

Harry Potter

and the

Half-Blood Prince



J.K. ROWLING

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

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— 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