and was folding it into the trunk himself, which was as close as he came to agreeing with anyone. He glanced at James. "You could still come."

"I could," James said, in the tone of someone who had considered it once, briefly, and moved on. "I'm not going to."

Harry watched him say it and believed him. Not sulking. Just decided, the way James decided most things now — quietly, and once.

"You're sure," Ginny said to him, one last time, the trunk lid balanced on her knee.

"I'm sure."

"Fine." She dropped the lid; it shut with a bang that made Lily jump and grin. "Then it's you and Dad."

"Me and Dad," James agreed, and went back to the almanac.

Nobody made it into more than it was. Harry thought that was probably right, though he couldn't have said why.

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"So. Hogwarts?" Harry said to him, mostly to say something, while Ginny wrestled the second trunk towards the door.

James looked up properly for the first time all morning. "September."

"Feels quick."

"Feels slow," James said. "Everyone keeps saying it'll go quick. It hasn't yet."

That, Harry understood better than he'd expected to.

The portkey turned out to be an old ice bucket, borrowed from Percy for reasons nobody had bothered explaining, sitting in the middle of the garden with its handle looking faintly embarrassed about the whole arrangement. Albus got a good grip on it first. Lily wedged herself in beside him and immediately let

go to wave, which meant she had to grab it again, flustered, while Albus told her to hurry up in the voice of an older brother who had done this before and knew exactly how it went.

Ginny kissed James on the top of his head, which he allowed with the weary dignity of someone who no longer objected but hadn't quite stopped noticing. She kissed Harry properly.

"Don't let him wander off in there," she said, low enough that it was mostly for Harry.

"He won't."

"And deal with the actual house this time. Not just take a look at it and leave again."

"I know."

"I mean it, Harry."

"I know."

She held his eye a second longer than the words needed, then let go and took hold of the bucket handle herself, three fingers wrapped around the rim between her children's hands.

"Three," she said. "Two—"

There was a tug somewhere behind Harry's navel that had nothing to do with him, sympathetic and useless, and the three fifths of his family were simply gone, taking the bucket with them. The garden went quiet. There was a flattened patch in the grass where it had stood, already beginning to spring back.

James closed the almanac.

"What are we actually doing there?" he asked. "At ... you know ... the house we aren't supposed to ask about."

Harry considered how much of an answer that deserved. Not much, he decided. Not yet.

"Checking on it," he said. "It's been sitting a while. There's a — thing I want to look at, while we're there. A family tree, sort of."

"A tree in a house?"

"You'll see."

James accepted that the way he accepted most things Harry didn't fully explain — by filing it away rather than pushing at it. He stood, tucking the almanac under his arm the way he'd carried it all morning, unopened.

"Do we walk," he asked, "or is there another bucket?"

"Neither," Harry said. "Come here."

James came, close enough that Harry could put a hand on his shoulder, and felt the small, solid weight of him settle under it. Not a teenager's shoulder yet. Not for a couple more years.

"Hold on, then," Harry said. "Properly. This bit's not like the bucket."

James took a fistful of his sleeve instead, which was as close as he'd come to holding on all morning, and didn't say anything else.

Harry turned on the spot, and the garden was gone.

## — CHAPTER TWO —

### *Twelve Grimmauld Place*

They came down in a gap between two streetlamps, on a pavement that didn't smell like the garden anymore — car exhaust, wet stone, someone's bins put out a day early.

James staggered sideways into him, one hand clamped over his own mouth, the other still knotted in Harry's sleeve. For a second he didn't do anything but breathe.

"You're all right," Harry said, keeping a hand under his elbow until he was sure of it. "First time does that to everyone. Feels like being thrown through a very small letterbox."

"You could've *said*." James straightened up, swallowed hard, and looked faintly betrayed, though he didn't let go of the sleeve straight away. "Rose says she was sick, first time Uncle Ron took her anywhere like that."

"You didn't."

"Nearly." He said it like a small, private victory, and finally let go, wiping his palm down his trousers as though that would help.

The street looked ordinary enough and wrong in a way Harry couldn't have explained to a Muggle. Number eleven, then a stretch of railing and a narrow, uninteresting gap, then number thirteen. His eyes wanted to slide straight over the gap, the way they'd want to slide over a word misspelled just enough to still look like a word. He'd felt it plenty of times from the other side, coming here as someone who already knew.

James, still a little pale, was looking at the same gap with no particular reason to look at it twice.

"This it?" he asked, once he'd got his voice back properly.

"Nearly." Harry crouched slightly, so they were closer to level. "Before we go any further, I need to tell you something, and it only works if I say it properly, so please listen carefully."

James went still in the particular way he went still when he suspected the next few seconds mattered. Harry had seen it at Christmas, when somebody said the word *presents*; he'd never seen it over anything like this.

"The address isn't the secret. Addresses aren't secret, not on their own." Harry made himself say the rest of it plainly, without slowing down for it. "Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place is the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. That's the secret — the two things together, the house and what it was. Once I've said it to you, you should be able to see it properly. Not before."

James didn't say anything for a second. He knew what the Order of the Phoenix was — everyone his age did, the way they knew what a Death Eater was, a fact absorbed rather than taught, sitting somewhere behind everything else adults didn't quite explain.

"Was," he said finally. "Not is."

"Was." Harry hadn't expected him to catch that. "Isn't anymore. Just was."

"Okay." James said it more carefully than he'd said anything all morning — filed away this time, not tossed aside.

Harry straightened, took James's hand — not the shoulder-grip of Apparition, just an ordinary hand, the kind you gave a child crossing a road — and walked him towards the gap.

It happened the way it always happened to him and never stopped being strange: the buildings on either side seemed to lean apart, reluctantly, the way two people shuffle sideways to let a third one through a doorway, and something narrow and soot-black shouldered its way up out of the pavement between them. A door. A tarnished serpent for a knocker. A number that wasn't a number, painted nowhere, because it didn't need to be.

James's hand tightened in his.

"Whoa!" he said, with real feeling.

"Yeah," Harry said. "That never really stops."

He got the key out of his pocket — a plain, unglamorous thing, no different from the key to their own front door. That was somehow the strangest part of owning a house like this. He let them in.

The hall swallowed the daylight almost immediately. Harry had half a second to register dust, and the particular cold of a house that had been shut up too long, before the darkness came down properly — a thick, artificial black,



nothing like nightfall, more like someone had upended a jar of it directly over their heads.

"Dad—"

"I've got you. Stay still."

A voice rasped out of the dark, gravel-rough, half a growl. "*Severus Snape?*"

Something brushed across Harry's tongue like static, there and gone, a curse looking for a mouth to lock shut and not quite finding purchase on either of them. James made a small, strangled sound beside him that wasn't quite a word.

Then the dark thinned into something worse than dark: a shape built itself out of drifting grey matter, tall, stooped, half-moon spectacles catching light that wasn't there. It came towards them without walking, the way things come at you in the worst kind of dream.

Harry's chest did something complicated and old. He shoved past it.

"We didn't kill him," he said, loudly, flatly, the words coming out before he'd finished deciding to say them. "*I didn't kill him.*"

The figure hung there a moment longer, close enough now that Harry could see it wasn't really Dumbledore at all, just dust wearing the idea of him. Then it came apart, all at once, into nothing, and the darkness went with it, and they were standing in an ordinary filthy hallway with a chandelier's worth of cobweb overhead and nothing at all moving.

James was breathing like he'd been running.

"What," he said, "the bloody hell was *that?*"

"Something Mad-Eye Moody left behind. Years ago." Harry lit his wand rather than explain further; the hall came up grey and peeling around them, worse in proper light than it had been in the dark. "It's not dangerous. Just unpleasant."

"It looked like—" James stopped himself.

"I know who it looked like."

That seemed to be enough for both of them, for now. Harry put the rest of it away — the way his hands hadn't quite come back to him yet, the half-second where some old, stupid part of him had believed it — somewhere he wasn't going to look at until later, possibly never, and moved them both further into the house.

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There was a fireplace in what had once been a drawing room, and a tin of Floo powder on the mantel that had gone slightly damp with age but still worked when he tried it. Harry knelt in front of the grate, threw a pinch in, and said, "Hermione Granger, Ministry of Magic," to the flames as they roared up green.

James wandered.

Harry noticed him go — a shape drifting off past the doorway, unhurried, the way James investigated anything that wasn't actively stopping him. He didn't call him back. Hermione's face had already assembled itself in the fire, soot-smudged and mildly harassed, and there were only so many things a person could attend to at once.

"Harry. I did wonder when you'd finally—"

"Twelve Grimmauld Place still has Moody's old wards live," Harry said. "The dust-Dumbledore thing. Just walked into it. And the Fidelius is doing something odd — half up, half down. Can you—"

Something shrieked, high and raw, from somewhere down the hall.

Harry was on his feet, and running before he'd decided to be, Hermione's face still hanging unanswered in the flames behind him.

He found James backed against the wall outside an open cupboard under the stairs, white-faced, one arm half-raised as though he'd meant to shut the door on whatever had come out of it and hadn't managed it in time.

What had come out of it was a Dementor.

Harry knew, distantly, that it wasn't real — that the actual thing had shifted the instant he'd arrived, become his own nearest fear rather than James's, whatever James's had been. Knowing it and feeling it were two different things. His body hadn't caught up yet. The cold came first, real cold, bone-deep, the kind that had nothing to do with the room. His own breath went thin and far away.

The thing turned towards him. Began, unhurriedly, the way they always did, to draw the warmth out of the air.

*"Riddikulus!"*

It wasn't elegant. It wasn't even fully formed as a thought before it left his wand — just reflex, the shape of a spell he'd never once had the chance to cast on this particular fear himself. Somebody else had always got there first. The Dementor's robes ballooned outward, absurdly, into something that looked for one ridiculous second like a bedsheet on a washing line, caught in a gale, and

then collapsed in on themselves with a wheeze like a punctured tyre, and there was nothing in the hallway but dust settling and a cupboard door hanging open on its hinges.

Harry stood very still for slightly longer than the moment required.

"Dad?"

He made himself look up. James was watching him — not the empty cupboard, not the place where the thing had been, but him, Harry, with an expression Harry didn't have a name for and didn't particularly want to find one for. Something had crossed his face a second ago that he hadn't managed to get out of the way in time, and James had seen it. There wasn't any getting that back now.

"I'm all right," Harry said, which was true, mostly, in the way that mattered.

James kept looking at him a moment longer, then nodded, once, and let it go — put it away with everything else Harry hadn't explained that morning, though Harry suspected this was one he'd be taking back out again later, on his own, when nobody was watching.

"That was a boggart," Harry said, because it seemed important to say something ordinary. "They live in dark, shut-up places. They turn into whatever scares whoever's looking at them most. Riddikulus makes them look stupid instead. That's the whole trick — they can't stand being laughed at."

"But before it—" James gestured vaguely at Harry.

"Before I got here?" Harry weighed up how much of an answer that one deserved. "Doesn't matter. It's gone now."

Harry didn't ask him the *other* question. James looked at the cupboard for a moment — small, dark, exactly the sort of space you wouldn't think twice about, the sort every house had one of — and then away from it, and Harry let it stay unasked. Whatever James had stood there alone and seen, he'd already had to look at it once. That was enough for one morning.

Down the hall, faintly, Hermione's voice was still calling his name into an empty room.

"I need to go and finish that," Harry said. "Two minutes. Stay where I can see you."

"Okay." James glanced back down the hall, towards the deeper dark of the house, the parts they hadn't gone into yet. "Is the rest of it going to be like this?"

"No," Harry said, and then, because it was probably truer: "I don't know. Let's find out. It might actually be worse."

And he laughed at the idea.

## — CHAPTER THREE —

# *The Kreaching House*

Hermione was still there when Harry got back to the fire, patient in the particular way that meant she wasn't going to be patient much longer.

"Sorry," Harry said. "James found something in a cupboard."

"He all right?"

"He's fine. It's fine." He crouched properly this time, so he wasn't shouting at the grate. "The wards, the Fidelius — can you send someone?"

"I'll come myself, if I can get free. Don't touch anything else in the meantime." A pause, her face flickering slightly in the green light. "Harry. Are *you* all right?"

"I'm fine," he said, which was becoming the day's most-used phrase, and reached out and broke the connection before she could ask it a second, more accurate way.

James was waiting in the hall when he came back through, standing very still under the staircase, looking up.

"Dad. What are those."

Harry followed the line of his gaze. He'd noticed them coming in — hadn't been able not to — and had been quietly hoping James wouldn't look properly until they were further past. No such luck. Mounted up the stairwell in a neat, ascending row, each on its own small wooden plaque like a hunting trophy, were house-elf heads.

There was no good way to say it, so he didn't try to find one.

"House-elves," Harry said. "The elder Black family did that to theirs. Cut their heads off when they got too old to be useful, and put them up on the wall."

James didn't say anything for a moment. He was looking at the nearest one — small, shrivelled, its expression fixed somewhere between startled and

resigned, the way old things left too long in one position seemed to fix themselves.

"That's disgusting," he said finally, with the flat certainty of someone who hadn't yet learned to soften a true thing into a polite one.

"Yes," Harry said. "It is."

"Are we going to leave them up?"

"No." He hadn't actually decided that until he said it, but it felt right the moment it left him. "Not much longer, anyway."

He didn't offer the rest of it — that it had apparently started with one particular woman, generations back, and that nobody in this family had bothered to stop once she was gone. It didn't seem like information James needed today. He filed it instead, the way he was filing most things about this house, in the growing pile marked *later*.

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"Kreacher would know," said a voice from somewhere near the skirting board, "who put them there. Kreacher was there. Kreacher has served this house for a very long time."

The voice's tone shifted, subtly unsettling. "You could just ask Kreacher."

James made a small, sharp noise and stepped backwards into Harry's leg.

The elf who'd spoken had come out from beneath the stairs so quietly that Harry hadn't heard him at all — a stooped, batwing-eared creature in a garment that had once been something and was now mostly just fabric, his skin the colour and texture of the house's own peeling plaster, eyes drooping and pale and fixed, unblinking, on Harry with an expression that wasn't quite a smile.

"Kreacher," Harry said, and something in his own chest loosened slightly, recognising him. "Hello."

"Master Harry Potter has returned," Kreacher bowed, low, with a creak that might have come from his knees or the floorboards. "Kreacher did wonder if Master would come back at all."

"This is James," Harry said. "My son. James, this is Kreacher. He's looked after this house for — " he searched for a number and gave up on finding an honest one — "longer than either of us have been alive. Longer than most things."

James was staring at the elf the way he'd stared at the elf heads — not rude, exactly, just unable to stop. "I didn't know we had a — I didn't know the house had a person in it."

"Kreacher is not a *person*," Kreacher said, with the wounded dignity of someone correcting a small but important mistake. "Kreacher is a house-elf. Very different. Master's son should know the difference, being a Black on his mother's side, though not the good sort of knowing, not anymore, not since—" He stopped himself, visibly, the way a man might stop himself mid-swear in front of a vicar. "Kreacher forgets himself."

"On my mother's side?" James looked up at Harry. "Mum's not a Black. Mum's a Weasley."

"Ah." Kreacher's ears did something complicated, somewhere between a wince and satisfaction. "Young master does not know."

"Know what?"

Kreacher looked at Harry, as if for permission, though Harry hadn't the faintest idea what he was meant to be permitting. He nodded anyway.

"Mistress Cedrella," Kreacher said, settling into the words like a man reciting something he'd said a thousand times and never once to anybody who cared. "Black, before she was foolish enough to marry a Weasley. Septimus Weasley. Blood traitor, and worse, pardon my language, made her one too. Burned off, of course. They always were, the ones who married down." A pause, almost fond, in the way old grievances sometimes softened into something closer to habit than hate. "Their son was Arthur Weasley. And Arthur Weasley's daughter—"

"Mum," James said slowly.

"Mistress Ginevra," Kreacher agreed. "Black blood, two branches down. Closer than most people in this house ever bothered to remember."

Nobody said anything for a moment. James looked, unmistakably, like a boy doing arithmetic he hadn't asked for and wasn't sure he liked the answer to.

"So Mum's actually from here," he said. "Sort of."

"Sort of," Harry agreed. "Turns out I'm not exactly a stranger to this house either, though it took me longer to find out. Someone called Dorea Black married a cousin of my grandfather's — a Potter. No blood tie to me, Kreacher tells me, just marriage tangling into marriage, same as this family always did." He glanced at Kreacher, who inclined his head in the manner of someone

confirming a small, satisfying fact. "Neither of them knew what they were starting, probably. Just happened."

James considered this with the seriousness of someone tucking away a fact that might be useful for arguing with a cousin later. "That's a bit funny, isn't it."

"A bit," Harry said, and found, to his mild surprise, that it was — two families that had spent generations insisting there was nowhere else *to* marry, and here they'd tangled themselves up in the Blacks anyway.

"All wizarding families are related," he said, "one way or another."

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The names had come easily enough. What came next didn't.

"Kreacher," Harry said, and heard his own voice go carefully neutral, the way it did when he was about to do something he'd decided was correct rather than something he particularly wanted to do. "I want to offer you your freedom. Properly. Clothes, all of it, if that's what you'd want."

He hadn't got any further than that — hadn't so much as reached for anything resembling a sock — before Kreacher's whole face changed.

"Master understands," Kreacher said, very quietly, in a tone that carried considerably more weight than its volume, "that this is not the way of the House-Elves?"

"I only meant—"

"Kreacher has served this house since before the name Potter ever came near it. Kreacher served it faithfully, and badly, and then faithfully again. Kreacher is not a possession Master is embarrassed to still own." He drew himself up, all four feet or so of him, with a dignity that made Harry feel, not for the first time that day, several sizes too large for the room. "Kreacher does not want *freedom*."

"Right," Harry said. "Sorry. I didn't mean—"

He stopped, because he genuinely wasn't sure what he had meant, only that it had seemed like the thing a person was supposed to offer, and Kreacher had made it clear, in about four seconds, that the offer itself had been the wrong shape entirely.

"You know, he doesn't want you to send him away," James said.

Both of them looked at him.



"He's not upset because you're keeping him," James said, with the slightly impatient clarity of someone explaining something that seemed, to him, extremely obvious. "He's upset because you offered to make him leave. He doesn't want that. He just doesn't want you deciding everything *for* him. He can still live here — he just wants to choose some of it himself."

Kreacher's eyes had gone very wide, fixed on James with an expression Harry couldn't immediately place.

"That," Kreacher said slowly, "is not the worst thing a Potter has ever said to Kreacher."

"Is that a yes?" Harry asked, because somebody had to.

"Kreacher will remain," Kreacher said, with enormous and sudden formality, as though issuing a proclamation. "Kreacher will tend the house, and Mistress Black's portrait, as Kreacher sees fit to tend them. Kreacher will not be told to do it. Kreacher will do it, because it is Kreacher's to do." He paused, and something in his ancient, folded face shifted again, unmistakably pleased now, though he'd clearly rather have died than say so outright. "Master's son understands more than Master does."

"Yeah," Harry said, looking down at James, who had already lost interest and gone back to studying the elf heads with a fresh, faintly triumphant sort of scrutiny, as though he'd just won an argument he hadn't fully realised he was having. "He does that."

Kreacher bowed again, lower this time, and when he straightened, something about the set of his shoulders had changed — not less bent, exactly, but bent on his own terms now rather than anyone else's.

"There is more Kreacher can show Master," he said. "If Master has come about the tapestry."

Harry hadn't said anything about the tapestry.

"How did you—"

"Kreacher has served this house *a very long time*," Kreacher said again, as if that answered everything, and in a way, Harry supposed, it did.

## — CHAPTER FOUR —

# *The Family Tapestry*

It hung the full height of the drawing room wall, black with age at the edges, gold thread gone the colour of old teeth. Names. Hundreds of them, spidering out across the fabric in tight, looping script, joined by lines that branched and rejoined and doubled back on themselves the way rivers did on a map, except rivers didn't have scorch marks where a name had been burned clean off the cloth.

Harry found the one he was looking for almost immediately. A neat, charred hole, roughly name-shaped, where **\*\*SIRIUS\*\*** should have been.

He touched the edge of it without quite deciding to. The fabric there was stiffer than the rest, brittle, the burn gone hard and glassy with age the way old wounds sometimes did instead of softening. It didn't feel like anything in particular. He'd expected it to.

He didn't look at it for very long.

"That's a lot of names," James said, from somewhere near his elbow, craning at the thing with the awe of someone realising a piece of furniture could also be enormous.

"It's a family tree," Harry said. "Sort of. The ones that got disowned—" he nodded at the burn marks, three of them close together, a fourth further along "—get taken off. Burned out."

"Like uncle Sirius."

"Like Sirius."

James didn't ask anything further about that one, which Harry was grateful for, since he wasn't sure what shape an answer would take yet, even now.

"So where's Mum," James said instead, practical again. "If she's supposed to be on it."

That, at least, Harry had an answer for, or thought he did.

"Kreacher," he said, "where would Cedrella's branch have run? If it hadn't been burned."

Kreacher pointed, a long grey finger unfolding towards a gap in the weave, no wider than a fingernail, tucked between two other lines like a missing tooth. "There. Where the thread should continue. Mistress Cedrella's, and then down, through Mister Arthur Weasley, to Mistress Ginevra."

"Right," Harry said, and drew his wand.

He wasn't entirely sure what he meant to do — something like the charm you'd use to mend torn parchment, aimed at intention rather than fabric, backed up with everything he knew to be true and could say plainly: *she is family, she belongs here, put her back*. He'd half-expected it to fail quietly. A fizzle. Nothing.

What happened instead knocked him clean off his feet.

It wasn't like being hit. It was like the tapestry itself flinched, hard, and the flinch went through the wand and up his arm and threw him backwards into an armchair that skidded a full foot across the floorboards with him in it. For a second the room tilted and doubled and there was a ringing in one ear that hadn't been there before.

"Dad!"

James was already there, hands on his sleeve, face gone the particular white it had gone in front of the cupboard.

"I'm all right." He wasn't entirely sure that was true yet, but it seemed like the thing to say first and work out the accuracy of afterwards. He sat up properly, waited for the room to agree to stay still, and looked at the tapestry.

It looked exactly the same. Untouched. As if it hadn't so much as noticed him.

"What was that," James said, not a question so much as a demand.

"It didn't like being told." Harry got up slowly, testing his own weight before he trusted it. His hand, he noticed, was shaking slightly, and he put it in his pocket rather than look at it any longer. "It's old magic. Blood magic. Whoever laid the curses down only answers to blood — the head of the family, by blood. I'm not that. I'm just the one who owns the house."

"But you *are* family. Everyone knows that."

"Not to this." Harry looked at the gap where Ginny's thread should have run, small and stubborn and entirely unmoved by the fact that a grown man had

just been thrown across a room trying to convince it otherwise. "It doesn't care what everyone knows."

James was quiet for a moment, looking between the tapestry, and his father, and Kreacher, who had not moved from his spot by the wall and was watching the whole business with an expression that gave away nothing at all.

"Couldn't Kreacher just do it?" James said. "He's lived here longer than either of us. Longer than anyone."

Nobody answered straight away.

"He knows all the names," James went on, apparently taking the silence as an invitation to keep explaining something that was, to him, extremely obvious. "He knew Mum's before we did. He's the one who actually knows this house. Why are you the one trying to fix it?"

It was, Harry thought, a genuinely reasonable question.

He looked at Kreacher. "Could you?"

Kreacher's face did something Harry hadn't seen it do yet — not the wounded dignity of the freedom offer, not the flicker of satisfaction over reciting the names, but something closer to surprise, as if the question itself had never been put to him in quite those words before, by anyone, in however many years he'd stood in this house being told what he was and wasn't for.

"Kreacher does not know," he said slowly, "if Kreacher can."

"But you'll try," Harry said. It wasn't quite a question either.

"Master's son asked Kreacher to." Kreacher moved towards the tapestry with a stiffness that might have been age or might have been the enormity of what he was about to attempt. "Kreacher will try."

He put both hands flat against the fabric, over the small gap where Ginny's name should have run, and went very still.

For a long moment nothing happened at all, and Harry began composing, in the back of his mind, something reassuring to say when it didn't work. Then the gap began, very faintly, to glow — not the sharp gold of new thread but something duller, more effortful, like a coal being coaxed back to life by someone who'd forgotten how tired blowing on embers could make you.

Kreacher's whole body had begun to shake.

"Kreacher—"

"Kreacher is *fine*," Kreacher said, in a voice that had gone thin and strained and not remotely fine, and kept his hands pressed flat, and did not stop. Sweat,

or something like it, stood out along the ridges of his forehead. The house-elf magic didn't ask the tapestry's old curses a question they'd ever been built to answer — it answered a different question entirely, and the curses, for the first time in longer than anyone standing in that room had been alive, didn't have an argument ready.

The gap filled. A thread, thin and new and gold, unspooled itself from nothing and wrote **\*\*GINEVRA\*\*** in careful, looping script exactly where it belonged, and settled, and held.

Kreacher staggered backwards and caught himself on the arm of the same chair Harry had been thrown into. Even so, before Harry could reach him, three more threads stirred beneath Ginny's — fainter than hers, barely more than a suggestion of gold against the black — and tried, badly, to write themselves out beneath it. **\*\*JAMES SIRIUS.\*\*** **\*\*ALBUS SEVERUS.\*\*** **\*\*LILY LUNA.\*\*** None of them held. Each one flickered into something almost legible and unraveled again, over and over, patient and unfinished, like handwriting practised on a fogged window.

Beside Ginny's name, a fourth thread stirred the same way, fainter still — reaching for a name that would have been Harry's. Not by blood. By the house's own new reckoning of who it called family now.

"Kreacher's all right," Kreacher said, before anyone could ask, in a voice that suggested otherwise. He was watching the flickering threads too, breathing hard. "It wants to. The house wants to. Kreacher simply cannot make it, not all at once. Not today."

Further along the tapestry, near the older of the burn marks, another thread flickered the same stubborn, unfinished way — trying to form and losing its shape, over and over, like a candle guttering in a draught that wouldn't let it properly catch.

"That one won't either," Kreacher said. He didn't get up yet. "Not today. Perhaps not for a long while yet. It is — further. Harder to reach."

"Andromeda's," Harry said, half to himself. "And Teddy's."

"And beyond her." Kreacher closed his eyes briefly. "Kreacher will try again. All of them. Another day."

"You don't have to do it today," Harry said. "You don't have to do it at all, if it costs you like that."

Kreacher opened his eyes and looked at him with something that, on a different face, might have been close to fondness. "Master does not yet understand what Kreacher chooses to do, or what Kreacher is made to do. This was the first kind."

Harry didn't have anything to say to that, so he didn't try to find something. He looked at the tapestry instead. Ginny's name sat new and slightly too bright against threads centuries older. The handful of fainter ones kept flickering beneath and beside it, trying and failing and trying again to hold their own shape. The small charred hole was still there, where Sirius's name should have been. None of it undone. None of it finished.

James had gone quiet beside him, looking at the same wall.

Harry put a hand on the back of his neck — not a pat, nothing performed, just weight, just there — and left it there rather longer than the moment strictly required.

## — CHAPTER FIVE —

### *Then We're Done*

Kreacher didn't come to the door with them.

He stayed by the tapestry instead, one hand still resting near the place where Ginny's name had settled, as if he meant to keep an eye on it in case it changed its mind. When Harry looked back from the doorway, he was still standing there, small and bent and entirely still, the way something looks when it's decided, on its own, that this particular spot is where it belongs.

"Kreacher," Harry said.

"Master." He didn't turn round.

"Thank you."

"Yes," Kreacher said, which wasn't quite an acknowledgement and wasn't quite anything else either, and seemed, from him, to be more than enough.

"Kreacher stays," he added, still to the tapestry, not to Harry, "because Kreacher chooses to stay. Master will remember that part." A pause, his hand not moving from the fabric. "Kreacher will not promise Master the next time. Kreacher is old. Older than is owed to anyone. But today, Kreacher chooses this."

Harry didn't know what to do with that, so he didn't try to do anything with it. "All right," he said, which felt inadequate and was, as far as he could tell, the only honest thing available.

James lingered a second longer than Harry did, looking at the elf's narrow back, and then at the staircase, and then didn't say whatever he'd been about to say. He followed Harry out instead.

The hall was exactly as grim leaving as it had been arriving, and somehow smaller for it — the way rooms always were, once you knew roughly what was in them.

Outside, the street had gone back to looking like nothing much. Number eleven. A gap nobody's eyes wanted to sit on. Number thirteen. Harry didn't

look back at where the door had been. There wasn't any point; it wouldn't be there to see.

James was quiet on the pavement in a different way than he'd been quiet in the house — not braced for anything now, just full.

Harry thought, briefly, about just Apparating them both straight home and being done with it, and then thought better of it. James's hand had found its way back into his sleeve at some point without either of them mentioning it — the same grip from that morning, the one that meant *not that way again, not today* — and it hadn't let go since.

"I guess we're done here for now," Harry said. "Do we floo home or take the tube?"

It wasn't a large question. He'd made sure of that, saying it. But he watched James turn it over anyway, the way he'd turned over most things today — properly, slowly, giving it more consideration than its size strictly warranted.

"Tube," James said, eventually. "I want to see it. Properly. Not just — going through."

"All right."

They found the station on the second street they tried, up a set of steps that smelled of chips and diesel, into a world entirely uninterested in anything that had happened to either of them that morning. James studied the map on the wall with the same close, unhurried attention he'd given the tapestry, tracing a line with one finger before he'd worked out which one they needed.

On the platform, waiting, he asked, without looking round: "Was your dust one the worst thing that's ever happened here?"

"No," Harry said, and meant it, and didn't say what had been.

James nodded, as if that was roughly what he'd expected, and didn't ask anything else about it. He didn't say what his own had looked like, either — not on the platform, not on the train, not once in the whole ordinary, rattling journey home, packed in between a man reading a folded newspaper and a woman with too many shopping bags, the city going past the windows in its usual unbothered way. Harry didn't ask again.

For now he just sat, swaying slightly with the motion of the carriage, almanac back in his lap, unopened still, and watched London go by like it was the strangest thing he'd seen all day.

Which, Harry thought, it very possibly was.