A weird bit of accidental magic sends Harry's fate in a new direction.

Notes

Greetings all! A few people have asked me if I ever planned to post the prequel to "Adventures in Dimension Hopping", which is a side story to a much larger work. There are actually four books completed, so there should be regular updates, so long as I have access to my computer, though as I may be editing it as I go, there may be lags here and there.

As always comments and kudos are appreciated.

Now on with the show--
"BOY!"

"Yes, Aunt Petunia?"

"Don't you cheek me, boy. I don't like your tone."

"Sorry Aunt Petunia."

Petunia glared down at her nephew, who tried his best to look helpful, and not in the least cheeky; all he got in response was a white lipped grimace and cold eyes.

"Stop slouching."

Harry tried to straighten up, but it was hard.

Dudley and his gang had caught him earlier, while Harry was supposed to be cleaning and organizing the garage. They had taken turns holding him down so they could punch him. His ribs were sore, and his head was throbbing from whacking it on the cement floor when they’d pushed him down to the ground.

When they’d gotten bored, they had been called in for ice cream; Harry had gotten yelled at for not finishing the garage, and had been told he’d not be getting any supper that night—for ‘slacking off’ and being a ‘waste of space’. His stomach already felt hollow, and seemed to be doing its best to eat itself. He hadn’t gotten supper last night or the night before either.

Petunia sneered at him. "Into the cupboard with you and do your homework."

"Yes, aunt Petunia."

Once safely locked away, Harry did try for a bit to do his homework--but he was hungry, and exhausted and sore, and couldn't concentrate. The smell of the dinner he'd helped cook but didn't get to eat wasn't helping matters.

"I'll just close my eyes for a minute...just till my head stops spinning."

Harry shifted slightly, trying to find a position that didn’t make his bruises ache. A familiar feeling of despair began welling up in him. "I wish..." Harry whispered.

It had been a while since he’d tried wishing for anything. He’d learned his lesson the hard way; wishing for things just made his life worse, usually. He was at a low ebb though, and he could feel that he was slowly losing himself.
“I wish there was some way to make my life better…protect myself.” He grimaced as his head throbbed, his ribs creaked, and his empty belly growled.

“At the rate I’m going, I’ll be dead before the year is out.” As Harry’s eyes slipped closed, a very real sense of panic and alarm welled up in him…and reached.

‘THUNK!’

The sound of children laughing woke him. Harry lifted his head from the…desk? and looked around in bleary confusion. There was a blackboard eraser on the desk in front of him, and chalk dust sprinkling down out of his hair. His eyes darted nervously from side to side. He was in some sort of strange classroom—one large room, wooden, with long tables on stepped risers instead of desks.

His eyes froze for a second on a girl with cotton-candy pink hair and then continued tracking. The man—the teacher, he assumed—up at the front of the room barked something to him in a strange language. Harry didn’t know where he was or what was going on, so he just sat up, and tried to look attentive—that’s usually what teachers back home wanted. It seemed to work here as well.

The man went back to the blackboard and continued writing. He was dressed sort of like a soldier, but he had no boots. Instead he was wearing sandals with no toes, and what looked like bandages wrapped around his ankles.

Harry could feel himself starting to panic—he couldn’t understand what anyone was saying, and he couldn’t read the board. What was he going to do if someone asked a question, or wanted him to read from the board out loud?

The teacher turned back to face the class, still talking, and scanned over the students while doing so to make sure everyone was paying attention. Their eyes met and for just a second the world went a bit fuzzy, and then it was like his ears popped and he could suddenly understand everything. He could even read the board…sort of…at least, he was pretty sure he could at least understand it if not read it.

He wiped sweaty palms on his pants and his hands froze at the unfamiliar feel of the material. “These aren’t my clothes. Did someone kidnap me and dress me in new clothes and make me come to this school? What’s going on?”

His mind tuned in to what was being said around him…

“….important weapon in your arsenal in your career as a ninja. We’re going to be working on this for a while, so don’t panic if you don’t get it right away. Just like everything else you learn here, it takes time, and practice.”

“Did he say career as a ninja?” Harry thought to himself hysterically. “Since when am I a ninja?”

The teacher rolled down a chart at the front of the room, and tapped it with a long pointer. “So, chakra. Who can tell me what chakra is?”
The girl with the pink hair held up her hand shyly with a demure look on her face.

“Sakura.”

“Chakra is what you get when you combine physical energy and spiritual energy. It allows you to do ninja techniques.” She chirped.

“Correct. Very good, Sakura.”

“Did you hear that Sasuke-kun?” the girl began gushing to the boy next to her while batting her eyelashes at him. The boy inched away from her—he seemed a little freaked out. Frankly, Harry couldn’t blame him—she not only had freaky hair, she was sort of intense.

“For the next few days…well, for the next however long it takes you to actually do it, we’ll be working on accessing chakra. Now, as Sakura so helpfully told us, chakra is what you get when you combine spiritual and physical energy. Knowing this, what do you think is one of the first steps towards doing this?”

A little blind girl—at least, Harry assumed she must be, her eyes were completely white—turned red and squeaked when the teacher pointed to her.

“Hinata, why don’t you give it a try?”

“Um…p-p-physical t-training. You must have a lot of physical energy to access before you can even b-b-begin.” She whispered.

“Very good Hinata.”

“Sensei! How do you get spiritual energy? Huh? Huh? I wanna know!” a blonde boy near the front yelled while waving his hands in the air.

Harry did something out of character. He could only attribute it to the stress the whole situation was putting him under, that and he really wanted to know the answer himself. He picked up the eraser and thunked it into the back of the blonde kid’s head.

“OW! Damn it, Shikamaru, you bastard!”

“If you’d shut up, maybe he’ll tell us.” Harry muttered back.

He froze for a second as soon as the words had left his mouth, but no one seemed to have any trouble understanding him. The kids all started laughing again—this time not at him. The blonde pouted at him and turned back around.
“Spiritual energy” the teacher continued without missing a beat “is increased through various techniques which we will be practicing over the coming days, just as your physical energy will increase with your physical training.”

“Hey, sensei, what’s this catchra stuff good for, anyway? You never said.” Another boy asked curiously.

The teacher sighed, but nodded.

“You’ve got a point there, I didn’t, did I? In a word, chakra is necessary to use most ninja techniques, such as the basic three which you’ll all be learning a bit later, once you are able to harness your chakra—observe! Henge!”

There was a faint poof of…not smoke, exactly—it was more like a faint spray of mist. When it cleared, a different man stood in his place.

“Hey, old man Hokage! What are you doing here?” the blonde in the front demanded. “Where’s Asuma-sensei?”

There was another poof, and suddenly the teacher was back in front of them.

“That was me, Naruto. That was henge, the transformation jutsu. It allows you to disguise yourself. You can also do this”

He did some sort of complicated gestures with his hands, and suddenly there were three of him; Harry’s eyes widened in shock.

“Bunshin no jutsu; the clone technique—it allows you to make clone images of yourself to confuse people and lead them away from you. They won’t fool anyone up close, as they’re just an illusion, but they’re still handy for confusion.”

The two shadow images disappeared.

“Then there’s the last – Kawarimi no jutsu. Naruto, try to hit me with that eraser.”

“OKAY!” Naruto shouted as he chucked the thing as hard as he could.

The eraser impacted and the blonde started laughing. Harry waited for the trick. His patience was rewarded when the teacher turned into a log.

“Kawarimi is the switching technique. It allows you to escape being struck by enemy weapons.”

The class turned; the teacher was standing at the back of the room, no chalk dust on him, leaning against the wall, with his arms folded. He moved back to the front of the room.

“That’s what chakra is good for. Now, who’s ready to learn?” The whole class erupted into excited chatter—Harry among them.
“I still don’t know what’s going on, but this is way cooler than my usual school.” He thought happily.

“Alright, quiet down, it’s going to be awhile before you can do any of that. The first step is that you have to find your chakra. That’s what we’re going to be working on for the next couple of days at this time. Some of you might not get it right away, don’t be discouraged…”

They were given instructions on what steps they needed to take to find their chakra…and then the bell rung before they had a chance to actually look for it. Harry wanted to cry in frustration; those tricks the teacher showed them would have been really damned handy to have the next time Dudley and his gang decided to come after him.

Although…was he actually going to ever see them again? He still didn’t know how he’d gotten here, or where here was. Life with the Dursleys had taught him one lesson above all— weird stuff doesn’t happen…and if it does, it still didn’t happen, and by the way, “you’re in so much trouble mister! Into the cupboard with you, freak!”

Harry knew better than to draw attention to the fact that something weird was most definitely going on. For now, he would watch and learn, and blend. He’d figure it out sooner or later.

He followed the rest of the kids out of the room. The chubby boy who had been sitting next to him fell into step with him, diligently munching away on a bag of crisps.

“Taijutsu is next, right, Shikamaru?” he asked.

“I think so.” Harry answered when he realized the boy was talking to him. Come to think of it, the blonde kid had called him Shikamaru too. Weird. He’d have to remember to listen for that name. Was it a code name or something?

“Do you have your schedule? I’m not sure what I did with mine.”

Harry reached into his pockets and felt paper crinkle beneath his fingers.

“Oh good, what’s it say?”

Harry unfolded it and prayed, nearly collapsing in relief when he saw he could read it.

“Let see, ninjutsu with Asuma –sensei…taijutsu next with Komaru-sensei. I hope he’s nice.” The chubby boy read over his shoulder.
“The sensei doesn’t have to be nice, Choji, he has to know what he’s doing. I hope he’s a really kickass ninja!” a dark-haired boy with red marks on his face shouted as he ran by.

“So, chubby’s name is Choji…good to know.”

“Shut up, Kiba! He can be nice and still know what he’s doing!” a blonde girl scolded as she ran by.

"You shut up, Ino!"

Harry stayed silent, and listened, and began matching names and faces and committing them to memory with a skill born of desperation. Until he knew what was going on, he wasn’t going to let something so obvious slip him up.

They stepped outside into the yard beside the school and Harry nearly froze again. It was sunny—really sunny, and it was hot, way too hot for Surrey in September. What’s more, the buildings—those he could see beyond the wall that surrounded the school grounds, were like nothing he’d ever seen before. The air didn’t smell the same at all, and there were ginormous trees everywhere. He couldn’t hear any cars, and there didn’t seem to be any telephone poles or electric lines…no planes, no helicopters…no car alarms, no police sirens… Wherever he was, he was definitely not anywhere near the Dursleys.

“Come on everyone! Stop wasting time! Make three lines in front of me! Move it move it! Hold your arms out to either side. I want everyone an arms-length apart. Come on slow pokes, we’ve a lot to do and little time to do it!” Harry and Choji hurried the last few feet and fell into line behind everyone.

Taijutsu, Harry quickly learned, was physical exercise—hardcore physical exercise.

He stretched and bent and twisted and jumped and punched and kicked, and fell down, until his whole body was trembling like a wet noodle. When they had all been reduced to mush, they were made to stand up and keep going—they got shouted at if they didn’t do so fast enough.

They were given a five minute breather until the bell rung and then they were led around to the back of the school building and given little flat, pointy metal things called shuriken and made to throw them at targets—which was a lot harder to do than it sounded. The targets were even pretty big, and they weren’t standing that far away from them.

He didn’t manage to hit the target but once, and then the thing fell to the ground right after because it didn’t sink in far enough to stick. He didn’t feel too bad, because that’s about what everyone was doing…all except for one kid, Sasuke. He could not only hit the target, he could do six at a time!

After target practice, it was back to the classroom. Harry was wrung out. Yeah, he ran a lot, and did a lot of chores, but all that exercise was far beyond what he normally did. He laid his head down on the desk.
“I'll just close my eyes for a second…”

"Boy! Wake up! You need to get started on breakfast! I'll not have my Dudders going hungry, do you hear me!"

Harry opened his eyes with a start and looked around in confusion. He was in his cupboard. A crushing feeling of loss filled up his chest and for a moment he couldn't breathe.

"BOY! Didn't you hear me? Get up!"

"Yes, Aunt Petunia." Harry answered dully. He gathered his things and shuffled out to start on breakfast.

That evening when he fell asleep, after another tiring day doing chores and dodging his bullying cousin, Harry was surprised to find himself in the ninja school again, once again being hit in the head with an eraser and being scolded by the teacher for sleeping in class. Harry sat up with a strange feeling of déjà vu, at least until the teacher started talking.

"Alright, class, we're going to start looking for our chakra."

A small slow smile began to creep over Harry's face. He still wasn't sure how he'd come to be here, or why, but he wasn't complaining.

Before he knew it, it was time to start back to school. Harry and Dudley were beginning the second grade. Somehow, Harry didn’t think it was going to be as interesting as the ninja school he’d been dreaming of.

He wanted to think about it some more, or practice accessing his chakra like they'd practiced in class, but he really didn’t have the leisure to do so; school-day mornings were quite busy for him.

He had to get ready, cook breakfast for his relatives, and then hurry off before any of them were even done eating so he could get to school on time. Dudley got dropped off by his dad while on his way to work, Harry had to walk. The school was seventeen blocks away, so he had to get an early start to make it on time.

As he began the long trek to school, he finally had the time and quiet to think back to the lesson about ‘chakra’.
“The teacher said when you learned to tap your chakra, it would enhance your body so you could run faster, jump higher and all kinds of other stuff…like a superhero or something. That would be cool. Dudley and his gang would never catch me again.”

He still had a long walk ahead of him, so he decided to pretend it was all true. He started running, imagining ‘chakra’ flowing through his legs, making them work better, through his lungs, making them work more efficiently.

A cheery, genuine smile broke across his face as he ran, and a laugh bubbled out of him. He felt like the wind must feel, when it was blowing across the earth; he could almost believe it was actually working.

“This is awesome. I’m going to have to run more often.”

The blocks flew by, one after the other. Luck was with him; most of the street lights were in his favor, allowing him to keep running almost the whole way. He tore into the school yard, and found he was the first one there. He checked the clock tower, and saw he’d made excellent time. He now had twenty minutes he normally wouldn’t in which to just do whatever he wanted. He was definitely running to school from now on.

He settled himself in an out of the way corner near the doors, which would allow him to watch the whole school yard at once. He didn’t want Dudley and his gang sneaking up on him, and getting started ‘Harry hunting’ early.

He found he didn’t quite know what to do with himself, having so much free time; he was rarely allowed any stretch of time to just sit around and do nothing. He found his mind drifting back to the ninja school again.

“It was so real. I’ve never had dreams like that before. I could feel the clothes I was wearing, smell the chalk dust, feel the sun on my head. I’ve never been anywhere that hot before; I don’t know how some of those kids could run around in those heavy jackets they were wearing. I never imagined trees could get so big either—you could probably perch the Dursleys whole house on one of the branches.”

A terrible melancholy began to fill him as he thought about it. It was a wonderful place, so interesting, and filled with such cool people. He wished he could go back there.

He hated Privet Drive. All the houses looked the same; all the cars parked in front of the houses did too. The only trees were a few small ones in a few of the back yards, and the ones in the park—and even the ones in the park had nothing on the behemoths he saw surrounding the place he’d been in. Another thing he liked was that everyone wore such interesting clothes, and in so many colors—some of them even had colorful hair!
“Ninja school was much more interesting than regular school too. I wish my school taught us useful stuff like that. Why did I have to wake up?”

As the other kids began arriving with their parents, no one noticed the small boy tucked away in the corner of the building, being slowly crushed under the wave of despair that was slowly overtaking him.

Harry’s funk lasted until lunch time. He sat quietly in class, did his work, answered questions when called on, but most of his mind was still lost in the ‘ninja world’. It was so nice there—warm and pretty and the air smelled good—and there was a ‘good Dudley’—the chubby kid, Choji—and no one had chased him or tried to beat him up or called him a freak even once! He wanted to go back there. It had seemed real.

He found an out of the way corner and wolfed down his lunch – cheese sandwich on whole wheat bread and a small carton of white milk. Sometimes, if he was lucky and they were about to go bad, he got a piece of fruit; Dudley got bologna and cheese and ham and cheese on white bread with a big carton of chocolate milk and cake, or cookies, or crisps for afters. He didn’t like fruit, hated white milk and hated whole wheat bread, which is why Harry got to eat it. Harry was so happy to eat, period, he wasn’t real picky.

His small lunch was finished quickly, and then he had a decision to make—stick around and let Dudley and his gang get a shot at him, or sneak off to the library and risk getting into trouble for being out of bounds?

“Screw the rules—it’s not like they ever do me any good. There’s rules against fighting, but Dudley never gets in trouble for beating anyone up, I get in trouble for being beaten up. I want a book about ninjas!”

He felt terribly daring as he slipped out of the lunch room and sauntered down the hall to the library.

“First rule of sneaking around—act like you belong there.” He’d heard that on the telly once. Only heard it, of course—he’d been in his cupboard at the time. Harry wasn’t allowed to watch tv.

“Oh, Harry…you have a free period at this time?” the librarian asked.

“Yeah. Where would I find books on ninjas?”

“Ninjas? Is this for a book report? Kind of early in the year…we don’t usually have book reports till near the end of term.”
“Just for me. I saw ninjas on a movie and well…”

“Ah, I see. Let me take a look. I’m not actually sure we have any, to be honest. Do you remember how to use the card catalog?”

“Um…”

“It’s real easy, once you get the hang of it, promise. You already know what you want so, let’s head right for the subject index…”

Twenty minutes later, as the bell rang and Harry slipped out of the library to blend in with his classmates to head back to class. He thanked god, for the first time, that the Dursleys made him wear Dudley’s three-times-too-large castoffs. He never really thought about how easy it made it to hide things.

His ninja books were safely hidden away from prying eyes—Dudley would tattle if he knew, and the Dursleys would probably have a fit—ninjas weren’t ‘normal enough’ for them. They’d take them, maybe destroy them, and he’d get in trouble—story of his life, in other words.

Nah, it was better this way. What the Dursleys didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him.

When he finally got home, finished his homework and his chores, and was able to read his books, he ended up rather disappointed. Neither one was really about ninjas—one was about samurai; the only time ninjas were really mentioned was when certain samurai were mentioned as having possibly been ninjas. The other was a general book about military history; ninjas were just mentioned in passing. It was very frustrating. He went to sleep that night, hoping he’d dream about the ninja school again, but he was to remain disappointed on that front as well.

The next day at school, before the bell rang, he went back to the school library to drop off his books. He’d stayed up later than he really should have, looking through them and reading parts that seemed interesting, but they weren’t what he’d really wanted, and it would be foolish to leave them lying around for the Dursleys to find. Miss Smith, the librarian looked surprised to see him there so early—she was in the process of unlocking the door when he arrived. “Hello again, Harry. Back already?”

“Yes ma’am. I wanted to return the books I got yesterday.”

“Already? Surely you didn’t finish both of them so quickly?”

“I read parts. There wasn’t really a lot about ninjas in there.” He complained as he followed her inside.

“Well, I did warn you. If you really want something more detailed you’re probably going to have to make a trip to the public library. If they don’t have a lot specifically on ninjas, you could probably
read about spies. If you like ninjas that will probably be right up your alley.”

“Spies?”

“Yes, spies, assassins, counterintelligence, military history—any one of those would be a good starting point. If you don’t want to do all that reading, I suppose you could just borrow a James Bond film or something.”

“They have films there too? Huh. I wouldn’t be able to watch it though.”

“Oh? No video player at home? Well, you could always watch them there, if your guardians are willing to stick around that long.”

“Watch it there?”

“Oh, sure. They have video players and tiny tellies in little rooms so you can watch videos there.”

“Really?”

“Would I lie about it?”

“Huh.”

The bell rang, cutting further conversation short. Miss Smith took the books back, and Harry hurried off to class, his mind racing at the new possibilities that had just been presented to him.

The moment the last bell rang at the end of the school day, Harry was off like a shot. He wanted to get away before Dudley and his gang came looking for him. He couldn’t afford to be delayed too much—it was a long enough walk to the public library that he was barely going to have any time to look around properly, let alone really read anything, before having to head back to the Dursleys.

He was slightly out of breath when he arrived and frowned to himself, recalling how worn out he’d been from the exercises he had to do in his ninja dream as well. The teacher had said they had to be in top physical condition if they wanted to use chakra and ninja techniques; he obviously had a lot of work ahead of him…

Harry sighed and banished the whole train of thought; it wasn’t real after all. What did it matter? Still feeling a bit gloomy, Harry headed into the library, and went straight for the card catalogue, wondering even as he did so why he was even bothering.

“Ninjas, ninjas, ninjas…Ninjas! Masters of Stealth and Secrecy…Ninja mind arts…The Way of the Warrior…cool!” Harry breathed out, eyes shining.
His earlier funk was completely forgotten in the wake of this new (awesome) discovery. He took careful note of the call number and raced off to read about the legendary warriors. He slid to a stop in front of the correct shelf and he all but trembled in excitement.

There weren’t a lot of books, but what was there was enough to sate his hunger for the moment. He pulled each book reverently from the shelf and flipped through it, reading small passages. When he was done, he had a small selection of books stacked by his foot, which he gathered up carefully. As he was making his way towards the front desk, he remembered Miss Smith mentioning videos. He didn’t know when he’d be able to slip away like this again, so he figured he’d best investigate while he had the chance.

The librarian was an older woman, who smiled a lot and called him ‘dearie’. She seemed to find his choice in books amusing, and she was happy to answer his questions about the videos they had. “Yes, you can watch them here. See the rooms there? You just go in there and pop it in and you can watch it. I don’t think we have any movies on ninjas. We do have a couple of more general martial arts films though…are you taking lessons at the community center, dearie?”

“Lessons?”

“Karate. My neighbor’s boy is going. They’re free, so you can’t beat the price.”

“Free? Karate? That’s like all the punching and kicking and stuff?”

“Something like that, yes.” She laughed.

“When are these lessons?”

“Saturday, ten to twelve.”

“Do you have to sign up?”

“No, you just have to show up, from what I’ve was told.”

Harry’s horizons suddenly broadened in a way he’d never dared imagine. Even if his ninja world wasn’t real, that didn’t mean he couldn’t pretend, right?

“Thank you very much, Miss. You’ve been very helpful. Could I see those videos now?”

Two hours later, Harry left the library with three books (gotten with Dudley’s library card which he’d nicked and stowed away when he chucked it). He knew he’d never notice it missing, as
Dudley was allergic to books. Harry hadn’t been allowed to get a library card, so it was certainly a convenient state of affairs, from his perspective.

He also had a head full of ideas for training—he’d find some way to slip away for karate lessons, and he’d use his chores for further training! He knew it would work, he’d just seen it do so when he watched Drunken Master. Who knew slave labor could be so bloody useful?

It was a far more upbeat, cheerful Harry who returned to the Dursleys that afternoon. He raced through his chores with determined cheerfulness: every time he swept, or mopped, or mowed the lawn, he was growing stronger!

When Harry went to bed that night, he was in a good mood. The resources of the library had opened up whole new vistas of opportunity. Even so, there was a part of him that was still discontented; he wanted to go to the ninja place again. That thought was on his mind as he fell asleep.
Training, chakra and the attack of the cannibal hobo

Chapter Summary

Harry steps up his own efforts to learn all he can to be a proper ninja, and decides to test himself by using some of what he's learned.

‘THUNK’

Harry lifted his head and glanced around. He’d been hit in the head with an eraser again. He sat up and looked attentive, while the teacher, Asuma-sensei, went back to talking. He was back in the ninja school.

Harry was hard-pressed to stifle the enormous grin that wanted to split his face in two. That urge to grin vanished just moments later as tests were handed out to everyone in the room. Harry flipped through the pages, scanning the questions, and realized with a bit of horror that he didn’t know the answer to most of the questions. In fact, he plainly didn’t understand some of the questions, let alone know what the answers were—he’d never even heard of most of the places they were asking about!

Choji handed him a pencil, which he took with a rather sickly smile, and got to work. Harry bent over his own test and started wracking his brains, and praying the answers would just come to him by some miracle.

After what seemed decades, the test was finally over, and they were dismissed for the day. Harry was disappointed, to say the least. He’d been hoping to learn more, not just take a stupid test that made no sense to him!

He and Choji wandered outside, and Harry took a deep breath of the fresh air outside; the trees and flowers smelled so nice. He’d never even imagined he could dream up such a place, but he liked it. There were no cars, no planes, no car alarms, no helicopters or trains. Everything sounded natural, and smelled fresh and clean.

“Hey, Shikamaru? I gotta get going. My cousin’s husband just made Jounin, and we’re having a party for him.” Choji apologized.

“Oh, okay. Tell him congratulations.” Harry replied, feeling that something was called for. Choji smiled and nodded, before hurrying off to join a man that looked very much like him, but had to be about seven feet tall and weigh five hundred pounds. He was huge!

He stuck his hands in his pockets and wondered what to do with himself now that he was here and there was no school.

A noise caught his attention, so he wandered around the building to see what it was. He saw the blonde kid, Naruto he thought his name was, trying to throw six shuriken at a time at one of the targets in the practice yard. Just by looking at him, he could tell he was consciously trying to imitate another kid from the class, Sasuke. The problem was, Sasuke knew what he was doing; Naruto obviously didn’t. Not a single one of his shurikens went anywhere near the target. Naruto was obviously getting frustrated and depressed at the continued failures. Having nothing better to
do, he went over there.

“Oh! Hey, Shikamaru!”

“Naruto. What are you doing?”

“Practicing! I’m gonna be Hokage someday you know!”

“Not doing that, you’re not. Have you even mastered throwing them one at a time yet?”

“Uh…sure I have! I’m an awesome ninja!”

“Let’s see it then.”

Naruto seemed a bit taken aback by the request, but he gathered his shuriken nonetheless.

“Watch this, Shikamaru! You’ll be amazed!” Naruto bragged, before letting one fly.

It, much like the others he’d thrown earlier, went nowhere near the target. Naruto laughed sheepishly. “I wasn’t concentrating, that’s all. Watch!” He threw another, which landed short of the mark, then another, which reached the outermost ring and then fell off. Naruto’s face screwed up in concentration and he began throwing the remaining shurikens very fast, one after the other. Two disappeared into the bushes, and the third wedged into the tree a foot above the target.

“I’m amazed alright. I can believe you’re this bad at it. It’s no wonder you can’t get six to land right; you can’t do even one.”

“Oh yeah! If you’re so great, let’s see you do better!”

“I never claimed to be an expert…I think I’m still not as bad at it as you are though. You have to master the one at a time throws before working on throwing multiples. You’re not doing yourself any favors trying to skip ahead like that. The only thing you’re doing is guaranteeing you’ll never do it right.”

As he talked, Harry gathered up the shuriken and then positioned himself in front of the target. He demonstrated throwing them like the teacher had shown the last time he had this dream, and managed to get them on the target—nowhere near the center, and none of them were in very deep, but it was still an improvement over Naruto’s performance.

“See? I’m no expert, but I at least can get them in the general area I’m aiming for. Try again; let me see what you’re doing wrong.”

Naruto was rather pouty and sulky, but he went and gathered the shuriken again.

“Alright get into position, but don’t throw.”

Naruto did so. Harry made a few corrections to his stance, like the teacher had done for him during the lesson, and then changed his grip a bit. “Alright throw it.” Naruto threw and Harry rolled his eyes. “You’re throwing wrong. Didn’t you listen to the teacher?”

“He said I was doing great!” Naruto protested.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “He must not have been watching what you were doing then. Try this.”

He grabbed one of the shuriken and demonstrated how to throw it, making Naruto copy him. When
it looked like he had the motions down right, he made him throw again. This time, he got it on the
target, on the outer edge; much like Harry had done earlier.

“There. We both have room for improvement, but at least you actually managed to hit the target
this time.”

Naruto gave a pleased little grin, very different from the big goofy smiles he normally sported.
Harry didn’t know why, but he was left with the impression that the little smile he was now
wearing was the first real smile of Naruto’s he’d ever seen.

He went and retrieved the shuriken and handed it back to Naruto, before moving to stand in front of
the next target over and digging out the shuriken that were in the pouch strapped to his thigh.

“How about a contest, huh? Let’s see if we can improve any.”

Naruto nodded and got into position. “Watch and learn, Shikamaru!”

“Save your bragging for when you can actually back it up.” Harry scoffed in return.

The shadows were growing long when they finally called a halt. With repeated practice they both
managed to start getting the shurikens higher on the target, even if not centered. They both jumped
when a man—a rather scary looking man—appeared behind them.

“There you are. Man, you are such a troublesome kid.” The guy drawled, managing to sound both
lazy and irritated.

“Hello, Mr. Shikamaru’s dad.” Naruto chirped.

Harry blinked, marveling over the strangeness of his dreams. He apparently had a dad here—a
lazy, scary looking one.

The man nodded to Naruto noncommittally. “What were you two doing out here?”

“Practicing throwing shuriken.”

“You didn’t get enough of that while school was in session?”

“Naruto was doing it all wrong, but the teacher told him he was doing great.” Harry muttered
resentfully.

He had teachers like that, who believed Dudley was a misunderstood angel, and that Harry was the
devil incarnate, in spite of all evidence to the contrary. There was no doubt in his mind Naruto was
experiencing something similar, though why he was, he had no idea. He didn’t have a Dudley
spreading stories about him.

Harry’s ‘dad’ pursed his lips thoughtfully and glanced at Naruto and then at Harry himself with a
measuring gaze.

“You get that all straightened out then?” he asked, his voice neutral.

“He can hit the target now, but neither of us can get it right in the center. I’m not sure why.”

“It just takes practice, that’s all. Keep at it, and you’ll get it. Come on, we need to get home. You
were supposed to clean your room when you got home. Your mom’s not too pleased that you
didn’t bother showing up.”
Harry waved goodbye to Naruto and followed the man away from the school, quailing inside. His dream wasn’t seeming like so much fun anymore.

“What’s the deal? First a test I can’t pass, now an angry ‘mother’ and chores? Man, this sucks!”

“Shikamaru!”

Harry winced. His ‘mom’ started shrieking the moment he entered the house. She was a nice looking lady, with black hair like his; his ‘dad’ did too. It was weird being in a house where he wasn’t the odd one out; the Dursleys were all blonde. Maybe this was some kind of wish fulfillment? If so, why was he still getting in trouble? It made no sense.

“Now, get upstairs and clean your room right now, mister! I want it spic and span, do you hear? No slacking off either! You have an hour until dinner. I want your room, and you, clean and ready when I call you. Are we clear?”

“We’re clear.” Harry sighed.

His ‘mom’ narrowed her eyes and pointed towards the staircase, and then began tapping her foot impatiently. He knew from years of Aunt Petunia to just keep his mouth shut and get going.

The upstairs of the house had two bedrooms, a bathroom--just a toilet, no shower or tub, and a storage room. It wasn’t hard to figure out which room was his. It was messy, but not anywhere near as messy as Dudley’s bedrooms got—and he should know, as he’d had to clean both of them often enough.

He gathered up the dirty clothes that were strewn here and there, and put them away in the hamper, made the bed, organized the weapons and such, and put them on their proper pegs on the wall, re-rolled the random scrolls that were laying open, put the books back on their shelves. Once the floor was clear, he took a peek in the chests against the wall, and in the closet. They were a bit of a mess, so he unpacked the chests, re-folded the clothes, organized them and repacked them, and then organized the closet. He went and got a damp cloth from the bathroom and wiped down all the surfaces, and then looked around. Everything was clean, neat and put away.

He moved over to the window and looked out, and saw his ‘dad’ heading for a little pavilion just off the house outside. Remembering that he was supposed to get himself cleaned up as well, he grabbed some clean clothes and went looking for the bathroom--one with a shower.

His ‘mother’ cornered him as soon as he came down the stairs.

“You’re done already?” she demanded with obvious skepticism.

“Yeah, everything.”

She studied him for a moment and then nodded. “Your father is already in the bath, go join him.”

Harry nodded and edged around her to look for a door that led back outside. He found one in the back, and could see the little pavilion, which must be where the bath was. It seemed a weird place to keep it.

The pavilion contained a couple of rooms. The first room had a washing machine, some robes and
towels folded on several shelves, and a dirty clothes hamper. He peeked inside the hamper and saw the clothes his ‘father’ had been wearing earlier already stuffed inside. He stripped down, left his clean clothes next to the pile that must belong to his ‘father’ and slid open the door leading further in, guessing that must be the bath, since he could hear water running. When the door was all the way open, he blanched for a moment, as his ‘father’ was indeed in there, sitting on a little stool, with a bucket of water next to him, and soaping up to get clean.

“Don’t just stand there, kid, get in here.” He called gruffly.

Harry made his way over and grabbed another bucket and filled it, and then used it to wet himself down, refilled it and went to sit on another small stool. There was another wooden bucket on the floor that had soap, rags and other things you’d need for bathing. He grabbed some soap and a rag and began copying his ‘father’s actions.

When they were both rinsed, his ‘father’ rose, but instead of going back out front where the towels were, he headed through yet another door that led further inside the pavilion. Hesitantly Harry followed. Inside, there was a deep wooden tub, filled with steaming hot water.

The man climbed in and sighed with obvious enjoyment. He glanced over when he saw Harry hadn’t followed and raised an eyebrow in inquiry. Still feeling rather uncertain, Harry shut the door and went and climbed into the tub as well. It was plenty big enough for two people. The water was very hot—something Harry, who’d always had to wash in cold water—wasn’t used to. It was wonderful. It seemed to seep down to his bones, and turn him into a pile of mush. Right then and there, Harry decided that when he moved out on his own, the first thing he was going to do was get a great big bathtub.

After they’d been soaking a few minutes, the man spoke up. “So… You were hanging out with Naruto today. I hadn’t realized you were friends.”

“Well, we’re not really. He’s in my class though, so I see him every day.”

“And you just randomly decided to be a teacher?”

“I heard the shurikens, and Naruto grunting and complaining. Choji left already. I was just curious, until I saw he was doing it wrong. I just gave him some pointers.”

“I’ve heard he’s a troublesome kid.”

“He’s loud, hyperactive, and a bit of a braggart, but he’s not bad. People lie sometimes. I don’t know why; he’s nice enough.”

“It might give people the wrong idea about you, if you’re hanging around a kid like that.”

Though the words themselves could be taken as a command, or a warning, his voice remained bland and neutral the whole time, giving no real clue as to whether he agreed with the sentiment or not.

The more his ‘father’ talked, the more he was becoming convinced that someone somewhere was doing the same kind of hatchet job on Naruto’s reputation as the Dursleys did to his in the real world. He thought back to his genuine smile, and was certain. He acted like someone who hadn’t had many people be nice to him. He knew all too well what that was like. Knowing that, there was only one answer Harry could give.

“The only people who would get the wrong idea are people who believe stupidly obvious lies, and never try to find out the truth. People like that are going to think what they’re going to think, no
matter what I or anyone else says or does. I’m not going to be mean to Naruto or drive him away just to appease people who are obviously idiots.”

“You’re a troublesome kid” the man sighed, but he was smiling just a bit.

That seemed to be that. They soaked a bit longer, and then ‘mother’ called them in for supper.

The foods were odd, but they were tasty and filling. Throughout dinner his ‘mother’ asked him questions about his day, what he’d done in school and so on, in between relaying news about her own day, and the local gossip. It was disconcerting, being the focus of attention like that, but at the same time, it was nice. He’d seen Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon do the same to Dudley; this was the first time he’d ever been on the receiving end.

When dinner was over, he was sent to his room to do his homework.

The only thing he could think, when he woke in the morning, back in his cupboard was ‘so that’s what it’s like to be part of a family.’ It left him with a rather bittersweet feeling lodged in his chest. He knew those people weren’t really his parents, but it had been nice—really nice—to pretend for just a little while.

“I guess I’m going to have to do my own training though, from now on, if the ninja dreams are just going to be about chores and taking baths.”

About the only good thing, trainingwise that had happened in last night’s dream was that he’d had a chance to read some of the school books and look through some of the manuals and scrolls in his ‘room’ before going to bed. He was pretty sure none of that stuff was anything he could find in the library.

When he got to school (early again from having run the whole way) He wrote down everything he could remember from the dream the day before in an old copybook of Dudley’s that he had pilfered from the second bedroom the last time he had to clean it. Dudley always got all new school supplies each year, but he barely used any of them. The second bedroom was full of mostly empty copybooks, markers, crayons (mostly broken), colored pencils, sharpeners and the like. Dudley didn’t bother with any of it, but he would have a major tantrum if he ever saw Harry with any of it even so, so he had to be careful about only using the stuff where none of them could ever see it. He finished scrawling the last of his notes just as the school yard began filling up.

“I’ve got a lot of work ahead of me.”

Over the coming weeks, Harry slowly built himself a routine. He started waking up before Aunt Petunia did, and doing the exercises he’d done in his ninja dream, and then would sneak back to wait for her to call him.

During recess, instead of trying to hide from Dudley and his gang, he started deliberately taunting them so they would chase him—building up his stamina and ability to dodge. It had the added side benefit that it developed his situational awareness as well, as the gang didn’t take kindly to his taunts, and started seeking him out whenever they could.

At night he read his ninja library books, and then later books on spies, on espionage, on history, on how to read people…each new subject he delved into led to others. His studies with his library books were supplemented now and again with more ninja dreams. He filled up several old notebooks with stuff he could remember each time, so he wouldn’t forget it.

On Saturdays, he managed to get to the free karate lessons. He was a bit disappointed to realize they only did the basic beginning lessons for free; if you wanted more, you had to go to the dojo and pay for them. He kept going back anyway, until he had the beginner lessons down pat, and he
even managed to finagle a few extras out of the sensei by asking questions about stuff he saw in movies at the library, or stuff he read in his ninja books. Every bit of information was soaked up eagerly, and practiced whenever he got a moment alone and unseen. When the free karate lessons ended, he did junior boxing for a few weeks. After that there was gymnastics. He got teased a lot for taking it, because it was him and a bunch of girls, but he wanted those lessons, so he put it up with it rather grimly. Free was free; the Dursleys weren’t going to pay for him to take lessons, so this was his only route to learn anything.

When he wasn’t reading, or stretching, or sneaking out to the community center, he was off in his ‘training ground’.

It was actually the local park. He found a quiet spot, screened by bushes, with a boulder-strewn stream running through it. He ran, he stretched, he did his basic karate lessons, and his gymnastics, and punched and kicked trees, and hopped across the boulders to work on his balance. One day, while taking a breather, it suddenly occurred to him that he’d never actually completed any of the exercises and found his chakra.

“Well, it was just a dream, right? They probably don’t even work…except those ninja books said kind of the same thing, didn’t they? They called it chi, but they meant the same thing. That one book even had hand gestures like that teacher did when he transformed and everything… and there are those weird things that keep happening—the teacher’s hair turning blue…my hair growing back after Aunt Petunia gave me that ugly haircut…that time that sweater shrunk when she was trying to put it on me…that time I ended up on the roof… Maybe I’ve already accessed my chakra? I guess I just need to learn how to do it on purpose.”

That night, safely hidden in his cupboard, he added something new to his routine—meditating to find his chakra, and practicing the hand signs in the book until he could go from one to the other quickly and without pause, like the teacher, Asuma, had. 

Harry’s first attempts at meditation were rather sorry things. He fell asleep more often than not, or his mind wandered and started chattering at him and he couldn’t properly concentrate on anything. He persevered though, and through diligent effort, his practices began to bear fruit.

After a solid two months of meditating nightly, he finally found his quiet, calm center. He could never hold on to it for long, not at first, because he’d always get excited when he found it, and he’d lose his hold on it. Another month of effort was needed before he could hold on to it indefinitely. Finally, he could look for his chakra!

Warmth was the first thing he noticed…and then it was cold…and then dark, then shining, then different colors…the harder he tried to grasp it, the more elusive it became. Night after night of frustration mounted, until he finally realized he was going about it all wrong! He’d learned through effort at meditating that trying to force it didn’t work; maybe it was the same with this? Resolved to try one more time before giving up for the night, he fell into his calm meditative state again, and just waited.

In his mind’s eye, he could see his chakra—it was a bendy, twisty, multicolored, colorless space inside him somewhere. He didn’t know how else to explain it. He waited, and sent out a wordless entreaty and welcome, and then waited some more. The twisty thing reached out and Harry was suddenly burning/freezing/wet/dry/upside down/backwards/spinning/still. He wanted to cry out; he wanted to escape…he wanted to grab the twisty thing and make it do his bidding! He forced himself to let go, and just be one with it. It was his, a part of him—it wouldn’t hurt him. Eventually the strange vertigo stopped, and he was surrounded by warmth and light and floating gently in a sea of golden rainbow. For the first time he could remember in his short life, he felt totally happy, at
peace, and safe.

Harry opened his eyes and gasped quietly. His whole body was shining softly in the dimness of the cupboard. He was refreshed, energized, and his whole body was buzzing just a bit. The light faded, and he was just ordinary Harry again. He flexed his hands and smiled—the scrapes on his knuckles from punching trees, and the bruises on his shins and knees, pulled muscles and the like, had all disappeared. The best part though, was he could still feel his chakra—like a ball of sunshine in his chest and belly, and humming underneath his skin all over his body. He was suddenly exhausted from the effort. He crawled under his blankets and fell asleep with a smile on his face.

Harry woke, feeling refreshed, energized, and very, excited...also confused, but mostly excited. He’d dreamed about the ninja school again. He’d learned how to disguise himself, and how to throw little knives, and make traps to get people who were chasing him! It was strange though...all the other times he’d had those dreams, it was like he was really there. This time, he’d been sort of disconnected from the whole thing. He couldn’t wait to try some of what he’d learned...the disguise technique would be loads of fun to use against Dudley and his gang. They’d be so confused! Of course, that seemed to be a natural state of affairs for them. Harry was pretty sure they only had one brain cell to share between them. He’d overslept just a bit, and so had to cut his morning stretches short. He heard Aunt Petunia moving around upstairs before he was done. How annoying; he’d been hoping to practice the karate they’d been doing while it was still fresh in his mind.

“Boy! Wake up!”

“Yes, aunt Petunia.” Harry sighed.

Harry eased the branch into place, and then carefully stepped back, taking care to avoid the trip wires that were hidden all over the area. It had taken far longer than he wanted, but he was finally done. He would finally be able to test out his trap-making capabilities. He had spent the last few weeks pilfering odds and ends from the Dursley’s house, and stowing it away in his cupboard until he was ready. He finally had the chance today to put it all to use.

“Well, the traps are all ready...time to see if they work like they’re supposed to. Now, where’s a good guinea pig when you need one?” Harry said cheerfully.

He crept off towards where he’d last seen Dudley and his gang, and watched, carefully staying out of sight until he was ready. A quick glance up and down the street showed that no one was watching him, so he made a bunshin and sent it out into the street so the gang would see it, and then hurried back to the trapped area to get into place. He concealed himself in a tree, after putting on a quick henge, and then settled in to wait.

Meanwhile, the bunshin stood waiting until Dudley and the gang spotted him, and then turned his back to them, bent over and smacked his bottom a few times, before taking off at a run, heading back towards the trapped area. Dudley and the gang shouted ‘get him’ and began giving chase.
“Where’d the little freak go?”

“I dunno. He ducked into the park, but I don’t know where he went.”

“I’m gonna pound him so hard! Who does the little freak think he is, disrespecting us like that?”

“There!” Piers Polkiss, Dudley’s best friend, pointed. He set off running again, following the distant image, and the rest took off after him.

“Wah!” Piers grunted as his foot caught on something and sent him face first onto the ground.

Malcolm, who was right behind him, got a face full of leaves and branch as the tripwire released the tension it had been held under. Malcolm grunted and went flailing backwards, knocking over Gordon who was right behind him and sending them both careening backwards. Gordon’s foot caught another tripwire, and the boys landed on top of one another on the ground, only to go flying upwards as the concealed net they landed in tightened and left them swaying from a high tree branch.

Dudley, who had staggered to a halt, gaped at them, and began inching backwards. His foot triggered yet another trap. A noose tightened around his ankles and pulled his legs out from under him, and then up into the air, where he too was left dangling and swaying from a high branch.

Piers gaped at his three friends in horror, while climbing very carefully to his feet. He jumped and screamed as a filthy wild man in layers of old clothes leapt down from a tree, cackling and smiling widely, showing off his rotting, nubby teeth.

“Hot diggity! Hot diggity! I’ll be eating good tonight!” the crazy man crowed.

He began dancing a crazy jig beneath Dudley while poking him with a stick.

“Jes’ lookit the meat on this one! I’m gonna need a bigger pot! I should invite some friends over too! We kin has a party! This one’s too fat to eat alone! Tee hee! Yer lucky fatty! Yer gonna taste real good! I bin pickin some herbs and stuff! Hot diggity dog!”

With another mad cackle, the man ran off, licking his lips and rubbing his hands together. Piers, who had begun backing up in horror as soon as the man appeared, screamed and ran back towards home, while his friends’ despairing cries of “NO! DON’T LEAVE US!” echoed in his head.

Harry, who was now some distance away, rolled on the ground and laughed himself sick—quietly, of course. When he had calmed down, he released his disguise, tidied himself up, and sauntered back towards where the boys were being held.

He could hear sniffling long before they came in sight. Dudley had fat tears dripping down his forehead and onto the ground. His face was bright red, and he looked like he was going to be sick. Malcolm and Gordon were both whimpering, and trying to maneuver themselves into a position that would allow them to reach the knots holding them up.

“Is this some new game?” Harry asked curiously.

“H-HA-HARRY!” Dudley whimpered. “He’s gonna eat us!”

“Who is?”

“The cannibal hobo!” Gordon and Malcolm screamed desperately.

“Oh, come on! Cannibal hobo?” Harry snickered.
“N-no! It’s true! He said he was gonna get his friends and eat me!” Dudley gasped.

His color was really not looking too good. Harry took one last look at all of them and ran off—all three boys screamed for him not to go. He kept running.

As he pelted his way back to Privet Drive, his mind was in overdrive—he couldn’t climb the tree to get them down—he’d used chakra before, a little trick he’d figured out after seeing an adult ninja in his dreams walk up a wall. That was definitely out. He didn’t know what Aunt Petunia could do, but he had to tell her—he was beginning to worry that Dudley was going to have an aneurysm or a heart attack before anyone got him down. He hadn’t really factored in Dudley’s weight when he set up the traps. He put on an extra burst of speed and hurried towards no. 4—just missing seeing a hysterical Piers dragging his parents towards the play park.

Aunt Petunia scowled angrily when Harry burst in the door.

“BOY! What do you think”

“AUNT PETUNIA! DUDLEY’S HANGING UPSIDE DOWN IN A TREE! HIS FACE IS PURPLE! I DON’T THINK HE CAN BREATHE!” Harry shouted before she could get too far into her rant.

“…” Aunt Petunia just gaped at him for a moment, before processing what he said.


“The play park, towards the middle. He’s hanging from a rope, and his two friends are in a net. He said a cannibal hobo captured him and he’s bringing friends to eat them!”

Petunia gaped at him again as the sheer ridiculousness of the story made it a bit hard to process. Something flickered in her eyes then and a look of absolute horror began taking over her face. “C-cannibal?” She began breathing heavily and her eyes took on a crazed glint.

Harry looked around at the sheer pandemonium that resulted from his little…prank. There were emergency vehicles everywhere, lights flashing—the fire department, police, even an ambulance. The play park was swarming with cops and hysterical parents, many of whom were clutching wide-eyed, gaping children—several of whom had been victims of Dudley and his gang, and were feeling rather cheery knowing they’d all nearly gotten eaten. The news was there as well, filming the crowd while the news guy did the story about the ‘horror that rocked Little Whinging’. Every time he said that Harry had the urge to fall down laughing.

Dudley and the others were sitting on the back of an ambulance, wrapped in blankets, still crying, while their mothers fussed and their fathers shouted a lot. It was all very amusing, really. He was torn, he really was. On the one hand, further sightings of the ‘cannibal hobo’ could keep the neighborhood in a state of chaos for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, further sightings might draw too much attention, and it might eventually come back to bite him in the ass. Decisions, decisions.

“MWRAAWR!”

Harry jumped as one of Mrs. Figg’s cats darted out of the bushes and zipped past him.

“Whole place is crawling with the damned things. It makes the whole cannibal angle all the
stranger, don’t you think? Why target kids when this whole area is crawling with bloody cats? There’d still be a hubbub from the locals if all their pets went missing, but it’d mean less time for our perp than eating a bunch of children would. I don’t get it.”

“Well, he’s a cannibal, isn’t he?”

“He must be a deeply disturbed individual.”

“I’ll say. I just hope this is an isolated incident.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Back in the seventies…there was a bone pile found. We were able to match the remains to a number of recent missing persons. The person or persons responsible were never caught…There were signs of cannibalism there too. There were so many victims, there were worries about a possible cannibal cult.”

“Here? In England? In this day and age? Madness!”

“Don’t I know it. There’s some sick people out there.”

“I should say so! My word!”

“Hem, hem. Ixnay on the annibalcay.” One of the cops grunted, while gesturing with his head towards Harry, who was listening in quite openly, eyes wide.

“Where’s your mum, kid?”

“Dead.”

“Oh…um, so sorry. Dad then?”

“He’s dead too.”

“Uh…”

“My cousin was one of the guys in the tree. I live with him and his parents.”

“Why don’t you go over to them, huh?”

“I’m fine here. They don’t like me getting in the way. Besides, if there’s a cult of mad cannibal hobos roaming around, well, I’m safest right here, aren’t I? They almost got my cousin earlier… and unlike with him, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon wouldn’t come running to save me.”

“What did you say your name was kid?”

“I didn’t.”

“Ha, ha. What’s your name?”

“Harry Potter.”

“Which kid is your cousin?”

“Dudley Dursley. He’s the one the hobo had to go get a bigger pot for. He’s probably gonna eat even more now.” Harry sighed, his voice tragic. He had reason for worry—he didn’t get fed often
as it was; if Dudley started eating more, it was probably going to come out of his share.
Over Harry’s head, the cops exchanged a look, and made a note to put a word in with child services—
they could probably sneak in a home visit under the pretense of it being a follow-up on the
captured kids.
“‘You get a look at the hobo?”
“I never saw any hobo. I was running away from Dudley and his gang, and then I lost them. I was
coming back through and saw them up in the tree. They said there was a cannibal hobo, which I
thought sounded kinda fishy, but whatever. I went and told Aunt Petunia, and she called you guys
and the fire department and Uncle Vernon, and made me carry a bat when we came down here. I
was supposed to bash any hobos in the head so they didn’t come near the rest of them.’
“‘I don’t see any bat.”
“Uncle Vernon took it when he showed up, and sent me into the bushes to try driving the hobo out
so he could bash him.’
“Excuse me.” A deep man’s voice sounded from the other side of the cop Harry was talking to.
“Dirk Gently, Scotland Yard. What do we have here?”
Harry’s cop turned so he could get a look at the newcomer, while the other two cops began filling
him in after taking a look at his badge. The guy was a bald black man with an earring, wearing a
suit. He seemed oddly familiar for some reason; Harry had the strangest sense that he’d met him
before. The man seemed to feel Harry’s eyes on him, and turned slightly, delivering his profile.
The sense of familiarity nagged at him and nagged at him until…
“Hey! I just remembered where I know you from! You’re that weirdo in the purple dress that
bowed to me in a shop that one time.”
The three cops turned and looked at Harry with obvious annoyance. “‘You still here, kid?’
“I do believe you’re mistaken. Why don’t you run along now?” the black man, Mr. Gently,
ordered.
“No I’m not. HEY AUNT PETUNIA! LOOK!”
Harry shouted, while pointing to Gently.
“That will be quite enough, young…”
“YOU! I REMEMBER YOU! YOU’RE ONE OF THOSE FREAKS! TAKE YOUR FREAK
SELF AND YOUR FREAKY CANNIBALS AND GET OUT OF MY NICE, NORMAL
NEIGHBORHOOD! I TOLD THAT BARMY OLD MAN I WASN’T HAVING IT! SHOO!
SHOO!” Aunt Petunia shouted, while stalking towards Gently and the three cops angrily.
She was bristling and shaking with outrage and indignation, and didn’t even care that she might
come to regret talking to the man like that—her precious Diddy Diddums had nearly been eaten by
a ruddy cannibal! The poor, wee tyke had rope burns on his ankles, and he was still shaking like a
leaf!
Mr. Gently was looking around at the crowd, who were beginning to stir in agitation after hearing
Petunia connect him to the ‘freaky cannibals’, a bit wild-eyed.
“There’s been a mistake! Scotland Yard!” Gently laughed, a bit nervously. The cops exchanged
another look, and two of them each grabbed one of Gently’s arms and marched him towards the
squad car. “Why don’t we head down to the station, hmm? If it’s a mistake, I’m sure it will be easily cleared up.”

“No, really! This is all a terrible mistake!”

Petunia, meanwhile, was intercepted by the third cop, who was quite interested to hear more about the ‘freaks, cannibals and the ‘barmy old man’.

Seeing Aunt Petunia was likely to be busy for a bit, Harry wandered over to the ambulance to see how Dudley was doing.

“Hey, Dud. How’re you feeling?”

Dudley just sniffled a bit, and Uncle Vernon bristled and looked around while his hands flexed on the baseball bat, obviously looking for the cannibal hobo so he could give him what-for.

“Excuse me?”

The three of them turned to look at the man, who smiled, and raised a wooden stick. Uncle Vernon’s face grew red, then purple. “YOU! You’re one of those fr—”

“Obliviate.” The man cut him off with a malicious smile.

Harry and Dudley watched confused and a bit freaked out as Vernon’s face went slack and his eyes glazed over. The man then turned to Dudley and did the same, before turning to Harry who had begun to back away. The man scowled at him and raised the stick again.

“Real nice job, brat. Do you have any idea the kind of mess you’ve made?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Drawing unwanted attention to an auror at work. Now we’ve got to obliviate everyone and clean up all the evidence. Thanks a lot kid. I was hoping I’d get to go home early tonight.”

“Au-ror?” Harry repeated the odd word slowly. “What’s an au-ror?”

“Never you mind, kid. Stupid muggles.”

Harry tried to bolt but the man caught his arm and held him in place, and none too gently either.

Harry blinked and looked around in confusion, wondering for a moment where he was.

“Oh, that’s right, Dudley and the gang decided to climb trees for some reason, and Dudley got stuck. The whole town came out when they saw the fire truck, even the news showed up, though they left again once they realized it wasn’t much of a story. Once Dudley was down, he, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon hopped in the car to go home. I had to walk because the car is new and Uncle Vernon doesn’t want me contaminating it with my freakishness.”

Harry heaved a sigh, and continued trudging back to number 4.

“I just hope I don’t get denied supper just because Dudley was dumb enough to get himself stuck in a tree. Somehow, everything always ends up being my fault, even though it never is. Story of my life.”
Albus Dumbledore stroked his beard while he listened gravely to Kingsley’s report of the possible werewolf attack in Little Whinging.

“I see, that is troubling. I shall have to take steps to make sure young Harry remains in the house for the next few weeks, until we’ve had a chance to flush out any possible werewolves in the area.”

“While you’re having a word with his aunt, spank the little brat for me, would you?” Shaklebolt grumbled. “This should have been a simple in and out matter; instead, we had to call out several obliviator squads, and get the muggle liaison office to do a sweep to make sure there were no videos of the incident. I should have been home hours ago.”

“Oh dear, I had hoped Petunia would take a firmer hand with the boy; it seems he’s become rather spoiled.” Dumbledore sighed regretfully.

Kingsley snorted as he rose from his seat. “I’ll say—four aurors, three muggle liaisons and eight obliviators working overtime because of his big mouth.”

“I shall certainly see to it that he is adequately punished for his indiscretion.”

“I’m gonna go now, I’m beat.”

“Goodnight, Kingsley, and thank you for your quick thinking action.”

When the auror was gone, Dumbledore sighed irritably and stood. He commanded the wards of Hogwarts to allow him to pass, before apparating from his office to the edge of the wards around Harry’s house.

Privet Drive was quiet when he arrived. He drew his wand. A quick flick unlocked the front door. He made his way upstairs, into the two occupied bedrooms one after another, slightly altering the false memories they’d been given earlier in the evening.

Before leaving the premises, he flicked his wand again, unlocking the cupboard under the stairs. He took a moment to study the child ensconced in the small cot contained within, and then raised his wand once more.

“I’m sorry for the necessity of all this, my boy, but it’s simply too dangerous to allow you to roam around willy-nilly when there might be werewolves about. You’ll be of no use to anyone if you’re a werewolf…”

He considered that thought a moment, before shaking his head. While it was true the marginal status of lycanthropes in their world would guarantee his absolute control of the boy, the inconvenient monthly transformations weren’t worth the tradeoff.

“Yes, it’s for the best.” He finally decided. “In fact…”

Smiling slightly, he shut the cupboard door again and re-locked it, without altering Harry’s fake memories. He strode from the house, whistling, looking forward to a nightcap before bed. The Dursleys would be furious, and would keep the child contained for the foreseeable future, thanks to his little alterations. The child’s indignation at being blamed for the events would lead to them adding to his punishment, which would keep him contained for even longer.

“Yes, that will do nicely. Better a long grounding than having the boy end up dead or a werewolf. It’s really for the best.”
He gave himself a mental pat on the back for having so neatly taking care of things, and apparated off to Hogsmeade to return to the castle.

Harry was rather bewildered by his relatives fury and hostility when he woke in the morning. He was let out long enough to go to the bathroom, and then locked back in his cupboard. “After what you did to my son, you little freak, you’ll be lucky if you see daylight again before you’re thirty. Don’t expect to be eating, either.” Vernon snarled at him, before re-locking the door.

Harry missed the last three days of school, and the last two weeks of June before he was let back out again, except for his daily trip to the bathroom.

When his punishment was finally over, he made a point of escaping the house first thing in the morning, as soon as he was able. He spent his days at the community center, his ‘training ground’ in the park, and the library. He also started scouting around for alternate sources of food. Two weeks without eating was pushing it. He was lucky it was summer. There was actually a lot of food to be found if you looked for it.

There was a wild-growing pear tree on the edge of the woods, close by where it lay against the main road out of town. Harry figured someone had probably thrown a pear out the window of the car, and the seeds had taken root. He gathered a stockpile of pears and hid them in his cupboard, in the part under the lowest part of the steps, where they couldn’t be seen from the door. He also found berry bushes scattered throughout the park, and a stand of strawberries growing wild along a fence on the way to the library.

There was a bakery that discarded old baked goods at the end of the day; he discovered that by being in the right place at the right time. Again, he loaded himself down and hid the stuff where his relatives wouldn’t notice it.

He usually ate his stockpile each night—he kept getting denied dinner because he wasn’t around during the day to do chores. He wasn’t sticking around though. They had always worked him like a dog, punished him for things he didn’t do, and denied him meals—it was the length of time involved. If they weren’t going to feed him, he was going to find alternate means of doing it himself. He had enough fruit and baked goods gathered each day to keep his belly filled while he was out and about, which was more than he could say if he stuck around the Dursleys.

There was no one in the world looking out for him, so his only real choice was to do it himself.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

A trip to the library and a conversation with Mrs. Figg give Harry a lot to think about.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hello dearie, back again, are we?” the librarian asked.

“Yes, Miss.”

“You certainly do read a lot for a young boy. Goodness, I don’t think most of our adult patrons read as much as you do.”

“I’m interested in a lot of stuff.” Harry replied.

The librarian chuckled and took his books to check back in. “Human anatomy? Why on earth were you reading something like that?”

“I wanted to know where my spleen was.” Harry answered innocently.

“Your spleen? Kids these days!”

Harry just smiled and blinked his big green eyes at her. He was hardly going to tell her that he’d been reading it alongside the book on acupuncture and acupressure so that he could more easily locate the pressure points and try to make sense of the whole thing. He certainly wasn’t going to mention the section of the book that discussed the pressure points as being incorporated into certain martial arts. He was hoping to learn a ‘five finger hand of death’ type attack, just in case he was ever beset by muggers, a child molester or enemy ninjas. Alright, so the last one wasn’t very likely, but one never knew, did they? After all, he was having ninja dreams…who’s to say no one else was?

“Oh, dearie, we got some new films in.” the librarian noted as she waved him through. She hesitated, looking at him consideringly for a moment before continuing. “There’s one that made me think of you when it came through, because I know you like that sort of thing…but, I don’t know…”

“What’s it called?”

“The Manchurian Candidate. It’s about a man who was made into a sleeper agent assassin.” She replied unhappily.

She just wasn’t sure it was really healthy for a boy to be so morbidly fascinated by that sort of thing…her husband always just laughed at her when she voiced her concerns though, and reminded her he was a boy, and boys liked covert ops, and guns, and explosions, and things of that nature. Judging by the way Harry’s eyes lit up, and the reverent ‘cool’ that passed his lips, he seemed to be
Harry was quiet, and rather thoughtful as he headed home that night, with his three newest books—an introduction to basic chemistry, a home owner’s repair manual, and The Art of War. Mrs. Greene, the librarian, had just shaken her head and sighed in bemusement as she checked them out for him.

He started running as soon as he hit the door—Aunt Petunia was going to be on his case worse than usual, since he’d be getting back even later than he usually did. He’d really only meant to get a couple of new books to read, but the draw of a new movie was too great to resist—he’d watched pretty much all of their, admittedly, limited selection already. He’d been really happy to find out they’d ordered more.

Sure enough, Aunt Petunia was on his case pretty much the moment he walked in the door. Seems she’d had to run out to the store herself since he didn’t come right home, because it was getting too close to dinner time and she couldn’t wait any longer. At times like these he really wanted to say something like ‘Geez, woman, you have legs for a reason, you know’. He never did. He knew better than that.

She set him to dusting and vacuuming so he would know just how very annoyed she was to be forced to buy her own last minute groceries. Dudley waddled in not long afterwards—he, by contrast was greeted with cooing and a half a chocolate cake to eat while he watched tv, to tide him over until dinner. And people wondered why Dudley was the size of a baby whale, even with all the running around after Harry, and beating up little kids, that he did.

Harry made a point of vacuuming in the room with Dudley and getting in his way while he tried watching his favorite show. He got yelled at for it, of course, when Dudley started crying and thrashing around like a two-year old, but by that point the damage was already done. He got yelled out harder when he pointed out that she’d told him to vacuum, and he was already doing it when Dudley came into the room, and so really Dudley was the one inconveniencing him, not the other way around. She didn’t appreciate it much.

Naturally, he got sent to his cupboard, which suited him fine. It meant he could get started reading early, and have his own ‘dinner’—pears, berries, a couple of rolls and a doughnut. It wasn’t like he was going to be fed tonight with how pissy Aunt Petunia already was when he came home. He wouldn’t have to worry about Dudley or Uncle Vernon bothering him either—neither one of them could fit in there, which also suited him fine.

He tried concentrating on his new books after he’d eaten, but his mind kept drifting back to the movie he’d watched earlier. It made him wonder about a number of things. The thing his mind kept going back to, again and again, was naturally the worry that he himself was a sleeper agent.

“Why else would I keep dreaming of a ninja school, where they teach you stuff that actually works?”

The part he couldn’t figure out was, why did he remember? The guy in the movie didn’t. He remembered a tea party, of all things. He didn’t know when he was killing people, even when they were friends of his. So, by that logic, he shouldn’t remember being trained as a ninja—but he did. The first few times, it had been like he’d actually been there. After that though, it had been more like a dream where he was looking though someone else’s eyes. So, was he remembering something that actually happened? Did they drug him or something the second time so he’d forget it easier? When did it happen? And why did no one know?

Or…maybe Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon do know? Maybe they got a deal with the
government--free slave labor, and they keep quiet about the ninja training?

He realized that regardless of what Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon knew or didn’t know, he couldn’t allow anyone to know that he could still remember. Judging from the movies he’d watched recently, and some of the books he’d read, “Shikamaru” was probably supposed to be a hidden identity that no one, not even himself, was aware of. “Shikamaru” was probably supposed to emerge and take over when he was “triggered”. If people knew he still remembered the training, one of two things could happen: they’d off him as a liability, or they’d find some new, more effective way, to make him forget. He wouldn’t know what he was anymore, and one day he’d be triggered, run off and kill someone and then forget he’d even done it. Sleeper agents had seemed a lot cooler before he’d been confronted with the possibility that he himself was one.

A wave of near-crippling terror and paranoia began taking hold of him. He curled into a ball and wedged himself deeper into the corner where he sat. He wished he had someone he could talk to about stuff, someone who cared, who he could tell about all this. Dudley would probably be surprised to learn that Harry had only rarely envied him the junk food he was allowed to eat all the time, and the toys that he broke almost as soon as he got them. No, the thing Harry regularly envied Dudley for was having two still-living parents. At a time like this, parents who would hug him and tell him ‘don’t worry, we’ll fix this’ would have been really nice. The fake ninja parents he had didn’t count—he knew full well there was no way they could be actually his parents; they looked like they were Chinese or something…maybe half Chinese? They sort of resembled some of the people he saw in the martial arts movies, but not exactly. Either way, they weren’t English, and he knew his mother was Aunt Petunia’s sister, so she was probably blonde too, …though he did have black hair like all of them did. It was all too confusing and worrisome.

“Get a hold of yourself!” he told himself sternly. “Wishing does nothing but waste time. The only person you can depend on is yourself!”

In an act of instinctive self-defense, he pulled up his ‘meditation quiet place’. Everything always seemed distant when he was like that. Bit by bit his pulse slowed, his breathing steadied, and he could think again.

“Alright. Think, Harry, think. What do you know?”

He fell a bit deeper into his meditative state and tried to list everything in some kind of coherent order:

“Okay…one, I’ve been dreaming about a ninja school, and the stuff actually works and is similar to the stuff I read about ninjas in books. Two, I have chakra, and I have been able to access it. Three: chakra heals you, and lets you do weird stuff. Four: The Dursleys have always called me a freak, and blamed weird things on me whenever they happened. Five: Aunt Petunia won’t talk about my parents, but when they do come up, she calls them freaks too. Six: ninjas, chakra and stuff are all things the Dursleys would consider weird and not normal…

Harry opened his eyes, considering the last couple of thoughts.

“Could my real parents have been ninjas? Aunt Petunia said they died in a car crash, not anything about battling ninjas…but she wouldn’t, would she? That’s not very normal… If I am being trained as a covert ops sleeper agent…were my parents as well? Did they actually die in some kind of government sponsored battle? Has the government been keeping tabs on me all this time? Are they watching the house? Is the phone tapped? Are there handlers living in the neighborhood? What will they do if they realize I remember?”
Still in the center of his ‘calm place’, he went back to his reading while he tried mulling over all the angles. He was only eight years old. He was way out of his depth and he knew it. He tried to think of what he could do, to protect himself.

“I need to increase my awareness of my surroundings. If there are handlers, or people watching me, I can discover who they are by keeping track of stuff like that. I need to be less predictable. I’ve fallen into a routine—I can’t completely help that for most of the year; I have to go to school. I can try to make the rest of my days more random. I should take different routes to places like the library and the community center, and leave by different exits each day once school starts back up...if I practice henge I can throw off pursuit that way too. I have to make sure no one ever witnesses me doing it though—they’ll realize I remember for sure if they do. I suppose if I use a clone and a henge on myself I can confuse people that way. If people are watching me, they’ll notice before long that I’m running around in disguise if I keep disappearing into bathrooms or behind bushes and never coming back out. I should trap my training ground in case I’m ever ambushed there…I should also take careful note of places around town I can hide or use to throw off pursuit.”

Harry’s confidence began to soar as he began making plans. So long as no one knew that he remembered, or realized he was planning ahead, he had the advantage. Truthfully, it wasn’t much of an advantage, but it might be enough if worse came to worst. He finished his math homework and took out his history homework, while his mind continued racing over things he could do to keep himself alive, safe and out of enemy hands.

“Cats again.”

Since his epiphany about being a covert-ops sleeper agent a few weeks previously, Harry had stepped up his training as much as he could. He was trying to be aware of the people around him, and the color of the cars, and the patterns of people in the neighborhood. It was harder than it sounded. When he first started trying—hoping to spot his ‘handlers’, if there were any, he kept finding his mind drifting off to other things; he wouldn’t even be aware it happened, and then he’d realize he’d walked two blocks and had no idea who had been around him or what they’d been doing.

Practice made perfect; though he was certain he still had a lot of room to improve, he knew he was getting better with every day, because he’d already started to notice stuff that he never had before. For example, there was a guy in a black car that would visit Mrs. No. 2 every couple of days and stick around for a few hours. For some reason, he always left when Mr. No. 2 came home—he knew that’s the reason he was leaving too. Mr. No. 2 came home early one day, and he saw the guy sneak out the back door while Mr. and Mrs. No.2 were talking in the front room. He was carrying his shoes for some reason…

Another thing he noticed was how very odd Mrs. Figg’s—his babysitter—cats were. If he didn’t know better, he’d say they were patrolling the area, and keeping tabs on him. He’d started to notice it a week ago when he was leaving the library; he spotted one of the cats in a tree, acting casual, and watching him as he walked by. He hadn’t really thought anything of it at first, after all, cats wandered around and hung out in trees sometimes, didn’t they? Then, he started noticing them on his way to school, and from, shadowing his movements. Then, he started noticing them meeting up, staring at each other, and then heading off in groups to follow people every so often—they guy visiting Mrs. No. 2 for one, which is how he first noticed.
Now that it had been brought to his attention, he’d decided to do some tests. He wandered around town, casually, going to places he didn’t normally—cats.

He went to the park—cats.

He’d dashed down the center of the stream so they’d lose his scent, and darted off in a new direction, doing a simple henge while screened by the trees. He took the long way around the park and approached the Dursleys from the other direction—cats. They’d called in reinforcements too—all of Mrs. Figg’s cats were out in force, looking for him. Oh, they were being sneaky about it, but he’d climbed a tree in the back of Mrs. No. 6’s yard so he could get a longer view; it was then that he realized that the whole group was out in force—and they were definitely looking for him, because one caught his scent and now they were all headed this way. He let the henge go—it obviously didn’t fool them—and cut across back to his own yard at no. 4, and then into the house.

He needed to do some research about the best way to foil the stupid cats so he could sneak around unseen. How was he supposed to spy on Mrs. Figg if they were reporting to her?

It really should have been obvious that she was his handler; she was the only person in the neighborhood he had regular contact with. In fact… Harry’s heart rose to his throat as he realized he even knew what one of his triggers must be—she always made him sit for hours and look at the photo album filled with pictures of her cats! He always went into a daze whenever it happened, because he was so bored, and hated the way the house smelled of cabbage. It had gotten to the point where he’d even feel himself zone out when she even mentioned the damned photo album. It was just like the guy in the Manchurian Candidate with his pack of cards!

A sick, cold feeling began crawling down Harry’s spine; all this stuff was really too much for someone his age to deal with!

He tried not to let how he was feeling show when he got into the house, but he didn’t quite succeed. Aunt Petunia told him he looked a bit peaky, and sent him off to clean Dudley’s second bedroom so he could work it out of his system. Harry wasn’t allowed to get sick—and if he did so anyway, he had to keep going. There was no bed rest or chicken soup for him, ever.

Harry sublimated his rage as best he could, and did his best not to stomp on the stairs—being “cheeky” would only hurt him; he’d probably end up cleaning Dudley’s other bedroom as well—bad enough he already had to do the second one.

Harry grimaced when he opened the door—the place was a huge pile of broken and discarded toys, books Dudley had never read, broken TVs, video cameras, video game consoles, telescopes and binoculars, and sports equipment… It was really unbelievable the sort of nonsense they let him get away with, when Harry got in trouble just for existing. He felt a presence behind him and glanced back to see Aunt Petunia standing there with the usual pinched look she got on her face whenever she looked at him.

“Sort all this out and put it away neatly, boy! There are boxes in the garage. Well? Get moving!”

Harry bit back another wave of annoyance—seriously, couldn’t she have told him all that before shooing him up here in the first place?

He tried staying focused while he worked, he really did, but he kept zoning out and moving on autopilot in spite of his best efforts not to. Every time he caught himself at it, he tried to regather his wits and stay in the present moment, but it was hard.

“It’s like my entire life has been designed to dull my mind and make me a robot; anybody would become a dullard under these conditions!”
A ripple of unease traveled down his spine.

There, surrounded by the ruins of his cousin’s overly spoiled childhood, Harry had the second epiphany of his young life.

“That’s exactly what it is. It’s training...follow orders, don’t ask questions, no imagination, no backtalk, just do what you’re told when you’re told to do it...don’t think, don’t dream, just be a good little soldier and march along.” He whispered.

He realized he was shaking, and tears had begun to prickle his eyes. How was he supposed to fight this, and not lose himself in the process? He’d already been trained to turn into a mindless zombie at will, long before he’d ever been aware that anything was going on. He’d been trying to fight it, but it had become so instinctive already to just sink away into mindless oblivion and do what he was told, that even being aware of it didn’t really help—it kept happening anyway!

The walls began to feel like they were closing in on him—he was well and truly trapped, wasn’t he? He was at the complete mercy of his relatives and their training here in the house, Mrs. Figg and her cats were monitoring him outside of it, and whoever she worked for was probably monitoring the area as well, meaning even if he tried to get away, it wouldn’t help.

He couldn’t even try to call the police or social services or anything of the sort—if the covert-ops thing was a government operation, anyone who tried to help him would just be eliminated or overruled—and he himself might simply disappear, and find himself in some new place where he didn’t even have the illusion of freedom he had now. He was trapped—completely, irrevocably trapped.

Unable to cope with the horror of his existence any more at that moment...Harry’s consciousness took a brief vacation, and sunk down into the depths of his mind...then merged with his magic, as it made him feel safe and warm and loved—something he desperately needed at the moment.

Harry might only be eight years old, but he’d had a joyless life so far, and had enough sublimated rage, frustration, and bitterness to sink a small country. He was already heartily sick of being everyone’s tool, punching bag and scapegoat—the idea that he might very well be stuck right where he was for another decade at least...and even then there was no guarantee he could actually escape, even being an adult and having some rights—it was enough to drive him to the brink of madness.

Harry finished organizing the room—neatly stacking and labeling the boxes, hauling the stuff that was broken to the curb, vacuuming the rug, washing the window, dusting the furniture and the corners of the ceiling. What had been a dusty, disordered refuse pile was now a clean, well-organized space. Aunt Petunia heard him carrying out the trash, and went to inspect the finished product. Her lips remained pinched the entire time, and only grew more so when Harry reappeared to hear the verdict.

“It will do, I suppose...but then, I don’t know why I expected better. Lord knows you can’t do anything right.” She said spitefully, her watery blue eyes examining him for any trace of indignation.

“Yes, Aunt Petunia.” Harry replied automatically.

He was as serene and unruffled as a cloud in the sky, his eyes and face blank and accepting. Petunia shivered, just a bit, at the empty gaze, and felt a stirring of unease.
“Go get cleaned up, you’re filthy!” she snapped, not liking the feeling at all.

“Yes, Aunt Petunia.” Harry replied again, before marching off without another word.

Petunia hurried back downstairs, still feeling uneasy. Where was the usual sullenness? The cheekiness? The glint he’d get in his eye when they went out of their way to remind him that he wasn’t wanted—all those parts of him that always reminded her of her dratted sister? It seemed they’d finally accomplished what they’d been trying to do all these years…
She’d expected to feel happier about it all.

When the boy came downstairs, and just stood quietly, awaiting orders with that same blank, eerie gaze, she shooed him outside and told him not to come back till dinner time.
She really didn’t like the thing they’d created at all. He made her skin crawl.

When the door snicked quietly closed behind him, she leaned against the kitchen sink and stared blankly at the wall.

“Damn you, Lily. Damn you to hell. You’ve been dead nearly a decade and you’re still making my life a misery!”

Harry went out the front door, rather at a loss as to what to do next.

"I missed gymnastics class.” He realized.

He started off, then saw Dudley and his gang in the distance. They hadn’t spotted him yet—they were all too busy beating up some kid. Taking advantage of his luck, he darted off in a new direction so he could, hopefully, evade them and make it to the center unscathed.
Luck was with him for once, though he found himself wondering if he’d made a wrong turn somewhere—the whole place was full of old people, not the usual mix of kids and teens that was there earlier in the day.

He spotted the activities director, Mister Andrews, and wandered over to find out what was going on.

“Oh, it’s you, huh kid? Not your usual time, is it?”

“I was doing chores and couldn’t come earlier. What’s going on?”

“Tai Chi”

Harry frowned, the words tickling a memory of some sort, but he couldn’t seem to place it.

“It’s supposed to be a type of martial arts, but no one really uses it that way. It’s recommended as exercise for people with joint problems and whatnot.”

“A martial art, eh?”

“Slow moving, low impact, mostly about defense, but yeah.”

“Huh.”

“It’s being sponsored by the local senior center, but they didn’t have enough space for the class, so
they came here. I don’t think they’ll mind if you sit in.”

Harry didn’t see it, but Mr. Andrews was giving the teacher for the class a ‘significant look’ over his head. Andrews had suspicions about the boy’s home life—he was here, bright-eyed, eager, and grimly determined, every Saturday while school was in session, and more often now that it was out for the summer—never a parent or guardian in sight. Smythe, the teacher for the kiddie karate classes that had first drawn the boy in, had expressed similar concerns, and confided that it was a damned shame he couldn’t continue lessons as he had a natural gift for martial arts—good reflexes, good balance, and most importantly, he listened, and wasn’t afraid to put in the work necessary to actually succeed.

“I tried giving him a sign-up sheet for regular classes, but he just laughed, and looked at me like I was an idiot. I don’t think I was supposed to hear it but he muttered something like ‘they’d sooner see me dead than spend a single quid on me.’ Did you ever get a look at the kid’s guardians? I never have. I’d really like to have a stern talk with them.”

When he’d admitted he’d never seen them, they’d both been left feeling frustrated and a bit helpless. The way Andrews saw it, so long as he was at the center, he wasn’t roaming the streets, or home with people who were likely abusive. Mr. Lin—the Tai Chi teacher—seemed to get the message. “No, I don’t mind at all. The more the merrier, I always say.”

Harry glanced up at him and nodded his head, before scampering off to get in line with the old folks. Lin shivered and glanced at Andrews, his disquiet plain on his face. A child that young shouldn’t have such sad eyes or such a blank face. Lin nodded to Andrews, resolved—he couldn’t do much for the child beyond teaching him the basics of Tai Chi, but it was soothing, and could be used for self-defense if necessary. Andrews nodded back, cheered to know the kid would have someone else looking out for him and trying to be a mentor of sorts for the short time he’d be around. He’d seen too many kids fall through the cracks, and end up bitter, angry, and leading criminal lives, because they’d had no outlet or escape from a bad situation at home—Harry wasn’t the only one like that who came to the center. Andrews did what he could, and hoped it was enough.

When Harry got home that night, he dimly noted that Petunia and Vernon had a whispered conversation—Petunia sounded urgent, Vernon dismissive, though he couldn’t hear what they were actually saying—his mind was still bye-bye; he wasn't yet ready to deal with the horror of his existence.

The whispers cut off, and then Vernon called Dudley to come in for dinner. Dudley hopped off the couch and waddled to the kitchen, knocking Harry aside without really looking at him.


Harry docilely followed her call, somewhat surprised to learn he was getting to eat dinner that night, and at the table with the rest of them no less. Petunia’s smile got fixed and uncomfortable when she spotted him, and Vernon huffed at her a bit, and turned to glance at him as well, only to flinch slightly when he got a look at his blank, robotic face. Petunia wrung her hands, and her smile grew more fixed yet.

“Well…sit down, boy.”
Harry sat, but didn’t move to touch the food. Dudley was already busily stuffing his face. Petunia and Vernon exchanged a speaking glance, and sat down as well.

“Well, go on then, eat. We don’t waste food in this house.” Vernon blustered, though his voice seemed to lack some of its usual bite.

Harry began eating. Vernon and Petunia exchanged another uncomfortable glance, and started eating as well.

When Harry was done, he sat there quietly. Dudley began getting distracted from watching the tv to stare at him in bemusement. He got distracted enough, he even stopped eating. Aunt Petunia’s face began looking tight and frozen again.

“Boy…go take your bath, why don’t you?”

Harry sat there and stared at her.

“Well? Go on!”

“Don’t you need to test the water temperature before I do?” Harry was only allowed to wash in cold water—hot water cost money.

“Just go. Don’t play around or make a mess.”

Harry looked at her oddly, but trotted off to get his pajamas and take his bath.

When he was gone, Dudley stared at his parents in confusion. “That’s a new kind of freaky, huh?” Petunia gave Vernon a look, and though he didn’t look pleased he nodded.

“Yeah…but you know that boy, always a bit odd, that one. Uh, Duddy…we need to talk to you about something. The boy is going to be moving into your second bedroom…”

Dudley’s reaction was instantaneous “NOOOOOoooooo It’s miiiiiinnnnneee! I don’t want him in there I don’t I don’t I don’t!”

“That will be quite enough of that!” Petunia snapped with uncharacteristic sternness. Dudley was so surprised that his whining and crying actually cut off.

“You’re both getting older. He was always so tiny, that keeping him in the cupboard was perfectly fine. He’s about due for a growth spurt at some time. If he gets too big for in there he might end up with bone problems or something. More than that though, you haven’t been taking proper care of your second bedroom. I sent the boy up there today to clean it out. It wasn’t a storage space, it was a trash heap. I like a clean and orderly house, young man. If you can’t be trusted to take care of your space and keep it clean and orderly, than obviously you have too much space to take care of. For that reason, and the fact that the boy is going to need a bigger room at some point, your father and I decided to do this.”

“Hey, Dudders, the weather’s getting warm; tomorrow, after school we should go for ice cream, eh, just the three of us.”

“What are we going to do with the freak?”

“Your cousin has been going somewhere most days. Do you have any idea where he goes?”
Dudley shrugged. “He runs really fast.”

“I see. Well…he goes somewhere, so it’ll just be us. What do you say? I’ll come home a little early tomorrow.”

“Alright.” Dudley agreed, content.

He went back to eating with gusto and watching tv, and Petunia and Vernon sighed in relief that the crisis had passed.

A short time later, they heard Harry’s footsteps on the stairs. Vernon headed off to inform him that he needed to gather up his things and move to Dudley’s second bedroom, as his Aunt wanted her storage closet back. It wouldn’t do for the boy to go getting ideas that he was getting privileged or something. He still needed discipline and lots of it…they were just maybe, softening their stance…a bit. A tiny bit.

Alright, the boy’s robot face had freaked them all out and they wanted to make it stop. That’s all.

When Harry woke in the morning, he was tired, but his mind had returned to normal. His life sucked, there was no denying it, but hiding from it wasn’t going to help anything. He was learning and training and doing everything he could to protect himself. No one was coming to help him or save him. He had to do it on his own, and he would. One day, he would be safe from those who wanted to use and abuse him, he would accept nothing less.

Later, at breakfast, as everyone was getting ready to leave for the day, the telephone rang.

“Boy! Mrs. Figg needs some chores done today. Go there straight after breakfast, no dawdling, do you hear?”

“Yes, Aunt Petunia.”

“Ha! You’re going to be stuck with the crazy cat lady when I’m out getting ice cream later, right dad?”

“Right-o, Dudders. You behave yourself, you hear boy? Don’t be giving Mrs. Figg none of your cheek.”

“Yes, Uncle Vernon.”

A sense of apprehension had dogged Harry all the way to Mrs. Figg’s house—it couldn’t be coincidence that his handler wanted him to stop by just a day after discovering the cats were watching him, right?

Was she going to drug him? Question him? Were they going to try triggering him and sending him out on assignment? Was she going to check to make sure the memory blocks were holding? Was he going to be eliminated in some freak ‘accident’?

He ended up calling up his meditation quiet place so that he would calm down somewhat—it wouldn’t do to tip her off to the fact that he suspected anything. On his way over, he found himself a short but thick stick and hid it in his pocket—when you were desperate, any weapon would do.
Mrs. Figg’s house came into view. Harry took a deep breath to steady his nerves, straightened his shoulders and gripped his stick, before approaching and knocking on the door.

Mrs. Figg offered him tea and a snack when he arrived, but Harry declined. If she was going to try drugging him, he certainly wasn’t going to make it easy for her.

“Oh…well, alright. If you’re not hungry or anything… Um, why don’t we sit down for a bit. You can tell me about how you’re doing these days.”

Harry sat down across from her at the kitchen table and eyed her curiously.

“And of course, if you have any questions for me…which I’m sure you do” she added pointedly while looking him in the eye “you could ask those too. Won’t that be nice?”

“I guess.”

Mrs. Figg looked at him expectantly, and seemed a bit confused when he didn’t immediately start pelting her with questions. Harry, truth be told, was a little confused himself—if she was his handler, why did she seem to be hinting around for him to ask her questions? Was she trying to trick him into revealing he knew more about what was going on, or was she trying to clue him in that something was going on?

“So…how’s school? Getting good grades?”

“I’m about average.”

“I see. Um…favorite class?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t particularly like any of them. I don’t really hate any of them either.”

“You must have one you like more than others.”

“Eh.” Harry replied shrugging again.

Mrs. Figg drummed her fingers on the table and tried again. “Um…are you part of any activities? On a sports team, perhaps?”

“No.”

“Hobbies?”

“No.”

“I see. Do you have any questions for me? About the cats? Anything?”

Harry locked eyes with her—she was still giving him that pointed stare and leaning slightly towards him as though urging him to ask her something. He decided to take a gamble; he gripped his stick a bit tighter beneath the table just in case.

“I’ve noticed that you have a lot of cats. They seem to go out of their way to follow me around. It seems an odd thing for cats to do. It made me wonder if there was something going on that I wasn’t aware of.”

Mrs. Figg relaxed and sat back in her seat and smiled a bit.
“Well, Dumbledore said you weren’t to know anything, but since you’ve figured it all out, I suppose there’s no harm in telling you!” she said brightly. “Harry, you’re a wizard.”

Harry raised an eyebrow and looked at her. He was puzzled to be sure—he was a wizard? Where did the ninjas fit in? And who the hell was Dumbledore, and why did he not want him knowing anything?

“I’m a wizard?” he repeated.

“Yes, dear.”

“Uh-huh. Where do the cats fit in? And who the hell is Dumbledore?”

“Language. As for the rest, well, that’s a long story.”

“I’ve got time.”

“Well, the story starts when you were just a baby…before you were born really. You see, there was an evil wizard, so evil, folks don’t dare say his name; they refer to him as “You-know-who”, or “He who shall not be named”…”

“They were afraid to say his name? That’s pretty stupid. Kids in this neighborhood are all scared of Dudley, but no one’s afraid to say his name.”

“There’s a reason for it! He had a taboo put on it. If you said his name, you not only got a horrible feeling from it, but the Snatchers would appear wherever you were and just carry you off. People learned right quick not to go around saying his name—you get Snatched, and either were never seen again, or the next time folks saw you, you were fighting on his side. It was a terrible time, you can’t imagine! But then that night…Halloween, his power was broken—by you, Harry. You’re famous in the wizarding world.”

“I’m famous.” Harry repeated. Mrs. Figg nodded earnestly.

“Your parents were targeted, and so they went into hiding. They had been fighting as part of the Order, resisting his reign of terror. I guess they were just seen as too dangerous to leave alive any longer or something… In any case, they went into hiding, but the secret keeper betrayed them… That horrible man! After all these years, I still can’t believe it! Everyone thought they were like brothers!”

“Secret keeper?” Harry prompted.

Mrs. Figg shook her head and waved a hand as though banishing the subject. “Never mind dear, it’s not important now.”

“You can’t just say something like that and then refuse to talk about it! Who was this man? And what is a secret keeper?”

Mrs. Figg told him about the war, and the Order of the Phoenix—a secret vigilante army run by that Dumbledore fellow she mentioned earlier. Apparently both his parents, Mrs. Figg and Sirius
Black—his father’s best friend, and the keeper of the secret that hid their location, were all members. Sirius had betrayed them, which allowed “You know who” to find them and kill them. For some reason—no one knew why, exactly—when he tried to kill Harry as well, the curse had bounced back, destroying him, and leaving Harry with the lightning-bolt scar on his forehead. Harry’s scar was famous, and he was known by the rather inane title of ‘The Boy Who Lived’. He seemed to have been credited with ending the war. Dumbledore had sent someone off to fetch him and deliver him to his aunt, and then set Mrs. Figg the task of monitoring the neighborhood in case any of “You Know Who’s” followers came looking to get him.

When she finished, she looked uneasy. “I really wasn’t supposed to let you know so much. You weren’t to anything at all until your Hogwarts letter came. It seems that was part of the deal with your Aunt to make her agree to take you. She’s not fond of wizards, and she didn’t want them coming by her house."

“Hogwarts?” Harry prompted. Mrs. Figg bit her lip.

“In for a knut, in for a galleon I guess…but Harry, I don’t want to get in trouble for spilling the beans like this. You’ll keep this between us, won’t you?”

“Sure.”

“Hogwarts is where young witches and wizards go to school.”

“Did you go there?”

“No. I’m a squib, you see.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m kind of the opposite of your mother. She was a witch born to non-magical parents; I’m a non-magical person born to magical parents. I can’t transfigure so much as a teacup, I’m afraid.”

“Transfigure?”

“Goodness, you’re just full of questions, aren’t you? I can’t tell you much about Hogwarts, beyond what everyone knows.”

“Let’s start with that then.”

“Oh, um, alright…well, it’s a big castle. Very pretty from what I’ve been told…”

That evening at home, Harry had a lot to think about. Harry’s mind was awhirl with curiosity at the hidden magical world that had been revealed to him.

It hadn’t escaped his notice that all the wizards he’d met thus far, when he’d described them to Mrs. Figg, all turned out to be members of the Order, which meant they, much like Mrs. Figg, all worked for Dumbledore—and were in violation of the ‘deal’ that had supposedly been made with his Aunt to leave them alone.

She used to take him with her when she went places, once upon a time. When oddly dressed people kept approaching them in the street or in the stores, bowing to him or shaking his hand, she’d
always gotten upset and driven them away. She finally got to the point where she’d leave him with Mrs. Figg, or just do all the errands and shopping when he and Dudley were at school or something.

Beyond that, there was also the fact that one needed a wand to go to the hidden wizard places. He’d asked if Mrs. Figg could, and she said yes, she could go to Diagon Alley—the wizard shopping district—she just needed the barkeep to let her thought the gateway. He’d asked if she could take him, but she had refused. It seemed Daedelus Diggle—a member of the Order, and one of the wizards who had approached him previously—hung out in the pub all day watching who came and went so he could report it to Dumbledore. Apparently, he wouldn’t be too pleased if she started showing him wizarding places before his ‘proper’ introduction when he was eleven.

Dumbledore again. He hadn’t even met the man and he was already thoroughly sick of him.

The more he thought about it, the more annoyed he got. All the times wizards had approached him, they’d been in London—where all the wizarding areas were. They either had people watching him closely so they would know when he was in London so they could drive them away, or there was something on him that alerted them. He was going to have to figure out which it was.

Either way, he wasn’t happy. Who did these people think they were, anyway? He had as much right as anyone to go on outings! Because of their stupid interference, he’d be lucky if he even got out of his immediate neighborhood any time in the near future. He also found himself feeling strangely bad for his aunt. Her sister was a witch, and got to go off to a castle to go to school, while she was left behind. Then, her sister is murdered, and she’s left to raise her son, who also has magic powers.

He tried to imagine growing up with Dudley if he’d had magic powers, while he himself had none, and could barely contain the shudder of horror at the very idea. Considering how helpless he felt right now, even knowing he had powers—it could only be that much worse for Aunt Petunia. She’d gotten nastier and more spiteful over the years, and he had a feeling it was in direct correlation to how many wizards had made a point of butting into their lives.

She seemed to realize it too, if yesterday was any indication. She’d been her usual nasty self, and then seemed to feel bad about it or something. Next thing he knew, he was being called in to dinner, given a chance to take a warm shower, and moving in to Dudley’s second bedroom. He resolved to be nicer to her from now on. She didn’t have any powers to fight back against these people; he did. He might not always like them, but they were the only family he’d ever known. He’d be damned if any wizards were going to push them around on his watch.

Feeling resolved, he got ready for bed. It had been a long day, and his head was still spinning from everything he’d learned.

“Shikamaru, wake up.”

Harry perked up, realizing he was having another ninja dream.

“Sit up, I have something I want you to read. Now that you’ve started getting a handle on your chakra, it’s time for you to start training in our family jutsu as well.” He was at "home" this time, and his "father" was there, handing him a large, very old looking, scroll.

“Our family style? Does that mean my parents were actually ninja? Or...are these cousins? Or are
all the ninjas people like me who are just snatched and trained up in secret, and we’re all just assigned a ‘family’ to learn specific things from? This is all so confusing. I still don’t know where the ninjas fit in. Who is behind them training me? Is it Dumbledore? You-know-who? The muggle government? The magical one? Even with everything Mrs. Figg told me, there’s still so much I just don’t know!”

He unrolled the scroll, and began reading. The Nara clan specialized in controlling shadows. The scroll detailed how to synchronize one’s chakra with your own shadow, which was the first step you needed to master before you could try the next step, which was grabbing control of someone else’s shadow. There was also an advanced Shadow Clone, which instead of just being a flimsy illusion was a solid copy of yourself. It was dangerous as it sucked up a lot of power, but it would be really damned useful.

“Control shadows? Cool! I can think of so many ways to use that. You could grab people, or spy on them, or make the shadow look like a monster on the wall so they’ll get scared, or turn around and look, and you can sneak past them... I wonder if you can travel through them? It might take some practice, but think how useful that would be!”

He did his best to memorize all the steps. He knew from experience that these dreams rarely went back over the same material, and he’d only rarely had chances to read scrolls with techniques when at the school, at "home", or at the ninja library in the strange town they all lived in. He had one chance and one chance only to absorb this lesson, and then he’d have to practice on his own. Happily, this was something he could do at home, since it didn’t require jumping around or punching and kicking.

He couldn’t wait to get started.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who are interested in reading the stories in the order they take place, "The Strange Life of Shikamaru Nara" is next in the timeline, taking place between chapters 3 and 4.
It had been three years since Harry had begun his ninja training, and then learned that he was also a wizard. Over that time there had been some changes in the Dursley household. Harry had followed through on his resolve to be nicer to his aunt—he did his chores without having to be prompted, offered to help carry bags when she came back from shopping, thanked her for dinner and breakfast—little things like that. She had warmed up to him a bit—alright, a very little bit, but it was there, he was sure of it. She relaxed, and that made uncle Vernon relax. Things stayed calm and peaceful, and everyone seemed happier. Dudley had been confused by the changes at first, but he’d clued in that things were different. It didn’t stop him and his gang from chasing him, however, all Harry’s exercise had left him in much better shape than Dudley and his gang, and he’d already been faster than them.

He had a feeling they weren’t going to remain so peaceful for much longer. Harry’s eleventh birthday was at the end of the month. He stifled a sigh; he much preferred the more laid back Dursleys to the ‘obsessed with normalcy’ Dursleys. It irked him no end that things would likely go back to how they were, once his Hogwarts letter came. The only good thing he could see was that he’d be gone most of the year, and so wouldn’t have to put up with it for long between now and when he graduated, but it still sucked.

He heard the mail slot clank, and rose to go get the mail. There were a couple of letters lying on the floor beneath the mail slot when he got out there—water bill, electric bill… The last was a thick envelope made of some odd, heavy paper. It was addressed in emerald green ink ‘Mr. Harry Potter, the smallest bedroom, no. 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey’, and was sealed with a coat of arms with a lion, eagle, badger and snake on the four quarters. Deciding to put off the drama as long as possible, he stuck the letter in his pocket and then returned to the kitchen to hand the bills off to Uncle Vernon.

It was several more hours before he had a chance to actually read the thing—he was busy doing chores all morning. When he finally got the chance to open the thing, he found himself rather irritated at how lacking in information it was.

Mrs. Figg told him that ‘he wasn’t to know anything’ at Dumbledore’s orders. His relatives were normal folks without a lick of magic, and he lived in an ordinary neighborhood—and yet, for some reason, the only thing the stupid letter said was that he’d been invited to wizard school, and they awaited his owl with his acceptance of the invitation, and then it gave him an list of equipment he needed to buy. There was nothing else. How on earth did they expect him to even know it wasn’t a trick? It didn’t tell him where he was supposed to go to buy his equipment, or how he was to get to the school once that was done! There was also the fact that muggles didn’t keep owls around to deliver mail for them…not that this letter had even been delivered by owl, it had come through the mail slot with the regular mail!

The whole thing just irritated him. It’s like they were being deliberately obtuse. How on earth did
people like his mother even end up there? Most folks, upon getting a letter like this, would have to assume it was an elaborate prank of some sort, and not even a particularly funny one.

While Harry stared blankly at the letter and then set it aside with a huff, he called sat back and tried to think of how things would have played out had he actually been as ignorant as he was supposed to be.

“Well, for one thing, I wouldn’t have been expecting a letter. I probably would have been so surprised that I wouldn’t have thought to hide it. Aunt Petunia would have realized what it was… possibly Uncle Vernon as well. They would have freaked, maybe taken it off of me. I would have been eaten alive with curiosity…”

It still didn’t make any sense to him. So, he would have been curious, so what? He likely would never have seen the letter again, probably would never have a chance to read it. What was the point?

Feeling thoroughly irritated at the whole situation, Harry stuck the letter under his pillow, and headed out. It was summer, it was a beautiful day, and he had library books to return. Maybe he’d get lucky, and there’d be some new movies to watch.

The following day, two Hogwarts letters were delivered through the mail slot. Harry frowned at them. He was beginning to have an inkling what was going on here. Harry scooped them up and stuck them in his pocket, and took the rest of the mail in to Uncle Vernon. The unopened letters joined the other under his pillow.

The next day, when Harry was making breakfast, he found a letter stuffed inside the egg carton. He swiped it and hid it in his pocket before his Aunt Petunia noticed it. He was beginning to get irritated.

On the fourth day, Harry was no longer able to hide what was going on. Hundreds of Hogwarts letters poured out of the fireplace and flooded the room. As one could imagine, there was complete pandemonium. It got worse. Outside, hundreds of owls were sitting on every rooftop, on all the power lines…and they were all staring at the house. The neighbors were all peeking out the windows, and standing in the street, gaping at the sight.

Harry twitched in irritation. Weren’t the wizards supposed to be hiding, and not alerting the ordinary folks to the existence of magic? What the hell did they think they were playing at?

He glanced back at his relatives and sighed internally. Uncle Vernon was purple and his eyes were bulging out of his head. Aunt Petunia was hysterical. Dudley was just gaping stupidly at the birds and the letter-covered living room. Poor guy, he was the only one who had no clue what the hell was going on. It was likely a common occurrence for him, but still.

Uncle Vernon told everyone to pack a bag. Harry went and did so without complaining about it like Dudley did. His relatives were upset enough already.

They drove for hours and stopped at a restaurant to get something to eat. The waiter brought them a Hogwarts letter. Vernon paid the tab and hustled them out of there.

They stopped for the night at a cheap motel. The concierge gave them a Hogwarts letter.

Vernon hustled them out of there and kept driving rather than stick around. He stopped after a bit,
and got out, telling the rest of them to stay put. He returned a while later with a long, wrapped package, and then kept driving.

Hours later, Uncle Vernon led them to a rickety boat in the middle of a huge rainstorm. He took them to an abandoned lighthouse out on a tiny, rocky island. The place was derelict, and none of them had eaten for hours, and the place was cold and dirty. They were all wet from the storm outside. All in all, it was shaping up to be a pretty miserable night.

**Boom. Boom. Crash!**

Harry woke with a gasp and gaped at the giant that stood framed in the doorway. He stepped into the room and picked up the door from where he’d knocked it off the hinges, and set it roughly back in the frame.
The noise had woken the Dursleys, who had all come running out, frightened and disoriented from being woken from a sound sleep.

Uncle Vernon had a shotgun in his hands – must have been what was in that package he’d gotten—and brandished it at the giant. Aunt Petunia’s face was white and she looked completely terrified.

“Get out of here! I’m armed!” Vernon shouted.

“Ah, shut it, Dursley, you old prune.” The giant scoffed, simply snatching the shotgun from Vernon’s hands and tying it into a knot without any visible effort. Vernon’s face whitened, and Aunt Petunia looked ready to pass out. Dudley whimpered and hid behind her.

The giant looked around the place, his eyes finally landing on Harry who had stayed quietly where he’d been sleeping and watched the drama unfold.

“Ah! Harry! There you are! I’ll tell you, I had a heck of a time finding this place!”

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” Harry demanded. “It’s the middle of the night, and you just barged in here, without so much as a by-your-leave, ruined my uncle’s brand-new shotgun, and then act like it’s all perfectly normal? What the hell?”

The giant blinked, and looked befuddled, as though he couldn’t imagine what Harry’s problem was.

“I’m Hagrid, keeper of the keys and grounds at Hogwarts. You know all about Hogwarts, of course.”

“No! We refuse! J-just go away! We swore when we took him in we were going to stamp that nonsense out of him!” Vernon blustered.

“Bah! Like a great muggle like you has any say!”

“They are my guardians.” Harry pointed out mildly.

Hagrid looked at Harry aghast.

“What? Harry Potter not go to Hogwarts? Why, the very idea! What, did these muggles brainwash you or something? Don’t you worry, Harry me lad, I’ll take care o’ them!” he growled, brandishing the pink umbrella he had in one hand.
Harry was confused for a second, wondering what the man was planning to do with an umbrella, of all things, when it occurred to him that it might be a disguised wand. He was in motion before the thought even had a chance to complete. He smacked the umbrella down so it was pointing at the ground and not at the Dursleys. There was a brief flash, and the ground in front of them grew a pig tail.

Dudley gaped, Vernon gasped and began spluttering, and Petunia shrieked.

Harry stared at the pig tail in astonishment for a moment—even knowing magic was real didn’t make the sight of a pig tail wiggling in the ground any less strange—before moving to stand between Hagrid and the Dursleys and holding his arms out.

“I take it you’re the people who sent me those odd letters, are you?”

Behind him, Vernon and Petunia stopped spluttering and stared at the back of his head in astonished horror.

“I have to say, from what I’ve seen so far, I am most definitely not impressed. You send a thousand stupid letters, when one informative one would have served, you bombard us with creepy owls that line the street and stare at us—how the hell are we supposed to explain stuff like that to the neighbors, huh? You chase us across several shires, and then bust in the door in the middle of the night, and threaten everyone? You’ve got a lot of bloody nerve, that’s all I can say.”

Hagrid spluttered and tried to answer, but Harry glared at him and he fell bewilderedly silent.

“Everyone, get your things. We’re going home.”

The Dursleys exchanged glances and did just that.

Harry waited till they’d gone out of the room, and dropped his arms, before stomping over to get his knapsack.

“Harry…there seems to be some sort of misunderstanding…”

The Dursleys came back into the room, clutching their own bags, and formed up around Harry, adding their glares to his.

“There’s no misunderstanding. Tell your bosses, or whatever, if they want me at Hogwarts, they’d best be prepared to present themselves like a normal, decent person, at the front door, at a normal hour, and they’d best be prepared to answer a lot of questions.” Harry started towards the door, and the Dursleys scurried after him. Harry glanced back once, at the knotted shotgun lying on the floor. “Take that when you go. We’ll be expecting reimbursement.”

Hagrid combed his beard nervously, still bewildered by the hostile reception.

“Damn, Dumbledore’s not gonna like this at all.” He muttered.

The ride home was quiet. The Dursleys were shell-shocked and bewildered, Harry was fuming, and they were all tired, damp, and chilled besides.

They got home around four a.m., and everyone just stumbled to their respective rooms to fall almost immediately into a deep sleep.
Harry woke, still groggy and gritty eyed. As he rolled to his back, his arm slipped under his pillow, and he hesitated for a moment. The space beneath the pillow was empty, but he had the nagging feeling that something was supposed to be under there. He sat up, flipped up the pillow, searched the floor beneath the bed and behind it. Seeing nothing, he sat up and rubbed at his head, wondering why he felt like he’d forgotten something. He scanned the room, but nothing seemed out of place. Still confused, he stumbled off towards the bathroom.

Once washed up and dressed, he clattered downstairs, and halted at the sight of a wrapped package leaning beside the door.

“That’s right…Uncle Vernon bought a shotgun…we were out in the country, and were going to go hunting. The ‘hunting lodge’ was actually a derelict shack, and a big storm came in out of nowhere. The roof was leaking and we were all getting wet, so we decided to turn around and come home. It was a long drive and we got in really late…which is why I’m so tired…” he thought to himself.

The sight of the clear and empty living room floor seemed to nag at him for some reason. He had a flash of an image of the living room covered in white, but it was gone before he could fully grasp it. He rubbed his head again, confused and irritated. The nagging feeling that he was forgetting something just wouldn’t go away.

The Dursleys were already in having breakfast. They all looked as tired and out of sorts as he felt.

“You’ll have to whip up more if you want to eat.” Petunia told him as he came in.

Harry nodded and went to grab the makings of his own breakfast. He was busy frying up his eggs and bacon when the doorbell rang.

Petunia sighed and rose to her feet to go answer it, patting down her hair and making sure she looked presentable while doing so.

Harry was loading down his plate, when they heard Petunia’s voice hissing in a quiet argument with whoever was at the door. Vernon frowned and heaved himself to his feet to go investigate. Harry and Dudley exchanged a glance and shrugged. Harry was too hungry to care who was at the door. It was funny, but he felt like he hadn’t eaten for days rather than just a few hours. Maybe his body was gearing up for a growth spurt and wanted the extra nutrients? He certainly hoped so—he was sick of being so short.

He finished eating, and was moving to wash his dishes—he grabbed Aunt Petunia’s and Uncle Vernon’s as well. Uncle Vernon came in and announced to Dudley in a stiff, artificially cheerful voice, that they were going out for the day, and to run along and get dressed. Dudley finished the last of his breakfast, and waddled off to do just that, already asking if he could get a new videogame that had just come out. Harry snagged his dishes as well and washed them, washed everyone’s juice glasses and Aunt Petunia’s tea cup. He was just wiping down the table and the stove and the sink, when he heard Dudley thunder back down the stairs, and then the front door close as he and Uncle Vernon left.

His mind was already making a list of things he wanted to do with the rest of the day when Aunt Petunia called him to the living room. He wandered out and found her sitting stiffly across from an equally stiff woman with black hair pulled back into a severe bun, wearing a tartan skirt. She looked like someone you didn’t want to cross. Her lips were thin and her nostrils pinched. Aunt Petunia looked like she’d just sucked on a lemon. He looked between the two of them uncertainly, not sure he wanted to be in the middle of whatever was going on. Petunia tried to smile, but it
looked more like a grimace than anything, and patted the seat beside her.

Harry sat down rather gingerly, and slanted a questioning look at his aunt, before turning his attention to the stern woman across from them.

“Are you from Social Services?”

Petunia choked, and the stern woman glared at her frostily, before turning back to Harry.

“Why would you think that, Mr. Potter? Is there some reason Social Services needs to be looking in on you?”

Harry counted off his reasons on his fingers. “Well, you look like a social worker, Aunt Petunia isn’t happy you’re here, and you’re here to talk to me. I’m the only orphan in the house, and I guess Social Services would look in on folks like me. It seems to make sense.”

“Ah, I see. I must say I’m glad those are your only reasons for wondering.”

Petunia glared at her.

“I’m not a social worker, Mr. Potter. My name is Professor Minerva McGonagall. I’m the Assistant Headmistress and Transfiguration teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

Harry blinked and stared at her.

“You, Mr. Potter, are a wizard. Your parents, before they died, made arrangements with us to see to your education. Here, read this. Next year, and the years after, a letter like this will come to you by owl before the start of the new school year to give you your booklists and any special announcements that need to be made. We have a little bit of time before we need to leave and do your school shopping, during which I can answer any questions you might have.”

Harry took the heavy parchment envelope, and stared at the four-quartered coat of arms on the wax seal on the flap and frowned. It was all strangely familiar. He got a brief flash of himself holding a similar letter in his hand (or was it two letters?) while standing by the front door near the mail slot, but it was there and gone before he could hold on to it.

“Something wrong, Mr. Potter?”

“No. Nothing’s wrong…this just looks familiar for some reason.” He replied absently as he opened the letter and started reading.

The letter was fairly short and straightforward—you’re invited to wizard school, buy this stuff, term starts September 1st.

“Where is this place?”

“It’s a castle in Northern Scotland.”

“How am I supposed to get there?”

“The Hogwarts express leaves from King’s Cross Station at precisely 11 am on September 1st. You’ll be given a ticket and instructions for boarding before we part ways this afternoon.”

“You said my parents made arrangements. Did they go there too?”
“Yes, Mr. Potter. Your parents, may they rest in peace, were both proud Gryffindors while they were with us. I myself was a Gryffindor, as was our esteemed Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. At the current time, not only am I assistant Headmistress, I am also the Head of house Gryffindor.”

“House?” Harry prompted.

This was already beginning to be strangely reminiscent of his conversation two years ago with Mrs. Figg.

“There’s four of them. I know that one wears red. Your mother’s uniform had red all over it. It clashed something awful with her hair. That friend of hers, that awful boy, wore green. They were the slinkers or something.” Petunia interjected.

McGonagall pressed her lips together briefly as though trying not to laugh.

“Green is House Slytherin” McGonagall corrected “but you must be mistaken.”

Petunia bristled and glared at McGonagall hotly.

“Don’t tell me I’m mistaken! They were thick as thieves for years those two, her and that awful boy! It was him that told her she was a witch. She dropped him like a hot potato, once he was no longer useful, of course. I even warned him it was going to happen. He never believed me, but she did just that, and turned around and married the boy that had been bullying him for years—him and his friends! Don’t tell me I’m mistaken. Severus Snape his name was, from Spinner’s End—a horrid place on the wrong side of the tracks.” She sniped.

McGonagall looked shocked and mortified. “Severus Snape is a Hogwarts Professor—Head of Slytherin House, in fact. I do believe this is an inappropriate line of discussion, given the circumstances.”

She pulled herself together and regained her former aplomb.

“We should probably get going. We’ve a lot of stops to make to get your school shopping done. Any further questions will hopefully be answered during the course of our trip and from the orientation materials.”

“Orientation materials?” Harry repeated, glancing down at the distinctly unhelpful school letter and back up at the Professor rather pointedly.

McGonagall blinked and looked puzzled for a moment. “Oh, dear…I didn’t give you the… no harm done. Just a moment.” She pulled a long, wooden stick from her sleeve and flicked it at him. A number of pamphlets appeared on his lap, with such useful titles as 'Handwriting guide for muggleborns', ‘Getting around when you are older and how to do it’, ‘Places to go and things to enjoy when you get older’, ‘What is an auror, and why do I care?’, ‘List of useful books and journals for supplemental reading’, and last but not least, ‘Muggle friendly services’.

Harry flicked through them and looked back at McGonagall. “So…where are we going, anyway?”

“We’ll be going to Diagon Alley, the wizard shopping center.”

“You said my parents made arrangements to see to my education, correct? What sort of arrangements?”

“There was a fund left to pay for your school things.”
“What about school tuition?”
“Taken care of.”
“It’s already paid for, or it will be taken from this fund you mentioned?”
“That I don’t know. You’ll have to ask the goblins.”
“Goblins?”
“Gringott’s, the wizard bank, is run by goblins.”
“Good at maths, are they?”
“One would assume so, yes. I would recommend that you be polite, and careful when dealing with them.”
“I’m always polite.”
“Good to hear. Is there anything you need to get, or can we be on our way?”
“Sure, just let me grab a hat and we can go.”

McGonagall led them down the street and then to the park. She looked around to see if anyone was nearby to see them, and then gripped Harry’s arm. “This may feel a bit strange, but don’t be alarmed.”

Harry didn’t have a chance to ask questions, he suddenly felt like he was being stretched through a rubber straw at high speed. Just when the feeling was becoming unbearable, it stopped as suddenly as it had begun. He and McGonagall were in an alley that he didn’t recognize.

“Apparating.” She explained as she took off at a brisk pace. “It’s not so bad when you’re the one in control. We’re in London, by the way. We’ve a few more people to meet before we can begin. They should be waiting for us, in fact there they are now. Come along.”

Up ahead was a group of several adults and three kids his age. The adults perked up when they spotted Professor McGonagall coming; the kids eyed Harry curiously.

“I hope none of you have been waiting long?”
“No, we’ve just arrived.”

“Likewise”

“Good, good. Will any of you be joining us?”

“Oh, Sid and I certainly will. Why, it seems like it will be ever so interesting. Don’t you agree, luv?”

“Oh, it’s a certainty! You don’t mind, do you, my boy?”

“No at all, father. I think it’ll be jolly good fun.”
“Any of the rest of you?”

“We’d like to, really, but we’ve appointments all afternoon, I’m afraid.”

“My parents are dentists” the little girl with the bushy hair announced in a very prim and bossy voice.

“You don’t say! How lovely. Good work, is it?”

“We like it.”

“Capitol, old chum.”

“Will you be staying, Mrs. Thomas?”

“Can’t I’m afraid, I’ve got six more at home. The neighbor’s with them, but I can’t really be gone too long. Maybe another time.”

The black boy looked disappointed, but unsurprised by his mother’s announcement.

“Well, lads…and lass…seems it will just be us.” The cheery blonde man spoke up.

“Seems that way.” McGonagall agreed. “The rest of you needn’t worry about picking the children back up. I’ll see to it that they’re each returned home when we’re finished.

The retreating parents said their goodbyes, and then the remaining group was ushered to the door that was right next to all of them.

“Grab hold of Justin there, would you?” McGonagall directed the remaining parents.

“My word! Where did that come from? How remarkable!”

“You couldn’t see it, father? Well, I say! Maybe there’s something to this magic thing after all!”

Harry and the black boy exchanged an amused glance as the trio went through first, and then followed McGonagall and the little girl inside.

Harry scanned the inside of the pub curiously. It was rather old and run down, with exposed beams and wooden trestle tables scattered about the common room. The air was redolent with blue-grey pipe smoke and the peaty smell of strong ale. Strangely dressed people littered the expanse, most of them looking at the group of them curiously. Front and center was an old man that Harry recognized. He was wearing a silly purple hat. He had bowed to him in a shop once and shook his hand. Aunt Petunia had driven him off.

He scanned the group of them and zeroed in on Harry—in spite of the fact that he was half-hidden behind the boy beside him, and wearing a hat to boot, and knew, just knew, that he was about to shout or something and draw everyone’s attention to him.

“WELL MY WORD!” he exclaimed brightly in a ringing voice guaranteed to draw every eye and ear his way. “IS IT? WHY, IT IS! IT’S…WHOAH, URK!”

Harry released the man’s shadow, which he had used to pull his feet out from under him, cutting him off in mid-yell.

“My goodness. Is that man alright?”

“Maybe we should clear the way in case they need to take him to the hospital.” Harry suggested.
“Oh, that’s a good idea!”

McGonagall eyed the fallen man in idle concern, but he seemed more stunned than really hurt.

“Yes, let’s. We’ve a lot of places to go.” She agreed. She led them through the back doorway and into a dead-end alley filled with trashcans. Behind them, they could hear the fallen old man shouting and demanding to know who had hexed him.

The cheery parents, and the other kids were all looking at the alleyway they were in with an air of distinct disappointment.

“Don’t be fooled. The gateway is hidden.” McGonagall explained as she withdrew her wand and tapped three bricks. The bricks began to spin and roll back, revealing a tall archway with the legend ‘welcome to Diagon alley’ inscribed across it.

“Well! That’s more like it!” the man said cheerfully as he and his family bustled through.

They were all so busy gaping and craning their heads at all the sights, they nearly lost one another in the crowd.

“Alright, everyone. First stop, Gringott’s.” McGonagall ordered, hustling them ahead of her.

“I’m Dean, by the way” the black boy told Harry.

“Harry. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Hermione!” the little girl interjected, moving to stand between them. “This is all so exciting, isn’t it? Oh, I do hope we have a chance to look around!”

“Yeah, same here. This is all kind of weird, isn’t it?”

“I’ll say.” Harry agreed.

“So, what’s this Gringott’s place, anyone know?”

“Bank. Run by goblins.” Harry replied with a grin.

“You’re having me on!”

“Nah, that’s what the professor said, earlier. She said be polite and deal with them carefully.”

“Wicked.”

“Actual goblins? I wonder if they’re anything like in fairy stories…not that I usually bother with such rubbish.”

“Rubbish?”

“Silly stories that aren’t true. I try to stick to more useful subjects.”

“Since magic is real, you might find they’re a lot more useful than you’ve given them credit for.” Dean laughed.
They were led to a white marble building with columns, and two little men standing guard on either side of the doors. Harry was rather afraid they had all gaped rather rudely as they passed them by—but, in their defense, none of them had ever seen a goblin before. When they got inside, they saw more goblins, sitting up on high stools behind a tall counter. There were several lines of people waiting. McGonagall pointed most of them to a teller at the end of the line.

“That’s where we need to go. You can exchange your money for wizarding money there. I’m afraid you’ll need it for when we visit the shops.”

The others nodded and started off. Hermione noticed Harry and McGonagall weren’t following, and halted to see why. Dean, seeing Hermione had stopped, did so as well. McGonagall took a small golden key out of her pocket and handed it to Harry.

“There you are, that’s yours. Professor Dumbledore has been keeping it for you. You’ll need to go to one of the regular tellers. If we get done before you do, our next stop is Madame Malkins, it’s right near where we came in so just head back the way we came. No dawdling, mind you.”

Harry nodded, and examined the tiny key curiously, before trotting off. McGonagall headed towards the two kids and shooed them ahead of her.

“Professor? Why is Harry going over there? What was that key? Why was Professor Dumbledore holding on to it for him? Isn’t he the headmaster? That’s what it said on my letter…”

“Really, Miss Granger! So many questions!” McGonagall tutted.

Hermione realized McGonagall wasn’t going to answer her questions. She was a bit put out by the evasion, and so resolved to grill Harry when he returned.

Harry went and stood in line. Happily, it seemed to be moving quickly; before he knew it, it was his turn. The goblin eyed him curiously for a moment. “Business?” it barked rather gruffly.

“I was hoping I could get a statement, or a ledger or something, detailing any accounts I might have with your institution. I was told my parents made arrangements for my schooling, but I don’t know if my tuition was already paid, or if it still has to be taken. I would like to know what I have to work with for budgeting purposes. I would also like to know if we have any investments, property, or anything of the like.”

“Key” the goblin sighed, holding out a hand and wiggling his fingers impatiently. Harry handed it over. He couldn’t see what the goblin was doing as the counter was too high. “It will take a few minutes to gather that information. Do you have any other business with Gringott’s?”

“I’d like to make a withdrawal from my vault. I’d also like to know if you can exchange wizard money for muggle, or if it only goes the other way.”

“We can exchange either way.”

“What’s the exchange rate?”

“Seven pounds per galleon. It fluctuates with the market.”

“Thank you.”
The goblin called over his shoulder to another in a gruff, growly language, before turning back to face Harry. “Go with Griphook there, he’ll take you to your vault.”

Harry nodded and followed the goblin that was now lurking behind the counter. Harry was only slightly taller than him.

The goblin led him through a doorway in the back to a mine cart, on a rail, in a tunnel. The thing took off at high speed as soon as both of them were inside. Harry imagined it was much like a rollercoaster. He couldn’t help but whoop in excitement as they plunged downward and then around a sharp curve at high speed. The tunnels were a maze. He very quickly lost track of the twists and turns. He thought, several times, that he spotted large beasts half hidden in the shadows, but they passed by too quickly for him to get a good look at any of them.

“Those things we passed back there, what were they?” he asked curiously.

“You could see them? You have good eyes, human. Most can’t spot the dragons when we pass by like this.”

“I think you’re the first person who’s ever told me that. I’ve worn glasses most of my life.”

The goblin glanced back at him for a second before turning back. “Try taking them off and take a look around.”

Hesitantly, Harry removed his glasses. He really didn’t like being without them, as it always left him feeling terribly vulnerable.

Once they were removed, his eyebrows rose in surprise and confusion. He could see better without them!

“I don’t understand…I’m practically blind without them.”

“I’ve heard it rumored there was goblin blood in the Potter line. It seems there was some truth to that.” The goblin informed him. “Goblin eyes and human eyes aren’t quite the same. When you mix them, you sometimes get people who are nearly blind by human standards, but who can see exceptionally well in the dark, and can track movement quite well. You’ll have noticed many of the clerks were wearing glasses…”

“Yeah, I did notice that.”

“Goblin eyes aren’t well suited to reading. Most of the clerks end up wearing glasses, while those of us who work the tunnels don’t.”

“I was told I had my mother’s eyes.”

“Maybe she had goblin blood as well.”

“She was muggleborn though…”

“Muggleborn are simply children born of lines whose magic went fallow for a couple of generations or more. Depending on how far back her magic comes from, she could have any number of things in her background.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that. That’s interesting.”

The cart came to a stop in front of a large vault door. Griphook hopped out of the cart “Key” Harry handed it over, and Griphook inserted it in the little keyhole in the center, before running his
fingers down the center of the door. A seam appeared where his finger touched.

“You can’t open these vaults without a goblin present.” He explained.

The doors swung open and a huge billow of smoke exited. When it cleared, several mountains of gold, silver and copper were revealed. “Holy crap! This is all mine? How much does Hogwarts cost a year, do you know?”

“five hundred galleons”

“Could you tell me how much is here?”

“There’s a list by the door there.”

Harry glanced over the ledger and did some quick math in his head.

“Even if they haven’t taken out tuition yet, I’m still pretty solid. Good! I can afford to do some clothes shopping and whatnot as well. Wow! This is awesome!” Harry crowed.

Hermione waited impatiently for her turn on the stool; Dean and Justin were currently being fitted for their Hogwarts robes—ankle length, with long, billowy sleeves and a hood, plain black. Professor McGonagall told them that they’d get a crest and a colored lining that would show inside the hood and at the collar, once they were sorted into their houses. She kept one eye peeled for some sign of Harry—she was being eaten alive by curiosity. Dean and Justin stepped down, and it was finally Hermione’s turn. She eagerly climbed up on the stool, and held her arms out while a half-finished robe was pulled over her head and pinned in place. She heard the door chime ring, and craned around to see if it was Harry at last, but she was scolded to stand still. She couldn’t stand it! She needed to know!

She saw someone stepping up onto the stool next to her from the corner of her eye, and twisted in place, to see Harry standing there.

“There you are! What took you so long? What was that key? How do you know the headmaster? Why were you in a different line than the rest of us?” she asked very, very fast. Harry leaned away from her as she leaned forward intently, demanding answers.

“What business is it of yours?”

“I want to know.”

“Goody for you. Keep your rude questions to yourself next time. I don’t appreciate being interrogated.”

“You’re done, lass. Next time you’re in to be fitted, do try to stand still. It’s torturous trying to pin the hems with you squirming like that.”

Hermione barely glanced at the seamstress, she was too busy bristling in indignation at Harry. She looked ready to continue haranguing him for answers, but she was shooed off the stool so a new customer could take her place.

“That’s you done as well, lad.”
“I was hoping to get a few everyday robes as well while I was here.”

“Oh, certainly, laddie. Follow Colleen there, she’ll get you sorted.”

Hermione marched after them. “I think you have some nerve, accusing me of being rude, I was just asking a question! Why would the headmaster have your key if you don’t know him, that doesn’t make any sense! And where did that ring come from? You weren’t wearing it earlier…is that a coat of arms? Is it your family crest? What’s your last name anyway? You never did say.” On and on and on she went, pulling at his hand to see the ring better, trying to pull his hat off, talking and talking and talking… He was trying to get the rest of his robe choices made before they had to leave, but he was having trouble concentrating with the infuriating girl following him around like she was. He finally snapped and just about bit her head off. She was nearly in tears by the time he was done.

“Save it! You’re being very rude, you know. You can bloody well see I’m trying to do something here, and I already told you my business was none of yours!”

Hermione did the whole quivering lip, watery eye thing and flounced off. Harry felt vaguely guilty about losing his temper, but honestly, the girl was infuriating. He made his selections quickly, and rubbed at his head, feeling a headache brewing. He hoped the rest of the trip went quickly. He noted the clerk was not very subtly eyeballing the ring he was wearing on his left hand, and cursed Hermione for drawing attention to it. He had hoped to get some answers with regards to the puzzle the ring presented before it really came to anyone’s attention.

They did the rest of their shopping with little fuss—potions ingredients, scales, telescope, dragon-hide gloves, parchment, quills, ink, school books (and in Harry and Hermione’s case a few extras). Hermione kept very pointedly sniffing in disdain and putting her nose in the air to flounce away whenever she caught his eye.

“Sheesh! What a petty, spoiled princess. If she thinks I’m going to apologize for screaming at her, she has another thing coming.”

He had almost asked her if she wanted to do a book exchange—compile a list of things they were both interested in, and each buying half, so they could read the ones they bought and then swap—but with the way she was behaving it seemed like too much trouble.

Once their purchases were tallied, they headed out to get their wands, and then their last stop would be the owl emporium in case any of them wanted to purchase a mail owl. Harry definitely did—in fact, he already had some mail in mind to send. He’d been presented with a mystery earlier, and he wanted to get the ball rolling to solve it. Given the other things he knew about his life, the nature of the mystery had screamed at him that there was something very wrong going on. Hopefully, his inquiries on the subject would actually be taken seriously, and would reach the proper ears and channels before any resistance could be mounted to stymie his efforts. He once again cursed Hermione and her big mouth and nosiness. Just for good measure, he glared at her. She seemed a bit taken aback by the amount of venom present in the glare, and got all wobbly-lipped again. Harry’s lip curled in response and he turned away from her without a backward glance.

McGonagall allowed them to stop for ice cream once they were done shopping, figuring it would give them all a chance to get to know each other a bit before the term started. Harry forewent the ice cream, and instead busied himself writing a letter. His new owl—a beautiful snowy owl that had caught his eye the moment he entered the shop—was waiting on his shoulder, eager to get to work. She was a funny little thing—she’d gotten all bent out of shape when he asked if she’d be
able to find him again, even if he wasn’t in the same place. Prideful as anything, and very smart; he figured she’d been a good choice, even if she did rather stick out like a sore thumb in these parts. Oh, well. She should blend right in to northern Scotland in the winter, so he wasn’t going to worry about it overmuch.

He caught Hermione trying to read what he was writing without making it obvious she was doing so. She squeaked when he glared at her.

“Mind. Your. OWN. BUSINESS.” He hissed once he was sure he had her attention. “Damn it all! There goes the goddamn pouty lip again. What does it take to get through to this brat that I’m serious? Maybe I’m actually going to have to kill her!”

He finished the letter up quickly, sealed it and handed it off to Hedwig. “Her only, okay, girl?” he told her quietly. Hedwig puffed up her chest, as though to assure him that she knew her duty, nipped at his finger and flew off.

“Who did you just write to Mr. Potter?” Professor McGonagall asked.

“Can I ask a question? Why am I under so much scrutiny?”

“I have a question! Why so secretive? What are you hiding?” Hermione sniped.

“I just met you a couple of hours ago, and know nothing about you beyond your name. What the hell gives you the right to march around demanding answers of me about my personal business, and to shout said personal business to the world? Boundaries. Learn what the hell they are.”

Hermione looked ready to begin another indignant tirade, but Harry had had enough of the girl for one day. He put the paper, quill and ink, as well as Hedwig’s cage, away in his trunk and tapped the lock plate with his wand, activating the shrinking function he’d paid extra for. Once it was shrunk down to the size of a pack of cards, he stuck it in his pocket and rose to his feet.

“Mr. Potter, I’m responsible for you while we’re all out together like this. I’m afraid I can’t allow you to leave.”

“I won’t leave the alley, if you like. But if I stay around this person “ his scathing glance at Hermione left no one in doubt of who he was talking about “I’m liable to snap and go quite mad. I’ve never met a ruder person in all my life.”

“How dare you! You’re the one being rude!” Hermione shrieked indignantly.

“Quite a lively bunch you have there, Minnie.”

Harry glanced towards the speaker and found a woman who looked to be of an age with professor McGonagall bearing down on them. She had a hat with what looked to be a vulture perched on top of it. Her presence had all the weight and inevitability of an avalanche bearing down on you. She marched along, shoulders back, head up, while people scrambled to get out of her way. You could see, just by looking at her, that she’d simply bull right through you if you happened to be in the place she intended to be. There was a chubby, moon-faced boy scrambling in her wake, trying to keep up with her.

“Augusta, that’s right, your grandson will be starting this year, won’t he?”

“Yes, Neville. Neville!” she barked, “come say hello to one of your professors.”

“Um, h-hello. Pleased to meet you all.” The boy said timidly, his face going red under all the
Everyone said hello back and introduced themselves, while his grandmother scrutinized all of them. She zeroed in on the ring on Harry’s hand, and then gripped his chin between her fingers, lifting his face so she could get a better look at him. She reached as though ready to move aside his fringe so she could peer at his scar, but he gripped her wrist firmly but gently between his fingers, and gave her a warning glare. He really didn’t appreciate perfect strangers just up and manhandling him like that. Her eyes narrowed back at him and they engaged in a brief battle of wills.

She finally snorted and nodded. “I suppose you’ll do. Augusta Longbottom, Neville and I are distant cousins of yours.”

“Really? How fascinating. I wasn’t aware I had any other relatives.”

“We’re all related in one way or another.”

“I was just about to part ways with our shopping group…” Harry said leadingly.

“Splendid. You can help Neville with his shopping.”

“Augusta…” McGonagall warned.

“Oh, can it Minnie. I’ll see he gets back to wherever he needs going to.”

McGonagall hesitated and then nodded. “I suppose it will be alright. Before you go, take this. It’s your train ticket. I’m sure Augusta can give you instructions to board the platform.”

“You’re living with muggles, aren’t you?” Augusta realized. “No worries, you can go in with Neville.”

“You’re both up North. You’d have to apparate them both to King’s Cross.”

“Nonsense. He can just stay overnight and go with us to the local gateway in Clitheroe.”

“They did away with the other gateways, remember? Everyone is supposed to go through King’s Cross.”

“Stuff and nonsense. We made a fuss and had Clitheroe stay open. We’ve used that gateway for hundreds of years, and I’ve no intention of changing that, just because some ministry flunky thinks everyone converging on one gateway is a good idea. The very idea. Well, we all know the Ministry is filled with fools and incompetents.”

“It’s very kind of you to offer.” Harry accepted with aplomb.

“There, all settled.” Augusta announced. “Well, we won’t keep you any longer. We’ve still most of the list to go through. You should stop by some time before term starts, Minnie. I’ve a nice bottle of aged scotch needs opening.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

“I figured that would reel you in!” Augusta chortled.

“Oh, quiet, you!”

“Ha! I could tell you tales about this one that would curl your hair!” she told the rest of the group in a stage whisper.
“Keep in mind I’ve tales of my own, Augie.” McGonagall warned.

Dean and Justin sniggered quietly, and Hermione looked scandalized, while Justin’s parents – the Finch-Fletchleys, chortled good-naturedly.

“Nice meeting you all. I suppose I’ll see you all at school.”

“Oh, dear, before you go, we were thinking of having a little party before school starts, all of you and your parents or guardians. Oh, you’re both invited as well!” Mrs. Finch-Fletchley added to Augusta and Neville.

“That’s very kind of you.”

“Not at all, dear. Here, let me give you both our address. I was thinking the thirtieth or thereabouts? Is that good for everyone?” she asked, as she handed Harry and Augusta a slip of paper with her address and phone number on it.

“I’ll let my aunt and uncle know and get back to you if you like. My cousin Dudley will likely be coming along as well.”

“I should warn you I have six younger siblings.” Dean spoke up.

“Oh! Lovely! A nice big group.” She replied cheerfully.

“So, you recognized my ring, did you?” Harry asked once they were out of earshot of the rest of them.

“That’s the Black crest. I remember seeing in on Orion Black’s finger when we were in school together, and at the occasional social function. I know your grandmother was Dorea Black, who married Charlus Potter, but it still seems strange you would end up with it.”

“Sirius Black inherited when his mother died—he was never convicted, as it seems he never received a trial of any sort, so he was able to. However, as he was still in prison, it left things kind of in limbo. I’m his heir, it seems, so I was able to claim the ring on some sort of technicality. So, he’s a cousin too? And my grandmother was Dorea Black. Thanks for that. I don’t actually know anything about my father’s side of the family. I’ve written to the Head of law enforcement at the ministry to inquire about having him questioned or getting him a proper trial. I just hope she actually takes my letter seriously, and doesn’t just dismiss it out of hand because of my age, or just decide it’s a joke.”

“No trial, and wasn’t questioned you say? Hm. If you like, I’ll drop word with a friend of mine, Griselda Marchbanks. She’s on the Wizengamot, and is a great believer in law and order. I’m sure she’ll be willing to give your inquiry the push it needs.” Augusta offered.

“Thank you very much, I appreciate your assistance in this matter.”

“It’s no trouble, lad. NEVILLE! Don’t just lurk back there like a lump! Come introduce yourself properly.” She suddenly barked. Neville startled and nearly tripped over his own feet, before scrambling to fall into step with Harry.

Neville eyed Harry uncertainly for a bit, but seemed to suddenly remember his manners.
“Neville Longbottom” he introduced himself, offering his hand to shake as they hurried after his grandmother. “Harry Potter” Harry replied, watching Neville’s reaction carefully. Neville’s eyes widened and he appeared rather startled, but beyond that there was no reaction. Harry felt some of the tension seep out of him. He was hopeful that the case of his ‘fame’ had been overstated and everyone’s reactions would be as low-key as the Longbottoms’ were. One could only hope.

“Nice to meet you. Um…excited about Hogwarts?” Neville asked shyly. He seemed rather ill at ease.

Harry guessed he hadn’t met many kids his own age. On top of that, his grandmother had a very domineering personality. Harry could easily have turned out like him, he supposed—timid and shy and jumping at shadows. He knew how hard it was to hold on to your spirit around a person like that; Harry wasn’t going to hold it against him. He was, however, going to take steps to teach him to be more assertive; he was pretty sure the flinching, stuttering, and dejected air was going to get annoying really quickly.

“I guess. It’s all a lot to take in. You?”

“Y-yeah, I guess… I thought for a long time that I wasn’t quite magical enough, but I am. Everyone was really excited, Gran was even crying, she was so relieved.” Neville admitted. “So, uh, what House do you think you’ll be in? Probably Gryffindor, right, since your parents were. My parents were Gryffindors too, so was gran, my grandfather too, same with my mum’s parents.”

“I wasn’t raised with my parents, so I suppose it’s anyone’s guess where I’ll end up.”

“But you’ll want to be in Gryffindor, of course.”

“I don’t really know enough about any of them to say for sure. What all do you have left to get?”

“Um…p-potions ingredients and supplies, and books. I have my dad’s wand.”

“Oh? Mr. Ollivander was saying that the wand chose the wizard, and someone else’s wand would never work as well as one that chose you.”

“My d-dad was a famous auror. Gran says it’s a great honor to use my dad’s wand.” Neville replied very quietly. Harry said no more, it was obvious it was a sensitive subject. He didn’t want to tread on any toes.

“So, uh, Neville…what do you like to do for fun?”

Neville smiled. “I work in the greenhouses we have on our property. It’s kind of my hobby, I guess you could say.”

“Oh? Have anything interesting?”

Harry was rather startled by the change that came over the boy; it was obvious that he felt pretty confident when it came to plants. He was relaxed, and animated, and spoke with quiet authority as he detailed the different species he was cultivating. Harry let him ramble on, asking the occasional question about plants he was unfamiliar with (which was most of them). Harry, to reciprocate, told him about the work he did on his Aunt’s garden. Neville had some helpful suggestions, though sadly, he had to decline. He was pretty sure Aunt Petunia would rather have all the roses wither and die than use dragon-dung fertilizer.

They finished up Neville’s shopping, and Harry made a couple of stops he hadn’t been able to earlier—to buy shoes, and get a new pair of glasses, among other things. He rather liked them—the
frames were so thin, you could barely see them, and they were a lot lighter than his old pair. He thought they looked better on him as well. His old frames were so thick and bulky that the only thing you could really see when you looked at his face was the glasses. He could see everything so clearly now. Yes, it had definitely been a good idea. When they were finished, Augusta took them through the Leaky Cauldron—the guy in the purple had who’d tried pointing him out to the crowd earlier was nowhere to be seen, happily. When they got outside, she held her wand out in front of her and a large, purple bus appeared with a bang and a billow of smoke.

“The Knight Bus. Not anyone’s preferred method of travel, but in some ways more convenient at times like this, when there are too many for one person to side-along apparate, and there are shopping bags involved. Find something to hold on to, that’s my advice. With any luck, it will be over soon.”

Harry and Neville both eyed the bus with some trepidation—that didn’t sound too promising.

It was actually even worse than they dared imagine. The bus weaved in and out of traffic, making cars, trees and houses jump out of its way, and teleported periodically, while driving at high speed. None of the seats were bolted down (and they were regular chairs, like one would find in a kitchen or living room, not bolted-down benches like were on a normal bus), so one also had to deal with one’s seat careening all over inside the bus on top of the drunken weaving. Harry was rather relieved to get off in one piece, truth to tell. He felt a bit bad for Neville; he looked rather horrified at the prospect of having to stay on longer.

When Harry got back inside the Dursley’s house, he found Uncle Vernon waiting, polishing his shotgun, and very nearly rolled his eyes at the obvious intimidation tactics. He went and sat down across from him and watched him polish. His regard seemed to make his uncle nervous.

“What’re you staring at, boy?”

“A man who stole roughly a hundred thousand pounds from me, while begrudging me food to eat.”

Vernon’s hand froze in mid-polish, and he stared at him wide-eyed.

“No. 1 Gryphon’s Way, Godric’s Hallow. Ring a bell, uncle? It should. It seems to be a house I own that’s been rented out since my parents went into hiding. You’ve been collecting the rent on it for me, isn’t that right? However, instead of using part of those funds to see to my basic needs, you all indulged yourselves while neglecting me to a nearly criminal extent, didn’t you? I’ve stopped the payments to that account, by the way. I think a hundred-thousand pounds is quite enough, don’t you?”

“Now see here, boy!”

“I need new clothes before I head off to school. My own clothes, that fit me. I’ll be needed the same each summer before heading back. I also want a new mattress for my bed. I don’t intend to get back problems because I’m sleeping on a lumpy piece of cardboard.”

“You can’t just go around making demands like that!”

“I just did. Your choices are to give me my demands, or I’ll begin legal action to see that the full amount is returned to me. I’m sure the wizards will be more than happy to help me with that, as I’m quite famous among them, and they credit me with saving the world.”

Vernon first turned purple, and then white. Harry watched impassively and wondered if he was going to have a heart attack.
“Fine. Your aunt will take you on Saturday, but I’m warning you now, boy…”

“Oh relax. Those are my only demands. Though I didn’t have a pleasant childhood growing up with you, in some ways you did me a tremendous favor. You could have spoiled me the way you did Dudley. Believe me when I say that you really didn’t do him any favors. Speaking of which… you and Aunt Petunia might want to have him tested for dyslexia—it’s a learning disability. I told him a couple of years ago that he should tell you, but I don’t know if he was embarrassed, or was just afraid he’d have to work to overcome it. Either way, he didn’t say anything. I would have, but then I realized I was probably going to end up being forced to do his homework for him. I had enough of my own to be getting on with, so I kept my mouth shut too. We’re going to be in different schools from now on, so if someone ends up being bullied into doing his homework for him, it isn’t going to be me, so I figure it’s safe enough to tell you now.”

Vernon turned purple again and started spluttering in outrage.

“Oh, we’ve also been invited to the estate of the Finch-Fletchleys in Northhamptonshire at the end of the month for a garden party. They’re the parents of one of my future classmates. Their son’s name is Justin. He was going to go to Eton, but decided to accept his invite to Hogwarts instead. Here’s their phone number. You or Aunt Petunia should probably ring them and work out the details. They seem to be some sort of minor gentry.”

Vernon’s eyes gleamed greedily at the possibility of hobnobbing with the ‘right sort’. While Vernon bustled off to ring the Finch-Fletchleys, Harry went upstairs to put away his stuff.
“Amelia, what is going on here?” Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic demanded as he strode into her office.

“Minister?” Madame Bones replied, her voice distinctly cool.

Fudge reined himself in, and tried to speak more calmly.

“I was at Azkaban today for the inspection. While I was there, something most unusual was going on. I inquired, naturally, and do you know what I was told? They were readying Sirius Black for transport to a holding cell at the Ministry, as he was to be interrogated to lay to rest some question of possible irregularities in his case!”

“Yes, and?” she replied, still frigid. She didn’t appreciate anyone, even the Minister of Magic, barging into her office and telling her how to do her job.

“Sirius Black!” Fudge spluttered. “There were no irregularities there! The man’s as guilty as they come. I was part of the obliviation squad on the scene! Dead bodies everywhere, Pettigrew’s finger, muggles screaming and carrying on…and there he was right in the middle of it, laughing like a bloody loon.”

“Nevertheless. Were you aware he’d never had a trial?”

“So? He was obviously guilty.”

“He was never questioned either. He also wasn’t checked for imperious, or any other mind effects, nor for potions. He was taken right from the scene and transferred directly to Azkaban. Not a single person spoke to him, or looked at him, or asked him any questions. He’s been there ten years without a trial, Cornelius.”

“Good riddance to bad rubbish! What even brought this matter up in the first place? As you’ve said, it’s been ten years. I’m sure I speak for everyone when I say that those days are best forgotten.”

“Harry Potter wrote me a letter asking me to look into the matter, as it seemed he was the only one either willing or able to speak up on the man’s behalf.”

“Harry Potter? My word? Why would he bother? The man betrayed his parents! They might be alive if not for him!”

“He pointed out that Sirius Black was his father’s best friend, and had made Harry himself his heir, which is how he found out the man existed, and that he’s been languishing in prison without a conviction for a decade. He figures, if the man is innocent, he’ll have done his good deed for the day. If he’s guilty, he gets answers as to why he did the things he did.”
“His heir? Good deed? What?” Fudge gasped.

“Exactly. So, just to be thorough, I’m going to personally see to the man’s questioning, just so I know everything is done by the book. Once he’s been questioned, I’ll arrange for a conviction to be placed on his record, just so all the loose ends are tied up.”

“A bloody waste of time, if you ask me.”

“I certainly hope it is just that.”

“What?”

“The alternative is that we sent an innocent man to hell for ten years, and no one could be bothered to care—and if proper procedure was followed, such an oversight should never have been possible. I’m Head of Magical Law Enforcement. I take my job seriously. An oversight like this reflects badly on not only my department, but the entire Ministry. So, yes, I really do hope it’s all a complete waste of time, and the man is as black as a dementor’s heart. I really don’t like considering the alternative.”

There was a knock at the door, and an Auror stuck his head in the office.

“Madame Bones? The prisoner is ready for questioning.”

“Already? Is he lucid enough? He’s been in for a decade…I was told tomorrow at the earliest, and maybe not then.”

“He was strangely aware, even in the clink ma’am.”

Madame Bones began getting a sinking feeling in her stomach. Something told her this case wasn’t going to be as cut and dried as she’d both hoped and believed it would be.

The staff and faculty of Hogwarts gathered around the single round table that served for meals when school wasn’t in session. Headmaster Dumbledore was smiling, and his eyes were twinkling up a storm. Professors Flitwick and Sprout were already seated as well, and talking quietly. Severus Snape wandered in, looking grim and dour as he always did at this time of year. He quite despised children, so the swiftly approaching school year was cause for deep despair. Hagrid crept in, smiled hesitantly at Dumbledore, before sitting as far from him as he could get, and busied himself loading his plate, hoping there wouldn’t be any questions. McGonagall appeared next, nodding greetings to everyone, before seating herself primly beside Snape. Everyone had their plates and had begun eating when Quirinus Quirrel—formerly the Muggle studies professor, and now the DADA professor—came in, looking flustered and a bit ill.

“Alright, Quirinus?” Sprout inquired.

“F-fine. D-don’t worry about me…I’m f-fine. R-really.” Quirrel stuttered.

“Maybe you should see Pomfrey. You look a bit peaky.” Snape said, sounding as though he really couldn’t care one way or another.

“Or just have a stiff drink after dinner. I’ve always found that to cure most of what ails you.” McGonagall added helpfully.
“I’m sure Quirinus is fine. Nothing a good night’s rest won’t cure.” Dumbledore offered.

“Y-yes, I’m certain that’s so.” Quirrel agreed, smiling weakly.

“So! Young Harry Potter returned to our world today. How did you find him?” Dumbledore asked gaily, his eyes twinkling even more than usual.

“He was fine. Polite, a bit quiet, likes to read. He does have a temper on him though—he and young Miss Granger seemed to rub each other the wrong way. They were snarling at one another like a couple of cats in a sack.” McGonagall replied absently.

Dumbledore blinked and turned to face her, with obvious confusion written across his face.

“You took him out with the muggleborn?” Sprout asked in surprise.

“Well, he was raised by muggles. His Aunt knows of Hogwarts, but couldn’t really give him much in the way of information about it.” An impish smile crossed her face and she slanted a look sideways at Snape. “She thought the students in green were called the ‘slinkers’”

Flitwick and Sprout chortled delightedly, while Snape twitched and glanced at McGonagall with surprise, which quickly turned to horror when he realized she was looking at him.

“Petunia mentioned me?”

The others’ eyebrows rose. “You’re acquainted with Mr. Potter’s muggle aunt?” Sprout asked, sounding startled.

Snape hunched in on himself when he found all eyes on him, and mumbled something under his breath.

“It seems Lily and Severus were good friends long before either started Hogwarts.” McGonagall informed everyone. “Thick as thieves” was how Petunia described them.


“I knew” Dumbledore offered cheerfully.

“It was a surprise to the rest of us.” McGonagall snorted. “I told her she must be mistaken—A Gryffindor and a Slytherin, in those days, with everything going on? Unheard of!” She shook her head “Of course, I had to cut the conversation short—little ears and all—and with you being a professor now…”

“Lovely” Snape sighed, stabbing a his food.

“So…young Harry was well. That’s good to hear. I do hope there were no problems during the trip. I know people have been looking forward to the boy’s return. I hope no one’s enthusiasm got out of hand. It would be a pity if the other children were frightened by overenthusiastic fans.” Dumbledore commented.

“Oh, there were no problems of that sort. He went completely unremarked. I think the only one who actually realized who he was might have been Daedelus Diggle. I suppose it was lucky for us someone hexed him. He seemed like he was about to call out to the boy and draw everyone’s attention to him.”

“Someone hexed Daedelus?”
“We heard him shouting about it as we were heading into the alley.”

“…!”

“He seemed fine. No worries.”

“Oh. Good.” Dumbledore said weakly. “I don’t understand though…how did you end up escorting Mr. Potter? Hagrid? I thought you wanted to be the one… Hagrid?”

Hagrid was on his way out the front door. They were all rather perplexed; the man was ten foot tall—how had he gotten out of his seat and out of the room without any of them noticing?

“He wasn’t able to catch up with them—they were on a trip or something. He was quite distraught about it. He must have run into Arthur Weasley at some point—he wrote to me and told me about Hagrid’s difficulties and asked if I could swing by and take care of things.” McGonagall explained.

“Oh, I see. He must have been very disappointed. He was so looking forward to showing the boy the sights.”

“I’m sure he was, but it may have been better this way. He really isn’t trained to do orientations—that’s my job.” McGonagall pointed out crisply.

“Yes, of course it is, Minerva. I wasn’t trying to step on your toes!”

“I’m sure you weren’t, but as I said, it’s probably for the best things worked out as they did. There’s no need to single the child out—heaven knows he’ll likely be singled out far too often, simply by virtue of who he is.”

“I’m sure that will change—we all know what a merry prankster James was.” Dumbledore chortled.

“I think he must take more after his mother.” McGonagall cut in. “He likes to read. It was a bit of a race between he and Miss Granger to see who got more extra books. He works at a local community center, looks out for neighborhood children beset by bullies, likes to hang out at the library, I’ll have to say, from the little I saw of him I’m guessing he’ll either be a Hufflepuff or a Ravenclaw.”

“Nonsense. He’ll be a Gryffindor for sure. Blood will tell, after all!”

“Now really, Albus. Aren’t you the one always insisting it isn’t our blood, but our choices that matter?” Snape interjected a bit mockingly.

Dumbledore tutted and looked at him with sorrowful disappointment. “Really now, Severus, don’t twist my words. I do indeed say that—I truly believe one’s blood status has no bearing on one’s worth as a human being or one’s right to exist. One cannot deny, however, that many character traits pass down in families—which is why house placement so often follows family lines.”

He leveled Snape with another sorrowful gaze, and Snape found himself wanting to beg forgiveness – an impulse which he staunchly ignored, choosing instead to curl his lip at the older man.

“Well, if the boy has Gryffindor blood, and yet was able to fool the head of House Gryffindor into believing him a Hufflepuff or a Ravenclaw, maybe what that actually proves is that he’s cunning enough for Slytherin.”
“Idle speculation, all of it. The hat will have final say of course.” Dumbledore said dismissively.

Snape grimaced—of course the old man wasn’t interested in Potter’s placement once the possibility of Slytherin was broached.

“I hadn’t realized you were so eager to mentor the boy.” Dumbledore added, his eye twinkles back in full, aggravating force.

“I’ve no wish, whatsoever, to mentor any spawn of James Potter.” Snape growled, the venom in his voice bitter enough to wound.

McGonagall frowned slightly, remembering Petunia’s words about warning Snape that Lily was going to drop him like a hot potato once she had no further use for him, and then run off and marry the man who’d spent years bullying him. The entire conversation, and this further evidence that James Potter had done something bad enough to leave Snape bellowing like a wounded bull all these years later, left her with a bad taste in her mouth. For years, Lily and James had been the poster children for not only their heroic sacrifices, but for their fairytale romance. These revelations took a lot of the shine off of it.

“Harry Potter is not James Potter. He wasn’t raised with him, doesn’t know him. He may be James’ spawn” she leveled him with a disapproving look to show what she thought of his choice of words “but that doesn’t mean you should hold things against him that he had no part in, and likely has no knowledge of. He’s a little boy, and you’re a professor. I do hope you’ll keep that in mind when term starts.” McGonagall told Snape quietly.

“Of course. Everyone would jump in to be sure the precious son of Potter doesn’t have his arrogant little feelings hurt” Snape muttered bitterly.

He fell quiet when McGonagall leveled him with a look that was equal parts disapproving and offended.

“I do hope, professor, that you are not suggesting that I would knowingly encourage, let alone condone, poor behavior in a student — regardless of who they are, or what house they are in. I have always prided myself on trying to remain impartial and fair. As you are among the staff now, having seen things from both sides of the fence, I’m sure you realize there are many things we miss, sitting at the high table, and only interacting with our students in the classroom for the most part. Ignorance is not the same as collusion, and I’ll thank you to mind the difference. I also expect you to behave as the professional I know you can be. Punishing an innocent child for wrongs—real or imagined—committed by those long dead will only diminish you in the end.” Having said her piece, she went back to her dinner, content to allow the subject to drop.

Snape glowered and continued pushing his food around on his plate.

Amelia Bones knocked on Barty Crouch’s door and let herself in when he called for her to enter. He was a man of medium height, with short, dark hair which he wore gelled down into a severe style, with a rigid part in the center that was perfectly straight. A small, neatly trimmed moustache graced his upper lip. Everything about the man was rigid, neat —obsessively so, many would say.

He had been head of the Auror Division during the war with Voldemort, and had made many decisions that were held against him after the fact—like the decision to authorize the Auror corps to use the Unforgivables. No one had objected at the time, in fact many applauded the decision. It was afterwards that everyone criticized, but such was life. More even than that though, it was the
act of sentencing his only child, his son Barty, to Azkaban for crimes committed while a Death Eater that had destroyed his reputation and nearly tanked his career.

There was a time when he had seemed the obvious choice for Minister of Magic. That was years ago. These days, Barty was the Head of International Cooperation—folks in other countries were more forgiving of his actions during wartime than those here at home. She almost felt guilty that she had to lay another loose end from those days at his feet.

“Do you have a moment, Barty?”

When they were both seated and comfortable, Amelia decided to cut right to the chase. “Do you remember the case of Sirius Black?”

“A bit hard to forget, that one. He blew up a street full of muggles in broad daylight and stood there laughing about it, after betraying his closest friends to You-Know-Who.”

“He was never questioned.”

“The case was pretty open and shut. We were already out looking for him when he decided to kill all those muggles.”

“Why were you looking for him?”

“He betrayed the Potters.”

“How would you have known that?”

“Dumbledore. He came and told me he was the Potters’ secret keeper, and asked me to find him. We found him a week later, standing over a pile of corpses.”

“He was never questioned, and he received no trial.”

“The courts were overloaded as it was. The whole Ministry was in shambles. You remember what it was like.”

“He was innocent.”

Barty’s only reaction was a slow, measured blink. “I think you must be quite mistaken.”

“It’s no mistake, Barty. I had him pulled out earlier today for questioning. He was quite lucid, even after a decade in Azkaban. He wasn’t the Potters’ secret keeper, and he didn’t blow up the street. It was Peter Pettigrew on both counts.”

“A likely story. Pettigrew is dead.”

“No, he’s not. He’s an illegal animagus. He hadn’t even made himself unplottable. We have him in custody right now. He was living as a child’s pet, has been since Black went to prison ten years ago. We’ve had an innocent man rotting in Azkaban, with dementors outside his cell around the clock, for ten years—and we left a death eater, a man who betrayed two of his closest friends to death, killed a dozen muggles in broad daylight, and framed his other close friend for the murders of not only them, but himself as well—free, and living in a house full of young children.”

Barty’s hands clenched slowly on his desk, and his face sagged as he saw any hope of ever gaining the much-coveted Minister’s post slip through his fingers forever—and with the blows his reputation had taken after the war was over, it had been a longshot to begin with.
“Winky” he called out through lips gone numb.

Amelia watched the man in concern, and wondered at the sudden appearance of a house elf.

“Yes, Master Barty?” the little elf squeaked.

Barty leaned down close and whispered to her at length. The elf protested, but he was firm, and told her to ‘just do it’. The elf wrung her hands and looked teary, but she vanished.

“Barty? What?”

“I’ve just seen my dreams go up in ashes for a second time…and the first time still haunts me…quite literally, in fact” he laughed hollowly. “If I was mistaken twice…I don’t want to know. He’ll be in the interrogation room at the end of the hall. I’ll explain to his mother.”

“Barty? I don’t understand? Explain what? Who will…” Amelia jumped to her feet and cried out in shock as Barty pulled his wand and blew a sizeable hole through his heart.

Amelia’s chair clattered to the floor, and Barty’s assistant peeked into the office to see what was wrong, only to start screaming when she saw all the blood coating the back wall of his office. There was a brief silence, and then the sound of running feet converged on them from all directions.

Hagrid cringed when a firm knock sounded at his door. He stopped moving and held his breath, hoping they’d think he was out and go away.

“Hagrid, I can see the smoke coming from your chimney. I saw you enter just a few moments ago as I was crossing the grounds, and I heard you moving around inside as I approached.” Dumbledore scolded.

Hagrid hung his head and shuffled to the door, opening it.

Dumbledore stepped inside, leveled his most disappointed glare on the large man, holding it till he looked suitably chastised, and then moved to seat himself at the large table that took up half the room.

He waited until Hagrid shuffled around to the other side of the table and seated himself as well, still looking like a child facing a scolding from an angry parent.

“Now, first things first…did you complete the second task you were given? I already know you failed the first.”

Hagrid dug in his pocket and withdrew a small, grubby package and handed it over without a word. Dumbledore nodded and made it vanish into his own robes.

“As to the first matter…I think I should like to know what actually happened.”

Hagrid bit his lip and squirmed uncomfortably in his seat.

“Dunno what you mean, sir.”

“Hagrid…”

Hagrid still wouldn’t look him in the eye as he muttered that he’d ‘missed them’. 
“Hagrid.” Dumbledore repeated.

Hagrid slanted a glance at him, and the older man caught his eyes. He didn’t say anything further, but he suddenly seemed to loom in the cramped confines of the house. Hagrid flinched and then began babbling the whole story from beginning to end, while the Headmaster sifted through the array of images that accompanied his tale, taken straight from the man’s mind. He didn’t even have to reach for any of it, it was all right there on the surface—if anything, he would have to work not to see it. Hagrid had many faults, but duplicity wasn’t among them.

“So you see! Lil Harry hates me!” Hagrid ended his tale with a sob, blowing his nose into the large, pink hanky he pulled from one of his many pockets. “I ran into Arthur and he said he’d smooth things over, and let professor McGonagall know he still needed picking up.”

Dumbledore sat back and repressed the urge to sigh. By the sound of it, things couldn’t have gone more wrong had they planned it that way. Seeing the expression on his face, Hagrid began weeping into his hanky.

“Come on boy, stop dawdling. I want to get this over with.” Petunia called up the stairs.

“Coming, Aunt Petunia.” Harry replied as he came down the stairs. “You’re coming too, Dud?”

“Mum’s making me get something new for the fancy party.”

“Huh. I suppose I should too then. I don’t have anything like that.”

Petunia looked rather sour at Harry’s announcement, but she kept her mouth shut. She had no desire for the freaks to come down on all of them demanding the boy’s money back. “Come on.” She repeated instead.

The drive to the mall was quiet and strangely peaceful for Harry—Dudley was in the front seat with his mother, leaving the back seat free for Harry alone. It was nice not having to dodge Dudley’s kicks and punches.

When they parked, he saw Mrs. Elwyn and her daughters Amanda and Mary; the two girls had been in the gymnastics class with him a while back at the community center.

“Oh, Harry dear, how nice to see you again.” Mrs. Elwyn greeted him.

Amanda and Mary grinned at him and then started giggling behind their hands. They did that a lot, it was kind of annoying, he’d always thought; he still had no idea what they always found so darned funny.

Aunt Petunia fixed her ‘meeting the neighbors smile’ on her face when Mrs. Elwyn introduced herself, and then began subtly interrogating her as to why she’d never seen her in all the time she and the girls had gone to the community center, and praised Harry’s performance in the gymnastics class. He’d give Aunt Petunia credit for being cool under fire—no one would ever guess to look at her that she had no idea what the woman was talking about. Aunt Petunia chatted a few minutes and then excused them, citing last minute school-shopping. When the Elwyns were out of earshot she gave him a look that told him they’d be having words about surprise acquaintances being sprung on her later.
They entered the shopping center. There was an atrium with tables and chairs for the food court just inside. Harry heard someone calling his name and saw some of the old guys from the senior tai chi group waving them over.

Aunt Petunia mustered up her ‘meeting the teacher’s association smile’ when they all greeted her, and then proceeded to inquire why he’d not been around for tai chi the day before.

“School shopping I’m afraid. I got my supplies yesterday, today it’s clothes. I’m going to a boarding school in northern Scotland, so I’m going to need something warm to tide me through.”

They chatted a bit, and continued on their way. Aunt Petunia and Dudley were both looking at him like he was an alien by this point.

It didn’t stop there. Mr. Andrews—the karate instructor—had a storefront school in the building. They just happened to be there while he was welcoming in a new class. He greeted Harry by name and ruffled his hair, before smiling at Petunia and subtly interrogating her as to why he’d never seen her before. Harry interjected a ‘reminder’ that Mr. Andrews gave free beginner lessons at the community center. He didn’t want his clothes shopping ruined because she got it into her head that he was robbing them to take regular lessons at the school.

Aunt Petunia was twitchy by the time they actually got around to shopping. That suited Harry fine, as she pretty much let him get whatever he wanted. She seemed to think yet another person was going to pop out at them and start interrogating her as to why she was an ‘absentee parent’. She smiled and told him he looked nice in the clothes he tried on, grabbed a second package of boxers when he only grabbed one, suggested some black socks to wear with his nice clothes, grabbed a simple dressing gown to add to his pajamas, all the while smiling and looking around to make sure no one else was giving her the eye, or about to approach them. She even let him get a halfway decent mattress—oh, it wasn’t as nice as the ones the rest of them had, but it was still pretty comfy. She arranged for the mattress to be delivered, and they were finally ready to go.

They were nearly out of the atrium, passing right near the old fellas, when they ran into Jade. Jade was a university student working towards a degree as a librarian. She had just started interning at the library Harry hung out at. He’d gotten to know her there, since she saw him so often. Jade was the sort of girl that Aunt Petunia didn’t approve of. She wore her hair in a ponytail that stuck out in all directions, and the ends of her hair were dyed different colors, so it looked like she had a rainbow hedgehog on the back of her head. She wore a lot of eyeliner, and had a nose piercing. Today, she was wearing shredded green and purple tights under a short denim skirt, with red boots and a bright yellow t-shirt that said ‘Wyrd Sisters’ on it. To top off the outfit, she had a snazzy denim jacket with really long fringe hanging from the arms and shoulders.

“Wotcher, Harry, luv! Fancy meeting you here!”

“What’s this lad? Girlfriends at your age? Well, my word!” Sarge, one of the old fellas gasped teasingly.

Harry’s eyes widened and his face went red, which made all the old guys chortled good-naturedly and Jade giggle, before scolding them and ruffling his hair and telling him not to listen to them. Aunt Petunia looked vaguely horrified by the whole ordeal—especially when she caught sight of Dudley gazing up at Jade as though he’d just found religion. Harry got a hold of himself, and willed his red face away.

“Jade, I’m glad I ran into you, I won’t be able to do the book club much longer. I’m going away to school in northern Scotland in a couple of weeks.”
“I thought you were going to the local comprehensive?”

“It turns out my parents made arrangements for me to go to their alma mater before they died. The school contacted us a few days ago to inform us of the arrangements.”

“Oh? What school?”

“Grey Friars Academy.” Harry answered, before Petunia had a chance to shriek or faint. “Oh, I’m being terribly rude, aren’t I? Aunt Petunia, this is Jade. She’s an intern at the local public library. She’s going to University to get her degree to be a librarian someday. She’s the one who helped me start the children’s library book club I told you about. Jade, this is my Aunt Petunia and my cousin Dudley.”

“Oh, you’re Dudley!” Jade exclaimed. “How are things working out with your dyslexia? Don’t let it get you down, it’s actually quite common. My sister is dyslexic, in fact. She had a terrible time in school for the longest time until they realized what the problem was. You should be happy it was caught as early as it was. My parents were ready to despair over my sister, especially as I always got really good grades. Looking back it was quite an ordeal for her, I’m sure. She had pretty much everyone on her case about it, she very nearly dropped out of school at one point, she was so depressed—the problem wasn’t really diagnosed till she was halfway through high school; she scraped passing grades somehow, but she was bottom of the class.”

Aunt Petunia twitched, and eyed the people passing by, watching her converse with the bizarrely dressed girl, who seemed to insist on talking very loudly about ‘poor Dudley and his learning disability’—which made them look at both her and Dudley with pity. Harry, damn him, just stood there nodding and looking angelic, and the old fellows he’d introduced them to earlier were looking like they’d just figured out some mystery—their earlier suspicion was now tinged with understanding and sympathy. It was probably one of the worst days of her life.

Aunt Petunia waited till they were in the car to start demanding answers.

“Relax, Aunt Petunia. The people at the library and the community center started asking where you and uncle Vernon were and why they never saw you after I’d been going by for a while. I told them uncle Vernon was at work, and you were taking Dudley to a center because he had dyslexia, and I would be a distraction. Mr. Andrews from the karate school gave free karate lessons—just the beginner lesson, of course. He wants people to pay him and go to his school after all. Mrs. Elwyn’s girls were in gymnastics class with me—also free, at the community center. The old guys are part of a senior’s tai chi group, and I’ve also hung out with them at the VFW outpost. They tell war stories if you ask them nicely, and Jade, as you know, works at the library.”

“You know kung fu?” Dudley demanded.

“No, I just told you, they only do the first lesson for free. I learned how to fall without getting hurt, mostly. I did get Mr. Andrews to show me some cool stuff though. He can do a spinning jump-kick and break boards with his bare feet!”

“Whoa!” Dudley said in awe. “Muuuum! I wanna do karate!”

“You wouldn’t have time to do much before school starts. It takes years to learn how to do that stuff.” Harry scoffed.
“Oh, and you’re the expert are you?”

“Who’s been hanging out with the karate guy? Me or you?”

“Boys! That’s enough!” Petunia snapped.

Dudley and Harry both gaped at her in astonishment. Dudley never got yelled at. Petunia got flustered when she saw them both staring at her. “Just…settle down. I need to concentrate on the road.” Dudley was so stunned by being included in the scolding, he did just that.

When Harry got home, he changed into some of his new clothes, put the rest away in his school trunk, said hello to Hedwig, who was napping in her cage, before heading back outside. He had some experiments to run, and there was no time like the present.

He headed towards the park, and cut through, making sure there was no one around to observe him. A quick henge later, and an older gentleman in wizard robes stood in his place. He held out his wand (also henged—he’d noted that no one’s wand was the same) and called for the Knight bus, which appeared with a ‘bamf’ and a billow of smoke.

He had the bus drop him off at the Leaky Cauldron, and then he sauntered through, acting like he belonged there. The guy with the purple hat was there again, and he frowned, looking sort of puzzled when Harry (still in his disguise) came through. He kept watching the door intently after he passed.

He hurried into the back alley and tapped the bricks, allowing him through to Diagon Alley. Once there, he ducked into the bookstore, wandered towards the shelves in the back corner, and changed his disguise as he ‘browsed’. Some of the titles ended up being rather interesting, so he made a couple of purchases before heading back out. Once back out in the alley he started wandering aimlessly, taking in the sights, and watching the people.

He stopped to look in a window and saw someone he recognized. He was a tall black man with an earring; he was one of the people who had shown up and shook his hand in a shop one time while in London with Aunt Petunia. He was walking casually, but his eyes were scanning the area as though he were looking for someone. Harry fell into step with the shopping crowds and followed after him at a distance. The man stepped out of the flow of traffic and waved his wand, and then headed back the way he’d just come, frowning and scanning the area. Harry kept walking, and stayed casual, passing right by the man, who barely glanced at him as he did so. He ducked into a shop, and scanned the area. Once he was sure no one was observing him, he crouched down as though looking at merchandise on the lowest shelf. When he stood, his disguise was a bit different—he was now a man of middle years with nondescript features, brown hair, brown eyes, brown robe.

The man from earlier stepped into the shop and began going up and down the aisles, still searching and being casual. Harry made a show of checking his money bag, and then frowning, shaking his head and sighing. He wandered out of the shop and down the alley a bit further, and ducks into another shop, changing his appearance once more. A few minutes later, the same man, who was beginning to look quite aggravated, entered, still searching. Harry now knew what he wanted to know. It was time to head back to the bookstore. He needed more information.

He changed his appearance again once in the bookstore, and began wandering the aisles, looking for information on ways to follow someone, or to keep oneself from being followed. There were a lot of books in the store, and he wasn’t having much luck.
“Hey, there, sonny. Could you direct me?” He asked the clerk.

“Certainly, sir. How can I be of assistance?”

“I need to know how to tag something so I can follow it.”

“You need to track someone?”

“My wife’s cat. The blasted thing is always getting out of the house, and then nothing will do but
that I spend my whole evening out looking for the damned thing! I’ve had it! I need some way to
just pelt the thing with something so I can go right to it. If you can’t help me, I think it’s about time
for Fluffy to have a little accident, if you know what I mean. It’s her damned cat, why can’t she go
look for the little monster?”

The clerk looked rather startled by his threats against his imaginary cat, but he led him to a section
dealing with tracking charms, and made some suggestions. Harry thanked him, and began going
through the books, checking the table of contents for each one, while keeping an eye out for the
black man that was following him. He found several promising selections and gathered them up.
He and the clerk were heading for the checkout counter when the mysterious man entered the
shop, eyes once again scanning for the sight of a small boy. Harry gathered up his purchases, and
sauntered out of the shop, just as the man was heading back towards him. He looked extremely
annoyed. Harry figured that was fair, because lord knew he wasn’t too pleased at the moment
either.

He changed his appearance again once through the alley, returning to his first disguise, and then
went through to call the Knight Bus again. The black man came stomping into the Leaky Cauldron
just as he was exiting the door, cursing under his breath about ‘brat kids’ and ‘wild goose chases’.
Harry was smiling and whistling a merry tune as he climbed back on the bus.

“Where’re ye headed?”

“Godric’s Hollow.”

“that’ll be eleven sickles.”

“Here you are, my good man.”

It was time to see how pervasive the surveillance on him was—was it just London they didn’t want
him in, or did they not want him out of his neighborhood, period?

The bus left him off on the edge of a smallish village. He followed the road that went through the
center of the town, into the town square, which had a pub on one side and a church on the other,
and a war memorial statue of three soldiers in the center. Harry’s steps slowed as he approached the
statue, and he altered his course so he could stand in front of it, rather than pass it by. That statue
changed as he approached. Instead of three soldiers, there was now a man with glasses and messy
hair, and a woman holding a baby in her arms. He glanced down and read the inscription, and
found he had to swallow a lump in his throat when he realized it was a statue of his parents…and
him.
He stared at the statue for a long time, his mind in chaos. He shook off his shock and melancholy
and was about to continue onward, when he found himself looking at the church speculatively. He
could see gravestones in the churchyard from here. He glanced back up at the statue, and then
turned to enter the churchyard rather than explore the village.

The churchyard was an old one, and was filled end to end with gravestones, many of them
weathered and worn from the passage of years. He scanned the names, looking for his parents’ names. “Bagshot, Bagshot, Jones, Peverell” he hesitated a moment, staring at the odd symbol on the grave—a triangle with a circle inside it, bisected by a line, and continued on “Peverell, Peverell…Dumbledore? Kendra…Ariana” he read the names quietly. He finally found Potters, a whole slew of them. The Potters must have lived in the village a long time. He found the graves of Lily and James Potter after a bit more searching, and the graves of Charlus and Dorea Black Potter nearby.

He sank down on his knees on his parents’ graves, and tried to understand all the stuff that was swirling around inside of him. It was a very queer feeling, to know that his parents—who he’d longed for, and resented (though he didn’t like to think about that part) in equal measure for as long as he could remember—were so close, and yet still so far away.

It had been a long time. Was there anything left of them?

He thought maybe he should cry, or shout, or even just talk—but what did he really have to say to them? He had no memory of them whatsoever. He only knew his mother had red hair because Aunt Petunia mentioned it when McGonagall came by to pick him up. He’d been told they’d died for him. Did it make him a bad person that a part of him wished they had lived for him instead?

He sat quietly for a little while, and then gathered the fallen leaves, and twigs that littered the space above the graves, and tidied them up a bit. He knew his parents were beyond caring about such things, but it made him feel better. When he had finished, he spent some time wandering among the rest of the gravestones, taking note of the names and the dates. Among the oldest Potter graves, he found one of a man named Hadrian Potter, married to Calliope Peverell—beloved daughter of Ignotus and Elspeth Peverell. Ignotus Peverell’s grave wasn’t too far away; it had the same inscription that was on his parents’ graves “The last enemy to be conquered is Death”.

It made him a little sad, really. He was obviously not very Potter-like, or even Peverell-like (since it seemed those folks were his ancestors as well). He’d never viewed death as an enemy to be defeated. There were times, especially when he was younger, when he thought it might be nice, to just go to sleep one day and never wake up. He’d learned quickly to not share his thoughts on the matter with others; it seemed to upset people for some reason.

He heard a crack in the distance, like a car back-firing. He was about to ignore it, but he realized he hadn’t heard any other cars—just the sound of the wind and the birds in the trees. Inborn caution, and a finely-honed sense of paranoia made him get out of sight and henge himself into a worn gravestone half-hidden by a prickly bush and the fall of shadows from a nearby tree. It was the black man again, the one who had been following him earlier. He had company this time—Jade, the intern from the library.

They split up and searched the churchyard by eye, looking for him. They met up in the center, and Jade shook her head.

“You sure you did your plotting spell right, Shak? I really don’t see how a kid his age could have been wandering all over London and then come here. The folks on the Knight Bus never saw him either. I think someone’s playing with us. He doesn’t know anything. He just got his Hogwarts letter. Figgy was told to keep his heritage a secret. I don’t see how he’d even know about this place, let alone come all the way out here on his own. I know the kid, Shak. He hangs out at the library and the community center, and does chores at home. He’s not adventurous, and has never been outside the neighborhood except for a few outings with his aunt, and a couple of minor school trips.”

“If someone is playing with us, we need to let Albus know. He’s has detailed surveillance in place to keep track of the kid, and his status.”
“Uh… Is he allowed to do that? He’s a school headmaster, not an auror.”

“He’s Albus Dumbledore.”

“He’s not his guardian either. Sirius Black is.”

“I doubt that will last for long. No one in their right mind is going to give a guy who just spent a decade in Azkaban custody of the boy who lived.”

“The way I heard it from my mum, he might not have ended up in Azkaban if Dumbledore hadn’t of interfered by taking the kid in the first place.”

“What would your mother know about it?”

“She’s his cousin, remember? She went to visit him at St. Mungo’s. The way he tells it, he was there that night, when the Potters died, to check up on them when he found Pettigrew gone. He was going to take Harry then, but Hagrid got to him first and refused to hand him over on Dumbledore’s orders. He lost everything that night; the only thing left for him was vengeance. That’s what mum said, anyway.”

“What else was he to have done? Tell me that, Nymphadora”

“Don’t call me that!”

“It’s your name.”

“I told you, call me Tonks!”

“Albus believed he was the secret keeper. He couldn’t possibly allow him to take him under those circumstances.” The man—Kingsley Shaklebolt, Harry now knew; he’d been one of the people Mrs. Figg had told him about—shook his head and started back towards the gate. “Let’s go. I should report this to Albus.” He vanished with a crack in mid-step. Jade…that is, Nymphadora, followed a moment later.

He let go his gravestone disguise and hurried out into the town proper. He wanted to see the house he’d lived in as a baby. He had a feeling this would be the last trip of any kind he’d ever be able to make. He might as well go for broke.

He knew when he found the place. It was a two-storey cottage, and most of the upper floor was gone. He shivered, just taking in the extent of the destruction. He had survived that when he was just a baby?

As he approached the gate a stand rose up out of the ground, badly startling him. It explained that it was the site of You-Know-Who’s defeat on October 31, 1981, and had been left that way as a memorial. People had scrawled well-wishes all over it. It gave him a rather funny feeling in his stomach—all these people knew more about his life than he himself did. He was so lost in thought he almost didn’t notice the little old lady coming up beside him.

“Well! We don’t usually get visitors this time of year. These days we only get a rare couple around Halloween.” Harry turned to face her and the old lady peered at him in interest and then her eyes widened. “Harry? Little Harry, is that you?”
He nearly cursed. He’d forgotten to put on a new disguise when he left the churchyard.

“Yes, I’m Harry Potter. Who might you be?”

“Bathilda Bagshot. Why, I’m practically your granny. I was the only guest at your first birthday party other than your parents. My! Look at you. You look so like your father did when he was your age. You’ve got your mother’s eyes though, can’t mistake them!”

The old lady chivvied him towards her house which was right next door. “Come along, child. Goodness. You must tell me all about yourself. I have something for you as well--things your parents left with me when they went into hiding. I was wondering if I’d ever see you before I died. I figured if it came to that, I could just leave the stuff with the goblins to put in your vault, but this is much better.”

“My parents left something with you?”

“Mmm hmm. They packed up their house when they decided to go into hiding. That house there was actually mine. I used to rent it out to folks. Since they were going to use the fidelis charm, they figured they couldn’t just make their own house disappear, because it would be obvious where they were hiding. I offered them the use of that house…much good it did them. Their house was a bit larger than that one. They took all the necessities, and enough furniture and the like to live comfortably. Everything else they packed in the trunk to be given to you, just in case. I wasn’t able to save anything that was in the house. I’m sorry to say it, but souvenir hunters descended on the place as soon as word of You-know-who’s defeat broke. Everything that was in there, those bits that survived, got carried off. I kept my mouth shut about the trunk. I didn’t want anyone trying to break into my house to try to get at it too. I don’t know what all’s in there, I can’t open the lock.”

“If you can’t, how am I supposed to?”

“Silly boy, they used your blood to lock it.” Bathilda laughed.

She summoned a trunk from upstairs. “It’s a seven lock trunk. The key there, each time you turn it, it opens a new compartment; you have to close the top each time. You can get to a specific compartment by turning the key the requisite number of times before opening it.” She explained, pointing to the golden key that seemed stuck to the lid. “You’ll have to smear some of your blood on the key before you try opening it. Just a drop should do.”

“Could you shrink this for me? I’m running late as it is. I really wish I could stick around longer and talk to you, but I really can’t right now.”

Bathilda looked disappointed. “It has a built-in shrinking function. Just tap there, like so. You have to promise to stop by another time, and plan to stay awhile.”

“I will, ma’am. Thank you for this. Oh…could you maybe not mention to anyone that you met me, or bring it up in front of whoever is with me when I come back?”

“Eh?”

“Well…you see…I sort of snuck off by myself to come here. I’ll get in a lot of trouble, so…”

“HA! Take after your father, do you? He was always in and out of trouble, that one. Sure, I won’t tell anyone, but only if you promise you won’t just be running off by yourself willy-nilly until you’re a bit older.”

Harry eyed her a moment and sighed, holding out his hand. They shook hands “I won’t promise…
but I’ll try.” He offered.

Bathilda snorted. “Yes, you definitely take after your father.”

After saying his goodbyes, he headed out at a fast clip, put his disguise back on when he was sure he was unobserved, and called the Knight Bus. He had it drop him off on the far side of Surrey from where he and the Dursleys lived, and then hopped a regular muggle bus to take him closer to home. He stopped off and bought himself some candy and filled the pockets of his pants—his shopping was all safely tucked away in a bottomless pouch that was tucked out of sight. He was glad now he had bought the thing when he saw it. Harry made his way back to the Dursleys. He walked home slowly, kicking a rock, and munching on the candy from his pockets, the very image of a small, innocent child who knew nothing, and certainly wasn’t dashing all over the country earlier. He hoped, if anyone was watching, that they bought it.

“Harry!”

Harry glanced over and saw “Jade” coming towards him. He was nearly home, just passing Magnolia Crescent, where Mrs. Figg lived when he ran into her. Harry slowed, looking puzzled as to why “Jade” was in his neighborhood—he knew she didn’t live around here, after all. He finished off the last of his candy as she approached.

“Harry, luv, fancy meeting you again.”

“Jade.” Harry replied coolly.

“What’s with you, brat?”

“I didn’t mention it earlier, because, honestly, I didn’t think about it till later, but while I was doing my school shopping, I saw a shop selling t-shirts with obscure bands on them.”

“Huh?”

“The Wyrd Sisters.” Harry offered, before crossing his arms, and tapping his foot meaningfully. “I think you have some explaining to do.”

Jade winced and grimaced. “Damn, I’m going to have to remember that” she muttered to herself before smiling apologetically at Harry. “Well, really luv, what was I to say?”

“You knew who I was, and about all that stuff and never said a word. Our whole relationship is a lie. We’re not friends anymore.”

Having made his declaration, he marched off, continuing down the street towards Privet Drive. Jade smacked herself in the forehead and hurried after him, discreetly scanning for imperious, charms and other mind effects while she did so.

“Harry, slow down.”

“I don’t associate with duplicitous people.”

“What? How does a kid your age even know a word like that?”

“I read the dictionary once.”
“And remembered words like that? Damn…maybe you will be a Ravenclaw. I wonder if Shak will let me change my bet?”

She nearly bowled him over when he suddenly stopped and turned to glare at her in outrage.

“So, not only do you lie to me and keep things from me, but you’re hanging out with other people and talking about me? What is it? A big joke? Hah, look at that dumb kid, he doesn’t know anything about anything! Yeah. Ha Ha Ha. What fun!”

“Harry, it wasn’t like that.”

“And who is this Shak, anyway? Isn’t he an American basketball player? Why are you talking about me with a basketball player?”

“He’s not a basketball player, he’s an auror.”

“Shaquille o’Neal is a wizard police man? When does he find the time? He’s already working for the LA county sheriff department in the off season!”

“Kingsley Shaklebolt. Not Shaquille o’Neal. Will you actually listen to me instead of jumping to conclusions?”

“No, I have nothing left to say to you. You were never my friend. Good day, Miss Jade…if that is your real name!”

Jade winced and Harry staggered back and pointed at her, horror written across his face. “It isn’t, is it? My god woman! Is there no end to your treachery??”

“Jade’s” face began to shift.

“What’s wrong with your face?” Harry demanded.

“Damn it damn it damn it” Jade muttered, covering her face with one hand. She grabbed Harry by the collar of his shirt and began hauling him towards the nearest alleyway. “Just be quiet. I need to get out of sight before I completely lose control of my powers. Merlin, I’m going to be in so much trouble.”

The moment they were out of sight of the neighbors who had begun peeking out their windows at them when they heard Harry’s outraged yelling, she apparated them both to a quiet spot in a park. Harry, who had just eaten a bunch of candy—something he wasn’t used to doing—something he wasn’t used to doing—clutched his stomach and groaned, before staggering towards the nearest trash bin and leaning over it to start gagging.

“Oh god! Are you alright? Are you splinched? Did I leave your stomach behind?” she panicked. She disappeared, to go back and check the alley to see if she left anything behind, and then reappeared, looking mystified. “You’ve got all your parts, what’s the problem?”

“Too much candy. Don’t do that! You can’t just go dragging people off places like that!”

Harry turned around, only to be hit in the stomach with a spell. He felt better, but it just made him angry all over again.

“Don’t just go shooting spells at people either! What is wrong with…you. Who the hell are you?”

“Jade” pulled a mirror from her pocket and stared at herself a moment, scrunched her nose and
then her face began shifting until she looked like “Jade” again. Harry crossed his arms and stared at her stonily. “You have a lot of explaining to do.”

“Yeah.” She sighed tiredly. “Come on. My place isn’t far. I could use some of my mum’s special hot chocolate right about now. I’m probably going to be booted out of the academy for this cock-up.”

Her shoulders slumped and she began shuffling away out of the park. Harry didn’t know where he was, or what all was going on, so he followed her, debating on whether or not he should try making a break for it. In the end, he just followed quietly.

“Mum?”

“Nymphadora? You’re home early.” An attractive woman with brown hair came out of the kitchen, drying her hands, only to stop short when she caught sight of Harry, who was still looking pissed off at the world, and her daughter, who looked depressed.

“Hello. Who might you be?”

“Harry Potter…though the way things are going, I may in fact be someone altogether different and no one bothered to tell me. I seemed to be surrounded by lies and treachery on all sides.”

“Jade” covered her face and sighed.

“Nymphadora?”

“So. That’s your actual name is it?”

“Call me Tonks.”

“You’ve been lying to me since day one. You don’t get to dictate terms to me, Nymphadora.”

“So…hot chocolate?”

“That would be wonderful, mum.”

“I’m Andromeda, by the way, dear. Welcome to our home.”

“Very pleased to meet you, ma’am. I do hope, for both our sakes, that is your real name.”

The woman smiled and shook her head. “Ah, Siri’s going to have his hands full with you.”

“Who?”

Andromeda glanced at her daughter and raised an eyebrow.

“I didn’t get a chance to give it to him! There was some false alarms saying he was in London and Godric’s Hollow…” Nymphadora turned to look at Harry suspiciously. “You weren’t in London and Godric’s Hollow, were you?”

“I’m not allowed to go to London because weird people keep stalking me and upsetting my aunt. I can’t say I’m best pleased about that. I don’t even know where Godric’s Hollow is.”
“Where were you all day?”

“Clothes shopping with my aunt…which you should know already, Jade. After that I hopped a bus and went to a used book store.”

“Why? You should have all your school books already, and they don’t sell them in muggle stores.”

“I wanted my own copy of the Art of War. That guy has a lot of useful advice for a dead Chinese man.”

“Did you get one?” Andromeda wondered.

“Unfortunately, no. They didn’t have any copies. I did get a nice copy of Grey’s Anatomy though.”

“Why would you want something like that?” Tonks wondered.

“I got it out of the library once so I could find out where my spleen was. I figure I should probably find out where my gall bladder is too, you know, just for completeness sake.”

He frowned suddenly and glared at Nymphadora. “Hey! Stop trying to trick me into talking to you. I already told you we’re not friends anymore.”

Andromeda steered Harry into the kitchen and got him settled at the table, while she started making hot chocolate. “Start at the beginning. What’s going on?” she demanded.

“Your daughter is a lying liar who lies.” Harry chirped.

“Would you stop!” Nymphadora moaned as she settled into her seat as well. “I’m an auror trainee! I got my job through the Ministry as part of my training. I was supposed to be undercover. I don’t have any records in the muggle world, really, so they just created a new identity for me—Jade Rogers, university student.”

“You knew who I was, knew about magic and all that, and didn’t say a word about any of it. You’re making bets with American basketball players over where I’ll end up in school. You know Mrs. Figg, my babysitter. I saw you coming out of her house.”

“American basketball players?” Andromeda interjected.

“For the last time, I don’t know any Americans, basketball players or not! Kingsley Shaklebolt! Shaklebolt!”

“She wasn’t even wearing her own face! Lies and treachery, all of it. There’s a vast conspiracy going on, and I don’t like it.” Harry added to Andromeda indignantly.

Nymphadora groaned and banged her head lightly on the table. She pulled a letter out of her pocket and handed it to Harry. “Here, read this. I’m going to go change.” She sighed, before leaving the kitchen.

Andromeda poured herself and Harry each a cup of hot chocolate and sat herself down across from him.

“Go on, dear. It’s from your godfather, Sirius Black. He’s a cousin of mine. He’s looking forward to having a chance to meet you. You were all he thought about all those years he was in prison.”
Thank you for that, by the way. I’ve been living in the muggle world since I married, and I wasn’t actually aware that he’d never been questioned or received a trial. I’ve spent all these years wondering” she sighed and took a sip of her chocolate, banishing her gloomy thoughts. “In any case, thank you.”

“Um, you’re welcome, I guess.”

“Read your letter, dear. I’ll answer any questions you have.”

“He has really bad penmanship.”

“He was in prison a very long time, and he wrote that pretty much as soon as he was given a chance to. Azkaban is a terrible place, and it takes a terrible toll on the inmates there.”

“Police brutality? Violent prison guards?”

“The guards there aren’t human. They’re called dementors. They’re horrible things who eat happy thoughts. It’s cold and dark wherever they’re gathered in any numbers, and the whole island where the prison sits is full of them. The inmates get trapped in their own minds, reliving their worst memories over and over.”

“That’s horrible.”

“There’s no known way to kill the dementors, and their presence makes it difficult for wizards to use their magic, so they decided to use the dementors to ensure dangerous criminals couldn’t run amok, while keeping them contained from the larger world at the same time.”

Harry read through the letter and frowned, setting it aside. “He’s in the hospital?”

“Like I said, it takes a terrible toll on the inmates. He was there for a very long time, when he shouldn’t have been. The Ministry is doing what it can to try and smooth things over. He’ll be there until the healers declare him fit and healthy, and of sound mind.”

“Will you do me a favor and keep an eye on the situation? He’s already been shafted by the system once. I’d hate to see him just trade one prison for another. Governments as a whole don’t like admitting to having made a mistake. They might find it quite convenient were he to just quietly disappear into a back ward somewhere.”

“You’re very paranoid. A child your age really shouldn’t be.”

“I’ve had oddities, strange people, lying people, and spying cats surrounding me my whole life, and then suddenly I have people coming out of the woodwork to tell me everything I thought I knew about my own life and history, and everything else was a lie. Then, on top of that, I find out that the man who would have been my guardian was swooped away into the night and thrown in prison without a trial, without so much as a single person asking him a single question—and he’d still be there now if I hadn’t of written a letter asking about it. Were you in my place, wouldn’t you be?” He drank down his hot chocolate and stood from his seat, carefully folding the letter from Sirius and putting it away in his pocket. “Thank you very much for your hospitality, ma’am, but I think I should like to go home now.”

“Can I get your phone number before you go? I can take you to see Sirius, if you like. He’s been rather antsy because he’s afraid he won’t be released until after you start school, and then he’d have to wait until the holidays to see you.”

Harry nodded and scrawled the Dursley’s number in the address book once she fetched it for him.
Nymphadora came back not long after, with pink hair, a different face than he was used to seeing, and wearing jeans and a (non-wizard) t-shirt.

“You’re going to have to change your hair before we get to my house. My aunt will have a fit if anyone with pink hair is seen on her property.”

Nymphadora huffed irritably and her hair went brown.

“Is that your actual face?”

“Yeah. Can we go now?”

“You never explained why your face can do that.”

“She’s a metamorphamagus, dear. It means she can just alter her appearance at will. It’s a talent that runs in the Black family.”

“Really?” Harry said with a bit of glee “My grandmother was one, Granny Longbottom told me so. That’s good to know.”

“I’m sorry dear, but I can tell you you’re probably not a metamorph like Nymphadora is. It was obvious what she was the day she was born—she kept changing colors.”

“Well, damn.”

Nymphadora stuck her tongue out at him.

“That’s not winning you any points, Jade.”

Andromeda bit her lip to keep from laughing. When she’d regained control of herself she smiled at Harry and patted down his unruly hair. “It was very nice to meet you, dear. I’ll be in touch.”

“It was nice to meet you too. I guess I’ll see you around.”

Nymphadora huffed and started towards the door. “And to think, I used to want a little brother!” The sound of Andromeda’s laughter followed them out the door.

Nymphadora popped them into the park down the street from Harry’s house, and they set off towards Privet Drive together. Harry was silent, just walking.

“You can’t stay mad at me forever, you know.”

Harry just glanced at her and kept walking.

“I was undercover.”

They turned onto Harry’s street, and he sped his steps towards no. 4. Nymphadora grabbed his shoulder and halted him before he could go in.

“Come on, you’re being ridiculous.”

“Tell me something, Miss Tonks, how would you feel if our positions were reversed? Jade was, I thought, my friend…but it turns out, she never even existed. I don’t know you.” He pulled his shoulder from her grip and hurried inside.
When Tonks returned home, she found her mother waiting with a cup of hot chocolate. She slumped down into a seat across from her and wrapped her hands around the mug.

“I was hoping you’d help smooth things over for me, but no such luck, it seems.”

“Even many adults would feel a bit betrayed under the circumstances. It’s just that much worse because he’s so young. I know you two were at least somewhat close; you were always talking about him when you’d come home from work. You knew all about him and his life, and he thought you were someone you weren’t. I’d have been more surprised if he didn’t feel a bit upset.”

“How am I supposed to fix it?”

“I don’t know dear. I’m afraid that’s simply one of the hazards of working in a situation like that. You figure, most times, undercover work would involve trying to gather evidence on criminals. When the job is over, the criminals are, one hopes, behind bars, and that’s the end of it. Even then, I suppose there has to be some residual guilt, simply from having gotten to know the people before using their trust against them. The fact that the boy is not a criminal, but is in fact an innocent caught in the middle of things… He’ll either forgive you, or he won’t. I’m afraid you’ll just have to accept that.”
Sirius perked up when the door began to open. It was boring as hell being trapped in the hospital—he kept trying to convince everyone that he’d recover better and faster if he had a chance to be out and about, but so far no one was listening to him. When the door opened fully, he was rather shocked to see who was on the other side.


He winced when his grandfather’s cane bopped him on the head. The guy might be old as dirt, but he was still quick with that thing.

“Idiot boy. Why wouldn’t we be here?”

“Why would you? No one wanted anything to do with me before I ended up in Azkaban.” Sirius laughed bitterly.

“Merlin. Going to Gryffindor really did rot your brain, didn’t it?” his grandmother said sourly, as she patted his head and kissed him on the cheek. “Goodness, look at you. What a horrible place. I do hope your good looks return in time; you’re going to have a difficult time carrying on the family name otherwise.”

“I’m probably going to marry a muggle.” Sirius announced boldly.

The four of them looked him up and down and sighed. “Beggars can’t be choosers after all.” Lucretia snorted.

“You might have to in any case. It’s likely everyone your age is already married off.” Cassiopeia added, conjuring seats for all of them.

Sirius frowned petulantly and sat back with his arms crossed, confused and disappointed by the near-non reaction to his shocking announcement.

“You really never caught on to how things were done, did you? Hanging out with all those idiot Dumbledore-lovers really did a number on you. How do you think it is that we all—even we Blacks who pride ourselves on our purity of blood—ended up with at least some muggle blood in the line? People like your cousin Andromeda have always married out of the family every few generations. They’re disowned so that their descendants can’t claim the family fortunes without marrying back in at some point. How do you think our family was able to stay on top for so long? We got the benefits of both a pureblood heritage to keep the magic strong, and the benefits of occasional influxes of new blood to stave off inbreeding, all while keeping the fortunes built up over generations intact. You marrying a muggle would be, to say the least, less than ideal, but as your parents were second cousins, it probably won’t do that much harm overall. If your half-blood child marries a pureblood, and so do your grandchildren, all is well—a strong, magically powerful,
healthy line to continue on.” His grandfather explained.

He looked at Sirius, saw he looked stunned, confused and quite discombobulated, and sighed mournfully. “Obviously, I have a lot of work ahead of me before I die. You’ve missed out on quite a lot it seems. We’ll save that for another time; best you recover your wits first—we don’t want it all going in one ear and out the next a second time.”

“Quite” his grandmother agreed. “On to other things. Your house was seized when you were arrested and sold off to pay for the damage to the street. We’re working on getting you compensated for that. Grimmauld Place is currently unoccupied, has been since your mother died. It’s been six years, so chances are the place is uninhabitable at the moment.”

“Hmm. Yes, we should probably do something about that. Does anyone remember if any of the house elves were still alive?”

“Just Kreacher, I believe. KREACHER!”

A small wizened house elf in a dirty loincloth appeared and gaped at all of them. “Masters and Mistresses is remembering poor Kreacher! Oh happy day!”

“Goodness, elf, get a hold of yourself.” Lucretia tutted. “Are any of the other elves still at Grimmauld?”

“No, poor Kreacher is being all alone.”

“Pity. Well, as you can see, Sirius is out of prison. You’ll need to get the place habitable again.”

“Kreacher is being very old, and mistress house is being in very bad shape.”

“Don’t worry, old boy. We’ll send some help along for you. Gather all the magical items and family treasures in the grand ballroom, and then all of you get started scrubbing the place down from top to bottom. A child will be moving in as well, so we want it fit for such use. Make a list of anything that needs replacing, and we’ll go through the treasures at a later time, see what needs to be put in storage and what needs to be gotten rid of. Get going, we’ll send the others along in a bit.”

The elf disappeared.

“Well, that’s taken care of. Now, before we go, is there anything you need?”

“Uh, well…something to do while I’m stuck here would be nice. Something to write with. I wrote Harry a letter. Andromeda said she’d see it was delivered, but I haven’t heard back yet. Oh! Some snacks would be nice. Hospital food, though far superior to anything Azkaban offers, is still not the greatest. If you happen to see any cute healers on the way out, you could tell them I’m in need of a sponge bath. That would be helpful.” Sirius added with an innocent grin. Arcturus snorted, and bopped him lightly in the head with his cane.

“So much like your father. It’s good to have you back, my boy.”

After the four of them had left, Sirius laid back in his bed and stared at the ceiling, his mind still reeling. Everything he had accepted to be true about his family for so long now had just been turned on its head. He wasn’t sure what to think.
Harry finished up the last of the dishes, and finally had a chance to sneak off to his room to examine everything he’d gotten that day. He perked up as he pulled the seven-lock trunk out of his pocket, tapped the plate and enlarged it, and then looked for something sharp to prick his finger with. Once he had a nice sized blood drop on his finger, he smeared the little key with it, coating the whole thing. The key glowed for a moment and the blood vanished inside of it, leaving the key reddish-gold instead of plain yellow-gold.

“Neat”.

He inserted the key in the lock, which briefly glowed as well before going ‘snick’ as the lock unengaged. He lifted the lid and peered inside, wondering what to expect. He could admit, he hadn’t been expecting a trunk full of linens. He dug through, and found sheets, blankets, tablecloths, towels, even some curtains.

“Wow, my parents were weird”. Harry decided. He unfolded a heavy bundle of lace and found it was a fancy tablecloth with a family crest embroidered in the center. “Fortis et astutus”, huh?

He shut the lid after putting away the tablecloth and turned the key a second time. He found a nice set of china, crystal, and fancy silverware, as well as a silver set of goblets, and a tea service, as well as serving platters and bowls. There was an armored shield with the family crest and crossed swords in another compartment, along with several suits of armor, more weapons, several stuffed animal heads, and various knick knacks, vases, tapestries, carpets, jewelry—old fashioned, heavy stuff for the most part, and most of it was ladies jewelry, but there was some stuff for a guy too—cuff links, fancy buttons, tie tacks, lapel pins, cloak pins, and a ring with a family crest on it in a small box. Harry glanced down at the Black ring he was still wearing on his left hand, and decided to wear it on his right. Much as the Black ring had done when he first put it on, it shrunk to fit his finger properly.

The remaining compartments in the trunk held gobs of furniture shrunken down to a fraction of their size, and then books—hundreds of them, in the bottommost compartment, which was really a room that you could climb down in to. There was a book on a stand in the middle of the room, which had a note on it, explaining that it was the master library index. Inside was listed all the books that were held in the collection, cross-listed by subject. He found a note inside the front cover explaining what it was, how to add books to it or remove them, and how to use it to search for things you wanted to look at. “Cool.” he said happily as he flipped through it.

He went back up into his room and grabbed all the extra reading material he’d purchased recently and brought it down into the trunk so he could try it out. He was a bit irked to discover there were already two copies of Hogwarts: a History in the library, the newest edition, which Harry had just purchased while school shopping, a 1970 edition, and a 1712 edition—the first run printing. Happily, none of the rest of the stuff he’d just bought was already in the library, as they were all printed more recently than 1981. In fact, to his delight, he discovered he had a half-dozen books on tracking charms, and ways to hide your location from others, that hadn’t been in the bookstore.

He walked the length of the room and ran his fingers lightly over the spines of the many books, and realized he owed Bathilda Bagshot a tremendous thanks. With one act, she had given him the tools needed to keep himself safe by breaking the conspiracy of silence that seemed to surround him, and had given him a small part of his family’s legacy to hold on to.

“I’ll have to send her a fruit basket or something.”
He saw the ring on his hand—the Potter ring, that is—and frowned suddenly, realizing that it could pose a problem.

“How am I supposed to explain this without letting on that I actually was at Godric’s Hallow and was somehow able to evade my jailers, when I’m not supposed to know anything about anything? Dumbledore had my key. If he inspected my vault to see what all I had, he’ll know this wasn’t there. There was only money in that vault; no items of any sort. He probably wouldn’t let on, not directly. If he looked into my affairs, and Sirius still remained in prison, he’s been actively working against us, and he’d hardly admit to that. If forces are at work to keep me ignorant of my own heritage, I might find myself ‘misplacing’ this trunk and its contents should anyone find out about it.”

He paced, worrying his lip as he wondered what to do.

“Well…she promised to not let on that I was there, and I promised to visit. I’ll just have to try winging it when that happens. Until then, however, I can’t wear this ring in public…and I’ll have to keep the trunk on me in shrunken form just in case a chance to make a ‘surprise’ visit to Madame Bagshot presents itself. Wizards are certainly troublesome.”

Andromeda called three days later to arrange a visit to St. Mungo’s.
While waiting for her car to arrive, Harry found himself pacing his room and worrying himself into a funk. He didn’t remember Sirius Black at all. The only thing he knew about the man was that
1) he’d been in Gryffindor with his father, and was his best friend
2) he was his godfather
3) he’d been in a prison described by many as ‘hell on earth’, with some sort of monsters eating his happy thoughts and trying to eat his soul.

It was hardly an ideal situation. Even if the man could recover from his incarceration, Harry still found himself wondering if he’d actually be allowed to.
All of that was bad enough, but on top of that, he didn’t know what sort of person he was, he didn’t know whether he’d like him…or whether Sirius himself would like Harry. He didn’t know whether he could count on him as an ally, or if he’d be just one more person he’d have to classify as a possible enemy.
Given a choice, would he side with Dumbledore or with Harry?
He didn’t know, and until he did know, he was going to be worried about it.

When she arrived, and they started back towards London, Harry found that he was feeling a bit sick to his stomach.
Andromeda glanced over and found Harry looking pale and a bit peaky, and took pity on him.

“Siri’s real excited. He can’t wait to meet you.”

“Me either.” Harry croaked.

“Just between us, I think he’s a bit nervous. I think he’s afraid you won’t like him.”

Harry slanted a glance at her. “He’s nervous about meeting me?” he asked, aiming for casual.
Andromeda pretended not to notice.

“Mmm hmm. Petrified, in fact. He knows he not at his best. I think he’s afraid you’ll run
screaming from the room once you get a look at him. I’ll be honest, he still doesn’t quite look his best, but he looks a lot better than he did even just a few days ago. He’s still far too thin, and his skin hasn’t quite lost the waxy look it seems to have acquired… Try not to be too alarmed. The healers assure me they’re doing all they can to reverse the damage, but it will take time. I’ve already seen a vast improvement, but I imagine he still looks pretty bad to someone who hasn’t seen how much worse he looked.”

“I wouldn’t hold something like that against him.” Harry assured her, just a bit indignant.

“I’m sure he’ll be glad to hear that. I think he’s also worried that, even once he makes a full recovery that you won’t actually want to leave your relatives to live with him. He’s already missed so much time with you, and with you going to school soon, I think he’s already aware of the childhood you have left slipping through his fingers.”

“I’m a little uncertain about that” Harry admitted, worrying his lip. “I’m not really all that fond of my relatives, but at least I know what to expect from them.”

Andromeda frowned at his admission but kept her voice light.

“Well, there’s a long break during Christmas holidays. Maybe you could use that as a trial run? Unless you’ve already plans with your relatives?” she asked, fishing for information.

“Nah. I probably would have stayed over at school if it came down to it.”

“Well then, that’ll be perfect. Two weeks to get to know each other.”

“I suppose that would be alright.” Harry allowed.

When they arrived in London, they ended up driving in circles for a while looking for somewhere to park. When they finally found a place, they had to walk two blocks back to find the hospital. Andromeda led them to an empty storefront with a bare, hairless mannequin in the window. He looked at her like she was mental, but she just smiled and spoke quietly to the mannequin, before grabbing Harry’s hand and ushering him through the doors. Inside was nothing like he’d expected from seeing the outside. Everything was clean and white, and there were portraits everywhere that were watching the people come and go, and commenting on the ailments of the folks waiting in the front room. Just ahead was a receptionist’s desk, with a line of people waiting to speak to her. A loudspeaker overhead occasionally came to life, saying things like ‘Healer Butterfield, please come to the Janus Thickey ward’. Harry’s eyes were practically plopping out of his head as he looked around.

Andromeda kept a firm grip on him and pulled him through the waiting room towards the lifts just beyond. The lift took them to the first floor, where a woman’s voice announced that they had arrived at the ‘Dai Llewellyn Ward for Creature Induced Injuries’.

They walked down the hall to the end of the ward, and Andromeda opened the door, to reveal a dark-haired, emaciated man lying on a bed, staring longingly at the open window. The room was bare and rather dingy, illuminated only by the single window, and a cluster of glowing crystals in the center of the ceiling. He was so lost in thought, he didn’t seem to have heard them come in.

“Did they overdo the calming draughts?” Andromeda asked curiously.

The man bolted to a sitting position and turned to look at her wildly. His skin was yellowed and
waxy, and stretched too tight against his bones. His eyes were deep sunken, and his dark hair, Harry could see now, was speckled with strands of grey. He glanced down and his eyes met Harry’s and a painfully large grin split his face. In spite of how scary he looked, Harry found himself smiling back, and his nervousness melting away. Andromeda smiled at them both softly.

“I’ll be back in a little bit. Enjoy your visit.”

Harry stuck his hands in his pocket and sidled closer. Sirius seemed to not know what to do with his hands—he looked like he was going to try hugging him, and then shake his hand, then pat his head. In the end, he just dropped his hands and looked sort of lost and bereft.

“Harry… I can’t even begin to tell you how sorry I am. I should have been there.”

“Not your fault. You can’t help getting shafted by the system.”

“…” Sirius laughed—it was an odd laugh, reminiscent of a dog’s bark. “I suppose that’s one way of looking at it.”

“Oh. Do you want this back? I believe it’s yours.” Harry offered, holding out his left hand.

Sirius swallowed and took Harry’s hand, and just stared at the ring for a long time.

“That was my father’s ring.”

“It’s the reason I wrote that letter. I guess he was looking out for you.”

Sirius’ face collapsed in grief and confusion, and he laughed bitterly. “Maybe he was. I don’t even know anymore.”

“It’s kind of neat, really. It wriggles around on your finger till it fits. I was ever so surprised when it happened. It kind of tickles.” Harry explained as he pulled it loose.

Sirius continued staring at it for a long time, before taking it and putting it on his right hand. For a good portion of his life, that ring had represented everything he hated, everything he thought was wrong with the world. He had grown to despise his heritage, and had spent a number of years trying to disavow all of it. Now, with everything that had happened… he was still deeply ambivalent, to say the least. Harry looked around and found no chairs about, so he poked Sirius in the ribs.

“Budge over, would you?”

Sirius was jolted out of his brooding by the odd request, but he scooched sideways as asked. Harry climbed up and settled himself comfortably beside him and then sat in uncomfortable silence. Hesitantly, Sirius put an arm around him, ready to pull away in a second if it seemed at all unwelcome. Harry stiffened a bit, but then bit by bit he settled into Sirius’ side. “So…”

“So.”

“What’s your favorite color?”

“Red. Yours?”

“Green.”

“Ah! Traitor.”
“What’s wrong with green? Everyone’s always told me I look good in green.”

“Oh, James! Do you hear what your son is saying?” Sirius moaned dramatically.

“Oh, this is a Hogwarts thing is it? McGonagall wears green, and she’s head of Gryffindor house. Liking green does not imply that I’m automatically going to be a Slytherin.”

“Right, because you’ll be a Gryffindor like I was, and like your parents were.”

“Actually, I’m aiming for Hufflepuff, myself.”

“Hufflepuff?!”

“What? Severus Snape is head of Slytherin, and I’ve heard he has a bit of a grudge against all Potters and Gryffindors everywhere.”

Sirius twitched, and smiled sickly at Harry. “Hooray for Hufflepuff?”

“Yeah, that was pretty much my thought on the matter.”

“I don’t really think yellow is your color. How about blue? I hear you read the dictionary for fun. You’ll probably fit right into Ravenclaw…in fact, with creds like that, you’ll probably be the life of the party.”

Andromeda came back, with tea and snacks for everyone. She handed everything out and then conjured herself a seat, and smiled, watching them. She could already see a marked improvement in Sirius even compared to just a few minutes ago. Harry poked through the array of snacks curiously and picked one up.

“Chocolate frog? It’s not a chocolate covered frog, is it? I’m not French. I heard they eat frogs, you know.” Harry confided.

“No, dear. It’s a frog made of chocolate. They’re charmed to jump when you first open the package.”

“Ah, you shouldn’t have warned him! You take all the fun out.”

Harry tore open the package and yelped when the frog when shooting out. He managed to catch it before it got away, only to look at it a bit uncertainly, as it was still wriggling. He bit off its head, and found himself rather relieved when it stopped moving.

“It’s good.”

Sirius got his own, thinking to himself rather ruefully that he never thought he’d see the day he started getting sick of chocolate—but each time anyone visited, that’s what they brought him. He knew it was supposed to be helpful after being around a dementor, but still.

“Who’d you get?” Sirius wondered.

“Huh?”

“There’s collectible cards in each one. I used to have a complete set, once upon a time.”
“Agrippa.” Harry read off, once he found the card.

“That was lucky, he’s rare. You should hold on to that. How about you, Andi?”

“Morgan Le Fay. You?”

“Albus Dumbledore.” Harry glanced over and saw a man with a long white beard smile at both of them and then wander off.

“He’s gone.”

“Well, you can’t expect him to hang around all day.” Sirius replied, handing him the card. Andromeda handed him hers as well.

“Where does he go when he leaves the picture?”

“Huh? Oh, who, Dumbledore? To one of the other cards, I imagine. You’ll see the portraits at Hogwarts, and here too, for that matter, do that. The ones at Hogwarts love to gossip, the ones here usually spend their time trying to diagnose everyone. They seem to think the healers here aren’t doing a good enough job.” Sirius laughed.

“We should go visit Barty before we go.” Andromeda mused. “He wants to meet you.”

“Who’s Barty?”

Andromeda and Sirius grimaced uncomfortably. “Oh, right…no one told you about him.”

“Well, you see… Madame Bones went to talk to Barty Crouch Sr. after questioning Siri. He was the head of the aurors during the war, and was left in charge of overseeing the trials and deposition of prisoners. When she told him that Siri was innocent, he called a house elf, gave her orders, told Madame Bones that there was someone else that needed to be questioned, and he couldn’t bear to learn that he’d been mistaken twice. He killed himself right in front of her.” Andromeda explained.

“He sent his only child, his son, Barty Junior, to Azkaban for a life sentence for the torture of the Longbottoms. He later went back and rescued Barty from prison—it was his dying wife’s last wish. She didn’t believe he was guilty, and she couldn’t bear the thought of him in that place…” Sirius continued.

“She used polyjuice and took his place. The dementors don’t have eyes. So long as the right number of prisoners are there, they don’t know whether it’s the correct people or not. He took his son home, hid him under an invisibility cloak and held him under imperious. He’d been there, like that, ever since.”

“What’s imperious?” Harry wondered.

“It’s one of the unforgivables—along with the death curse and the cruciatus curse. It allows the caster to completely subvert another’s will, and its use against another human being is an automatic life sentence in Azkaban.”

“I take it he was innocent then?”

Andromeda nodded sadly. “He was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. My sister, her husband and brother-in-law had tortured the Longbottoms, looking for information on what had become of You-know-who, after your house blew up. They didn’t find what they were looking for,
and their torture of the Longbottoms with the cruciatus left Frank and Alice mad—they’re here, in
the long-term care ward. They’re not expected to ever recover from what was done to them. Their
next stop was to seek you out, but you had already been hidden away with your relatives. They
approached Barty and told him that they wanted to adopt you…”

Harry raised an eyebrow. Andromeda faltered for a second before rallying

“Bella claimed she couldn’t have children, and that as her cousin, Siri, was your godfather, that she
was your closest magical relative. They told him that, now that things had quieted down, you—a
magical child—would be better off with magical guardians than with muggles who would never
understand you. Barty approached his father, and got your location from him. When they arrived at
your house, they killed a mailman…”

Harry blinked “Was he scattered in pieces across the lawn?”

“You remember that?”

“Not until you just said that.”

“Ah. Yes…he apparently was scattered across the lawn. Aurors apperrated in as soon as magic was
detected. They rounded up the four of them, and he went to prison alongside them for the
Longbottom torture.”

“The poor bastard. He’s been on suicide watch since he got here. No one really knows what to say
to him.”

“And he wants to meet me. That’s a lot of pressure.”

“If you’d rather not dear, we can save it for another time.”

“No, that would be cruel. He probably feels forgotten and overlooked enough without adding that
to the mix. We’ll go see him before we leave. Maybe we can cheer him up somehow.”

They stayed awhile longer with Sirius. Harry asked a lot of questions in an effort to get to know the
man—favorite food, favorite type of music, hobbies—that sort of thing. Sirius in turn told some
funny stories about his time at Hogwarts with his father. Finally, Andromeda cut things short.

“Visiting hours will be ending soon, and if we’re going to stop in to see Barty, we need to go.”

“I can come back. I’ve still got a bit of time before school starts. Now that I know how to get here,
I can take the Knight bus or something.”

“You really shouldn’t be traveling such distances by yourself.”

“It’ll drop me off at the front door, won’t it?”

“Well, yes, but”

“I don’t see the problem.”

“Promise you won’t go anywhere but directly here and back home.” Andromeda cut in sternly.

“Where else would I go? I don’t really know anywhere else.”
“I still don’t like it.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine…but if there’s ever any trouble, I’d prefer you safe than coming to see me.”

The spell damage ward was as depressing as the creature-induced injury ward. Andromeda had to ask one of the nurses on duty for assistance, as Barty was in a locked ward, since they feared he would try to hurt himself. They had to hand over their wands before they were allowed to go in.

Barty Crouch Jr. was a fair-haired man of average height and build. He might have been attractive, but the vacant, hopeless look in his eyes kind of detracted from it. He was sitting up in bed, still, quiet and staring at the wall when they came in. He glanced at them without much interest when they came to stand beside the bed.

“It’s rather ironic, don’t you think?” he said quietly. “I ended up in this mess because I was trying to rescue you from muggles all those years ago. Instead, you end up rescuing me from wizards all these years later.”

“Yeah, that is kind of ironic.”

“What’s more, you’re accompanied by the twin sister of the woman who started it all.”

“Small world.” Harry agreed. “They tell me you’re on suicide watch.”

Barty smiled unhappily. “So I am.”

“For what it’s worth, I don’t think your father hated you.”

Barty blinked and glanced at Harry curiously.

“People working in law enforcement, especially in a time like that, would get to see only the very worst that human beings were capable of, day after day, week after week. In a small community like this, the people you would see doing these terrible things would be relatives, neighbors, people you went to school with, co-workers. Even the strongest person would get weighed down by that. The only way to really deal would be to accept that anyone, at any time, can be a monster, given the right circumstances. However, once you accept that as truth, it means it’s just that much harder to believe that someone isn’t a monster—especially if there seems evidence that they are. The fact that your father committed suicide over this whole mess tells me that he didn’t hate you—far from it, even if he had a very twisted way of showing it. It’s probably not much comfort, but there it is. My advice? Go to a nude beach, get some sun, live a little.”

Barty blinked, looked at Harry, who nodded sagely, and then started laughing. He laughed until tears began streaming from his eyes, and then he started sobbing. It was like a dam had broken, and everything he’d been unable to deal with came pouring out at once. Harry settled himself on the bed and rubbed his back until the worst of it passed.

“Nude beach, huh?” Barty croaked, still sounding slightly hysterical.

“Yeah, this old guy I know, Sarge, said he went to one in Spain one summer. He said it took twenty years off him and gave him a whole new lease on life.”

“You know, there might be something to that.”
Andromeda’s eyebrow was twitching, and her smile had frozen on her face.

“Nude beach, Harry?”

“What? Look how much more cheerful he is just thinking about it.” Harry said innocently.

Barty sniggered.

The nurse came in not long after. She kept staring at Barty curiously. “Um…visiting hours are over. I’m afraid you’ll have to leave.”

“I’ll stop by again, if you like. I’ll bring something to brighten up the room a bit. These wards are all terribly depressing. It’s an outrage, really. Bad enough having to be in the hospital without the décor making you sick as well.” Harry muttered.

“I think I’d like that.”

Harry waved goodbye, and followed Andromeda and the nurse out.

When the door had closed, Barty shook his head and laughed. “Nude beach.”

Harry was only able to visit the hospital once more. The waiting room was filled with reporters, and he very nearly didn’t make it out alive. He did manage to keep his promise to brighten up the two men’s rooms though—with Andromeda’s help, he put together boxes that were larger inside than out, and were filled with balloons of all colors that escaped the box when opened and filled the ceiling with color. It was a big hit with both of them—the real kicker though was the fake nudie mag. It sprayed you down with cold water if you tried opening it. Barty had laughed. Sirius had as well, though he’d also gotten him in a headlock and noogied him until he cried ‘uncle’.

Before he knew it, it was the 30th, and he and the Dursleys were on their way to the Finch-Fletchleys estate in Northamptonshire. Harry had his school things all packed and ready in his trunk, which was shrunken and in the pouch on his belt. He had packed away a selection of books from his parents’ trunk as well—he also had that with him, but he didn’t want to take it out and have anyone seeing it until he’d ‘officially’ gotten it from Bathilda Bagshot.

The Dursleys were practically vibrating with excitement and nervousness as they drove up the long drive leading to the Finch-Fletchley’s house – it was an old, ivy-covered manor house, with a lot of ground around it, and they could see stables for horses and a garden with a hedge maze as they approached. The Finch-Fletchleys were just the ‘right sort’ that they most wanted to socialize with. They were even willing to forgive them having a freak in the family, that’s how eager they were.

When they arrived, they were welcomed in, and taken to the garden patio where the adults were all gathered. He and Dudley were shooed off towards the garden where all the kids were gathered. It was a sizeable group they found when they got there—Dean was there, with his six younger brothers and sisters, Hermione, Justin, Neville, and then he and Dudley made twelve.

“Harry, lovely to see you again. Welcome to our home.” Justin greeted him with a handshake.

“Justin, thanks for having us. This is my cousin, Dudley Dursley. Dud, this is Justin Finch-Fletchley.”

“Pleased to meet you.”
“Capitol, old chum. Why don’t you both join us; we’re teaching Dean’s siblings the finer points of croquet.”

“I’ve never played it either, so I’m not sure what help I’d be.”

“Not a problem, it’s really very simple.” Justin assured them.

“Everyone! Harry is here, and this is his cousin, Dudley Dursley. Harry, Dudley, this is Dean, Emma, Chauncey, Brittany, Joseph, Deacon, and Beth” he pointed to each of the Thomases in turn. “That there is Hermione, and of course, Neville.”

Dudley nodded and tried to smile; in truth he was utterly petrified, being surrounded by freaks on all sides.

“Dud, relax” Harry whispered quietly “Only Dean is going to Hogwarts, the rest of his siblings aren’t. Dean’s parents can’t do magic, neither can Hermione’s or Justin’s. Regular folks far outnumber the magical here. It’s fine.”

Dudley glared at him and scoffed at the idea that he’d been at all worried. He still relaxed and was able to join the group without further ado.

“I know who you are. You’re Harry Potter!” Hermione announced smugly.

“We did meet before. Not all that long ago in fact.”

“You’re the Boy-Who-Lived!” Hermione growled, stomping her foot.

“Yes, I’m living right now. It’s not really such an accomplishment. Lots of boys live. Why look at them” he gestured to the rest of the group “they’re all doing it right now as well.”

Hermione realized the rest of the group was looking at her strangely—except for Neville, who was looking at Harry strangely.

“Stop looking at me like that! I’m not mad! He’s famous! He’s in Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts! Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century! He’s been in the Daily Prophet just about every day!”

“I can’t imagine why. The only things of note I’ve done recently are write a letter and go visit some relatives.” Harry replied, his voice bland.

“Geez, sister, chill out a bit there!” Dean laughed at Hermione’s bristling form “You on drugs there or something?”

“Of course not! I threw them out after Professor McGonagall visited!” Hermione shrieked.

There was a ringing silence after Hermione’s shocking announcement. “Geez, Hermione. Drugs are bad for you. I thought everyone knew that.” Justin sputtered, sounding scandalized.

“Are you one of them crazy thugs on PCP? I heard about them.” Dudley interjected, eyeing Hermione with curious interest.

“I’M NOT ON PCP!” Hermione shrieked, tears in her eyes. “My parents thought there was something wrong with me because I kept seeing odd things and weird things kept happening. They made me go to a psychiatrist! I was on medication. I’m not mad though! I’m not! It’s all real! It always was. I threw the medication away and I told my parents I’m never going back to that psychiatrist ever again and they can’t make me!” having said her piece, she burst into tears.
Neville sidled over and patted her back. “There, there”

She flung herself on him and continued crying. Neville looked rather flustered to find himself suddenly with an arm full of crying girl, but he continued patting her back and trying to be soothing.

“Well…I feel a bit of a heel.” Dean said uncomfortably.

“You couldn’t have known.” Justin assured him. “Alright there, Hermione?”

Hermione pulled herself off of Neville, and wiped at her eyes. She couldn’t quite look any of them in the face.

“Ah, none of that. It wasn’t your fault. Wasn’t really your parents fault either. How were they to know? They probably thought they were helping you…the fact that they weren’t I’m sure never occurred to either of them. Just a big cock-up from beginning to end, right?” Neville offered.

“We were supposed to be playing a game here, right? Why don’t we get back to that?” Harry announced, while moving to retrieve one of the long mallets that seemed necessary to play.

Dean sidled up beside him. “So, what was all that ‘boy who lived’ stuff earlier?”

“Wizards like to hyphenate things, it seems.”

“That really doesn’t explain anything.”

“Sorry, mate, that’s all you’re getting from me.”

The remainder of the party went smoothly—there were no more shocking revelations, and after Hermione ended up spilling her own secrets rather than getting Harry to reveal his, she stopped trying to out him as the ‘famous Harry Potter, boy-who-lived’. They played games, had a nice dinner, Justin took them for a tour of his house, and to see the stables; all in all, a pleasant evening. Harry left with Neville and Augusta to spend the night at the Longbottom place, in preparation for leaving for Hogwarts in the morning.

The Longbottom house was a brooding gothic mansion on a moor, with a stretch of forest beyond it. The backyard consisted of a number of greenhouses, filled with all manner of outlandish plants. The house itself had a stern, brooding air, and was filled with shadows, even when the rooms seemed well-lit. It seemed a pitiless place, unforgiving of foibles and human weaknesses. The walls were covered with row after row of portraits—stern-faced people with straight backs and uncompromising stares. The furniture was functional and lacking in unnecessary frills. The whole place spoke of age, tradition, and an unbending attitude that would keep marching forward no matter what. It was easy to see how poor Neville had turned out the way he did. It would have been a lonely, cheerless place for a small child to grow up in.

Neville took Harry up to his room, where a second bed had been set up for Harry. Harry could say without a doubt it was the friendliest room in the whole house. It was filled with plants on every available surface, and had three large windows covering one wall.

“Gran had those put in for me when I complained that I didn’t get enough light in here. It was my birthday present that year. She was feeling extra generous, I guess, since she knew I’d be going to Hogwarts.”

“You keep saying stuff like that, like it was in doubt. You’re a wizard from a long line of wizards
—why wouldn’t you go to Hogwarts?”

Neville sighed, and his shoulders slumped. “Most kids have accidental magic. Stuff just happens around them all the time. People know they’re wizards long before it’s time for their Hogwarts letter to come. I didn’t. Everyone was afraid I was a squib. Uncle Augie took it upon himself to try to scare the magic out of me.”

“Isn’t that counterproductive?”

“No…I mean, he was always trying to scare me so I’d use magic. For as long as I can remember, every time I turned a corner, he was jumping out at me. He tossed me in Blackpool, hoping I’d float. I didn’t know how to swim. I nearly drowned before he pulled me out. When I was eight, he hung me out a window by my ankles. Aunt Eunice offered him a meringue, and he dropped me. Luckily, I bounced. I bounced all the way down the front walk in fact. Everyone was real excited. Gran was crying and everything. Uncle Augie went and bought me Trevor there” he pointed to the terrarium by his bed that contained a toad.

Harry sighed and rubbed his eyes. “Let me get this straight. This uncle of yours terrorized you your whole life, and nearly killed you a couple of times…because he’d rather you be dead than a squib?”

“I try not to think of it like that.” Neville admitted quietly. “But, it turns out I am a wizard, and I am going to Hogwarts.” He added, trying to sound brave. He wasn’t able to maintain it. “I keep worrying though. What if I’m not magical enough? What if I fail? What if they kick me out? I think that might be worse than never getting to go at all.”

“Tell me something, Nev. This uncle Augie of yours, is he going to be around to see us off tomorrow?”

“Yeah, why?”

Harry smiled at him.

The next morning, various Longbottoms and assorted others were gathered at the house for breakfast, and to see the boys off. When it came time for uncle Augie to give his best wishes, Neville looked up at him, and then glanced back at Harry who nodded firmly.

“Uncle Augie?”

“Yeah, lad?”

Neville pulled his foot back and kicked his uncle between the legs, hard. Augie went white, grabbed himself and fell over with a groan, twitching and cross-eyed.

“That’s for dropping me out a window, you bastard.”

Neville’s gran looked down at her brother and then at Neville, before nodding in approval.

“Well, how about that. There was a spine in there after all. I had you pegged for Hufflepuff all this time. I was hoping Pomona’d be able to make something of you. You might make Gryffindor yet.”

Augie gave him a shaky thumbs up. “Good show, lad.” He wheezed, while the remaining relatives
clapped and chuckled.

The portraits on the walls were all clapping and nodding in approval as well. Neville looked around wide-eyed, and slowly stood up straighter and prouder. Harry noted that he suddenly seemed to fit his surroundings in a way he just hadn’t before.

“You might want to put some ice on that.” Augusta told her brother without remorse. “Come along boys.”

They set off down the road, and came eventually to an old-fashioned looking train stop. There was no one else there. Augusta led them in the building – which was little more than a basic shelter, and then walked through one of the walls. Neville followed after her and disappeared right after. Harry shrugged and followed them, though he couldn’t help but close his eyes as he saw the wall approaching. The first thing he was aware of was noise. He opened his eyes and realized they were in a completely different place than they had been just a few moments before. There was a bright red steam engine on the tracks, and billows of steam were wafting over the platform. The platform itself was filled with people and trunks and pet carriers. Parents were giving last minute advice to children, and hugging them goodbye, children were greeting friends and swapping summer news, parents were catching up with one another. It all seemed very festive and marvelous to Harry’s mind.

“Well, you boys have a good term at Hogwarts. Neville, have you forgotten anything?”

“I don’t think so, gran, we went through our trunks last night and re-packed them. I’m pretty sure I’ve got everything.”

“That’s good. Write to me tonight or tomorrow, and let me know how you were sorted.”

“I will gran.”

“Take care of yourself Mr. Potter. Have a good term.”

“Thanks, gran.” Harry chirped.

She smiled faintly and patted him on the head, before giving Neville a firm hug and shooing them towards the train.

The noise level on the platform suddenly went up a few decibels, and Harry craned his head around to see why. There was a large family of red-heads that had just arrived, a mother and several children. They were all talking at once, and the mother was handing out last minute advice, and scolding them in a non-stop tirade. It was like watching the circus coming to town.

“Who are those people?”

“Red hair, freckles, that’s the Weasleys. They’re who Peter Pettigrew was living with. He was pretending to be the youngest boy’s pet rat.”

“Huh.”

“You’d best get on. The train will be leaving any minute.”
He and Neville found an empty compartment, which was just past where the red-headed family was congregated on the platform. Harry heard his name and glanced over suspiciously.

“Mum, please, can’t I go see him?”

“Ginny, we talked about this. No, you cannot, and that’s the end of it.”

The little girl’s face screwed up into a scowl and her face went red to match her hair.

“Great, a fan-girl. That’s just what I need.” Harry muttered.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing. So how long is this trip supposed to take, anyway?”

“Nine hours, gran says.”

“Long day. I’m glad I brought snacks.”

“There’s a cart that comes around too, sells candy. Gran told me so. I even have a bit of money so I can get something.”

“Cool. The only wizard candy I’ve ever had is a chocolate frog. It was pretty good.”

“I collect frog cards. I’ve got practically the makings of two complete sets, but I’m still missing Morgan LeFay.”

Harry quirked an eyebrow. “Yeah? I’ve got a Morgan LeFay. What’ll you give me for it?”

“Um, well, let me get my cards and I’ll see what I’ve got.”

The door to the compartment opened, and one of the red-headed boys from earlier stood there. “Mind if I join you? Everywhere else is full.”

“Sure, go ahead.” Harry answered. Neville settled back on the bench with his frog cards in hand.


“Neville”

“Harry. Agrippa, you say? I’ve got one. What’ll you give me for it?”

“A trade, huh? Let me get my cards.”

Neville was already flipping through his cards, pulling out the ones he had doubles of. Ron, seeing what he was doing, started doing the same.

“Paracelsus, Andros the Invincible, Circe, Herpo the Foul, Ethelered the Ever-ready” Neville began listing off.

“Gregory the Smarmy, Godric Gryffindor…good job getting two of those, eh?” Ron continued.

Harry began taking the extras from each boy as they went through and putting them in order. He also dug out Morgan LeFay and Agrippa and set the cards on the bench beside each boy so they’d see he was keeping his end of the bargain.
“Now this is what I call good trading. At this rate, I’m going to end up with a complete set myself with only two cards to trade.” Harry laughed.

Harry lucked out more than he at first realized; as they were going through their respective decks, it was discovered that Ron had an extra Morgan LeFay, and Neville had an extra Agrippa—which they each ended up giving to Harry rather than each other, since they’d already made a deal.

They finally came to the end of the decks.

“Oh. Looks like you won’t get a complete set after all. I’ve only got one Albus Dumbledore. His card is the most common, and I already had one, so I’ve been tossing most of the others I’ve gotten.” Ron explained.

“Yeah, same here. I usually get one each time I get chocolate frogs.”

“That’s alright. I’ve got one of those.” Harry chuckled, digging the Albus Dumbledore card from his pocket and settling it in order at the back of the deck. The cards started glowing. Neville and Ron didn’t notice at first because they were busy putting their new cards in their decks and putting them in order.

“Oh, guys?” Harry called, as he held the cards out away from his body.

The compartment filled with light, and the sound of tooting horns echoed around the room.

Ron and Neville both gaped in astonishment. “CONGRATULATIONS!” a voice sounded out of thin air ‘FOR ASSEMBLING A COMPLETE DECK OF CARDS, IN ORDER, WITH NO REPEATS, YOU HAVE WON A SPECIAL PRIZE! YOU ARE NOW THE PROUD OWNER OF THE LIMITED EDITION HARRY POTTER, BOY WHO LIVED CARD! THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATRONAGE!”

The light contracted and a single, gold edged chocolate frog card was the result. It fluttered down and landed on top of Harry’s deck.

“You have got to be kidding me.” Harry muttered.

Neville and Ron began hurrying to put their finished decks in order. The same thing happened again. Harry face palmed.

“This is frigging embarrassing.” He complained.

“What’s your problem?” Ron wondered, as he stared at his rare chocolate frog card in unabashed delight.

“I’m Harry Potter, that’s what my problem is. I’m pretty sure I didn’t authorize anything like this. I’ll have to send this thing to my godfather; he’s probably going to laugh himself sick.”

He realized Ron had turned rather pasty and was sitting in an oddly stiff manner.

“I already know about that, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Ron relaxed, but he still looked uneasy. “We really didn’t know. He was with us for years. He used to be Percy’s rat. He gave him to me because he got an owl for making prefect. Scabbers used to sleep with me, so imagine how I feel about it!”
“I’d rather not, thanks. Wow. That Pettigrew was a really twisted sonofabitch, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah.” Ron agreed.

“Neither one of you are allowed to tell people how to get a Harry Potter card. It’s bad enough there’s three of the damned things in circulation.”

“Why would I do that?” Ron scoffed. “It wouldn’t be rare anymore, would it? I’m fine with there only being three, so long as I’ve got one.”

“I won’t tell anybody.” Neville agreed.

Dean and Justin stopped by awhile later, and hung out for a while. Ron told them all about the wonder that was quidditch—a game played on broomsticks, and they played a rousing game of exploding snap. Apparently, games just weren’t fun to wizards unless there was at least a threat of bodily injury, as Dean discovered to his chagrin when the cards exploded and he lost his eyebrows.

When the food cart came around, they all bought a variety of snacks and traded them around. Harry also dug out the snacks he’d packed away—bags of crisps, and juice boxes—and they ate until they were sick.

They left afterwards, claiming they’d been sitting with other people for most of the ride, and didn’t want to just ditch them.

Their next visitor was Hermione. She appeared not long after Dean and Justin left.

“Oh, there you both are. I’ve been wandering all up and down the train looking for you.”

“That’s the same thing Dean said. I don’t know why everyone’s having so much trouble; we’ve been here the whole time.” Neville explained.

Hermione sat herself down and eyed Ron. “Hermione Granger. Did you know you had dirt on your nose? You should probably do something about that. You want to look presentable when you get to school.”

“Ron Weasley.” Ron offered, while surreptitiously wiping at his nose.

“I’m ever so excited. I can hardly sit still. I went to speak to the conductor. He said we should be arriving soon. You all might want to put on your robes.”

“With you sitting right there?” Ron squawked, sounding scandalized. His face and ears went pink.

Hermione went pink as well, and hurriedly made her excuses, before fleeing the car.

They had just finished changing into their robes, when they felt the train starting to slow down. They pulled into the station, and could hear a voice outside calling “First Years! First Years over here! Leave your trunks on the train, they’ll be taken up separately! First Years!”

“I guess that’s us.” Harry announced.

The owner of the voice was a large man, who had to be at least ten feet tall. Harry froze for a second when he spotted him, but whatever thought had started to come to mind vanished like mist. He blinked, wondered why he had stopped, and continued following the rest to gather near the large man.

As they stood there, they saw all the older students were boarding carriages that were lined up just past the platform.
As the last of them left, the first years began getting nervous, and wondering how they were to travel—there weren’t any carriages left.
The large man led them down a path to the edge of a dark lake. It was slippery and hard to see—there was no light anywhere.
When they reached the water’s edge, they saw there were dozens of tiny boats all lined up and waiting.

“Go on, then. No more’n four to a boat. Careful there, no rough housing. Keep moving.”

Ron, Harry, Neville, and a boy with glasses who introduced himself as Anthony Goldstein, entered one boat. When all the boats were filled, the large man climbed into the last, though he stayed standing up—he was big enough, he might not have been able to sit down. All the boats began moving across the water.

Anthony swore he saw a tentacle in the water at one point. The rest of them looked but didn’t see anything. A girl in one of the lead boats screamed, and they could just make out tentacles across the way.

“See! I did see them! I told you.”

“No worries” the large man boomed “That’s just the giant squid. He’s friendly. Why don’t you all wave to him?”

Harry wasn’t sure, but he thought the squid waved back.

“Who is that guy, anyway?” Harry wondered.

“Oh, that’s Hagrid. He’s the gamekeeper. My brother Charlie knows him. He said there’s nothing the man doesn’t know about magical creatures. I suppose he should know. He’s a dragon tamer in Romania.”

“Oh. Cool.”

“So…any of you know what house you’re going to be in?” Anthony wondered.

“Well, nobody really knows till they’re sorted do they?”

“How do they sort you, anyway?”

“Well…my brothers said you have to face a troll.”

“I suppose that would be a good way to decide. If you try fighting it, you’re a Gryffindor. If you trying making friends with it, you’re a Hufflepuff. If you know how you’re supposed to deal with it, you’re a Ravenclaw. If you convince it to attack someone else, you’re a Slytherin.” Harry mused.

Ron and Neville went grey. Anthony got lost in thought and started patting his pockets. “They fear fire. I know that much. I wonder if I have any matches?”

In the next boat over, a small, pointy faced boy with blonde hair smiled innocently at the large boy next to him.

“Hey, Greg, you’ll stand beside me, right? You’d make a much better meal than I would.”
“That’s a wonderful idea, Draco” the one girl in the boat exclaimed. “Vince, you stay by me.”

The two boys—Vince and Greg exchanged worried glances. “Well…we could try making friends with it. We can even offer to eat these two with it. It probably won’t attack us then.”

“Yeah. Would that make us Slytherins or Hufflepuffs though?”

“You know…I’m not sure.”

The blonde boy and the girl exchanged horrified glances and huddled down in their seats.

“What’s all that? You talking about trolls?” Hagrid asked.

“Yeah, Ron and Neville are trying to decide if they want to try fighting it.”

“Ah, wrestling trolls is great fun!” Hagrid boomed cheerfully.

“What house were you in?” Anthony wondered.

“Gryffindor!”

“Well. There you have it.” Harry decided.

“You’ll get yer first glimpse of Hogwarts when we round the bend!” Hagrid called out.

As the boats turned the corner, they could see it, perched on top of the mountain like a glowing jewel. Harry felt warmth engulf him, as though he’d just received a warm hug. He was completely entranced, and felt like he’d just come home. All his nervousness about the sorting, about living full time among wizards, just melted away. Hogwarts was where he belonged; he knew that with absolute certainty.

“Watch yer heads!” Hagrid called out.

The boats sailed into a sheltered cove screened by hanging vines. There was a dock inside, and a steep, climbing staircase at one end that seemed to climb up into the mountain. It was rather slippery, and their legs were shaking by the time they made it up to the castle. Hagrid led them to the large wooden door, and banged on it three times. They could hear the hollow boom echo inside.

The door opened, and there was professor McGonagall. She was wearing floor-length emerald green robes and a witch’s hat over her severe bun.

“The first years, professor.”

“Thank you, Hagrid. First years, if you’ll all follow me.”

They were led inside the castle to a large stone entryway. Moving portraits covered the walls as far as they could see, and moving staircases filled the tower above them. Most of the children simply stood there, struck dumb with amazement at the sight. From there, they were led into a room off to the side and told to wait and make themselves presentable for the sorting.

Harry wanted to laugh, he really did. Once professor McGonagall left, the group seemed to divide itself among those who were trying to gear themselves up to attack the troll, those who seemed
determined to befriend it, and protect it from the people trying to attack it, those who were looking around desperately for someone else to fling at it, and a final group who were arguing whether one had to deal with it differently if it was a River troll as opposed to a mountain or forest troll. Harry sidled over to the group he had dubbed the ‘future Slytherins’.

“You know, if you trick the thing into defeating itself, that would count as cunning as well. It shouldn’t be too hard…unless you think you’re dumber than a troll?”

The blonde kid from earlier, who was looking decidedly pasty, straightened up, and seemed to regain some confidence.

“You’re right. I’m definitely smarter than a troll!” he declared.

“Your parents must be so proud.” Harry deadpanned.

“Of course they are.” The boy agreed, nodding. “You speak good sense. Draco Malfoy, by the way.” He offered, holding out his hand.

“Harry Potter.” Harry introduced himself, shaking it.

“Are you really? I thought you’d be taller.” The little girl from earlier opined.

“Well, that’s what they tell me. Hopefully everyone hasn’t been lying to me; it would be rather a bother to have to change my monogram.”

He had to bite back a laugh when they both just nodded, as though that really would be the worst part of finding out you weren’t who you thought you were.

“Pansy Parkinson.” The girl introduced herself.

“Delighted to make your acquaintance”

The girl preened and glanced around to see if any of the other girls were jealous. The blonde boy frowned sourly and gave Harry a dirty look. Harry could feel someone glaring daggers into the back of his head, and turned to find a red-faced Ron Weasley scowling at him. Harry raised an eyebrow questioningly, only to blink and start laughing when Neville suddenly straightened and exclaimed “Of course! I’ll just kick him in the ‘nads! That’ll down him for sure!”

“What if it’s a girl troll?” a pretty Indian girl demanded. “You going to pop her one in the chest?”

“Golly! I don’t think Gran would approve of that at all! I hope it’s a boy!”

Harry was nearly bowled over when a frazzled Hermione stumbled away from the ‘future Ravenclaws’.

“Oh, Harry! It’s awful! No one has matches, and none of us has ever cast a fire spell before! What are we going to do?”

“Um…well…there’s torches all over. You were aiming for Gryffindor, right? I’ll bet if you charge at it with a torch in hand, yelling a battle cry, you’ll be a shoo-in.”

“Oh! That’s a marvelous idea, Harry!”

“Hey, you know, if we just throw someone at the troll, and just go sit down at Slytherin, I’ll be that would count.” Vince mused. He and Greg both glanced at Draco.
“Not me, you idiots! Throw one of the Hufflepuffs! They can make friends with it while they’re flying at it!”

A little girl with blonde hair in pigtails straightened up and nodded firmly.

“No throwing…I’ll approach it and make friends while you slink off.” She declared. “No sense in both of us being in the line of fire.” Greg blinked and looked down at the girl, shrugged and settled in beside her.

The girl’s friend wrung her hands and then, determined, went and stood beside Vince.

“I’ll help you befriend it. I won’t leave you to face it alone.” She declared, her voice shaking. Vince and Greg looked at the girls, looked at each other, and gave each other a surreptitious thumbs-up behind the girls’ backs. They’d only been in school a few minutes and they already had them lining up.

“I’ll help too! I cannot allow you ladies to face the beast alone. If we all work together, we will surely prevail!” Justin declared.

“Well said, old boy, well said!” another boy agreed. “All you over there, come on. We’ll soften the troll’s heart while you all creep away.”

Harry looked over and found the future Gryffindors and Ravenclaws had joined forces on the other side of the room. They were making a plan to try to get down some of the torches, and trying to think up a good battle strategy.

“No, silly. We only need one torch. We can just pass it along when we’re done with it.”

“You know, we should go last. It’ll be easier to befriend the troll if we offer to patch up its burns once they’re done with it.” The blonde girl mused.

“And it’ll be tired out already, and so won’t try to chase us when we all slip by it. That’s a good idea.” Pansy concurred.

Everyone was so involved in their discussions, the passage of four ghosts through the center of the room went pretty much unremarked.

“Oh, first years.”

“Hmm. Odd bunch we’ve got this year.”

Harry chuckled to himself and just kept watching. It was all very amusing.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The kids get sorted and settle into Hogwarts.

Professor McGonagall faltered on her way to retrieve the first years when the four house ghosts stopped in front of her.

“They’re an odd bunch. They seem to be trying to climb the walls to steal the torches for some reason.”

McGonagall’s eyebrows rose into her hairline and she quickened her steps. The rest of the student body craned their heads, trying to see what was going on.

“What on earth! Put those torches back! What are you all doing?! In all my life! Line up! Line up, you silly geese! You were supposed to be smartening up, not dismantling the castle!”

The first years, when they appeared, looked distinctly ruffled. Professor McGonagall was in the lead, Harry right behind her, hands in his pockets and looking for all the world like he was out for a Sunday stroll. He looked around the room in curious interest, and nodded hello to any students who caught his eye. The remaining students streamed along behind him. The first half of the group looking frightened but grimly determined, or thoughtful and musing about strategy. The second half of the group seemed to be comforting their partners and assuring them that they’d make sure they’d get away alright, and not to worry, between fretting about how to heal burns for some reason.

McGonagall led them all up to the dais at the front of the room and told everyone to line up. She gave them a stern warning glance and then left them there, facing the curious students, while she disappeared into a room off to the side of the great hall. When she returned, she was carrying a stool and a battered hat. The first years stirred, and Hermione looked at Harry in annoyance.

“Harry! I thought we had to fight a troll!”

“Hey, don’t look at me! Ron’s the one who said that.”

The whole group turned to glare at Ron. Ron’s face went red and he waved his hands in front of him defensively.

“That’s what my brothers said! Blame them!”

McGonagall glared them into silence, and set the hat atop the stool. The brim split like a mouth, and began to sing.

“Oh you might think I’m pretty…”

“You know, this is probably a lot safer than the troll option.” Harry murmured.

He fell silent when McGonagall glared at him. He mimed zipping his lips, and listened with everyone else.
When the song ended, everyone clapped. McGonagall unrolled a long scroll.

“When I call your name, come up, sit on the stool and put on the hat.” The glare she passed down the line told everyone she would accept no funny business. “Abbot, Hannah.”

The little girl with pigtails scurried out from the group and sat down. The hat was large enough, it completely engulfed her head.

The hat started laughing uproariously, before shouting “A true child of HUFFLEPUFF! They thought they had to battle a troll!”

A pair of twin red-headed boys, who could only be Ron’s brothers, looked at each other, and fell out of their seats laughing, just seconds before the rest of the room burst into laughter as well. The first years closest to Ron smacked him in the back of the head. McGonagall ignored the commotion as best she could. The Hufflepuff table clapped to welcome their newest member, and McGonagall called out the next name ‘Bones, Susan” Once again, the hat called Hufflepuff.

Each student was called, one after the other, and the hat called out their house almost as soon as it touched their heads. The students and teachers alike seemed rather bemused by how quickly the sorting was going.

Hermione got into Gryffindor, (a flaming torch and a war cry?!) as did Neville (You were going to ‘kick it in the ‘nads?!’).

“Patil, Padma, and Patil, Parvati” were sorted into Ravenclaw and Gryffindor respectively, Perks, Sally-Anne into Hufflepuff, and then it was time for “Potter, Harry”.

Harry grimaced at how all the students were craning their heads and gaping at him, and at the mutter of ‘wow, did she say Harry Potter?” that rippled across the crowd. The hat settled over his head and he was engulfed in darkness.

“Well, what have we here? You seem to be the only one this year who didn’t sort yourself. Hah… that whole thing was your doing was it?”

“No. Ron is the one who said we were supposed to battle a troll. I just reasoned out how facing a troll could be used to sort anyone, based on what I knew of the four houses. Everyone who overheard me ran with things on their own. I had nothing to do with that. The only thing I really did after everyone did so was suggest an alternate example of ‘cunning’, and suggest torches for a ready source of fire.”

“You’re certainly sneaky enough for Slytherin… a fine mind. Yes indeed. Not afraid of hard work. Bravery aplenty as well. Well, well, where shall I sort you?”

“Are you asking me to do your job for you?”

“Not at all. The final decision will of course be mine…but as it stands now, you could easily go to any house and do well. Have you any preferences?”

“Hufflepuff.”

“I’ve no desire to get caught up in anyone’s rivalries.”

“It takes bravery to buck the system, and you intend to do just that. I think I have made my decision...you’ll do best in...GRYFFINDOR!” the hat shouted out loud.

Harry sighed, and took the hat off his head. The Gryffindor table at the far end of the room erupted in cheers, and Ron’s brothers began dancing a jig and shouting ‘we got Potter! We got Potter!’ It was all rather troublesome. He replaced the hat, and went to join his new house.

The remainder of the sorting went as swiftly as the first half had. Once Zabini, Blaise, had been sorted into Slytherin, the headmaster stood and smiled at everyone, his eyes twinkling like stars.

“So, that’s Dumbledore, is it? I’ve seen his frog card, of course, but this is the first I’ve ever seen him.”

“What? That’s ridiculous. Everyone knows you’re practically his grandson and he spoils you something awful.” A red-haired boy with glasses scoffed.

“I really would like to know where anyone got that idea. I’ve never met the man, and I never heard his name till I got my Hogwarts letter. I think I’d know better than you, wouldn’t I?”

“And stay away from the third floor corridor unless you want to die a horrible death.”

Harry tuned back in to what Dumbledore was saying and gaped.

“Did he just say something about horrible death?” he demanded.

“You should have been paying attention instead of talking” Hermione scolded. “And yes he did. There must be structural damage on the third floor or something. He really should have just said that instead of the whole horrible death thing. It’s rather unbecoming of the headmaster to be so melodramatic.”

“And now, without further ado, tuck in!” Dumbledore intoned. He spread his arms wide as though encompassing the whole of the hall, and the tables were suddenly filled with all manner of food.

“Whoa. There must be a lot of house elves in this place to pull that off.” Harry marveled.

“House elves?”

“Indeed, the largest colony in Britain.” The red haired boy agreed.

“What are house elves?” Hermione demanded.

“They’re like brownies from fairy tales. They clean and work in houses, but they leave if you give them clothes.” Harry explained.

“Oh, like the story of the shoemaker?”

“Yeah, just like that.”

“I don’t think they make shoes.”

“It’s just a story. They sure can cook though. I wish I hadn’t eaten so much junk food on the way up.”

“I don’t remember any mention in Hogwarts: A History.”
“I don’t think they were mentioned. It’s an old book though, maybe they weren’t here when it was written?”

“Is it old? I didn’t even look to see when the first run printing was!”

“It was seventeen something. I don’t remember the date. I glanced at it when I opened it the first time. I remember I was afraid it would be hard to read, and be in archaic English or something. They seem to have modernized the language for later editions; I didn’t have any trouble reading through it.”

Harry noticed Ron was gaping at the two of them with his mouth hanging open.

“Eh, Ron? Wanna shut it? I’ve got my own food, I don’t want to share yours.”

Ron hurriedly closed his mouth and swallowed down his food.

The rest of dinner passed quickly, and Harry got to talk to the remainder of his yearmates, those he hadn’t yet met. Other than himself, Hermione, Ron, Neville and Dean, there was Seamus Finnegan, Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown. There were also two more girls—Amanda Runcorn and Elizabeth Spinks, who went and sat with the second and third years respectively, as they had siblings and cousins among them. When the tables cleared, the red-haired boy from earlier—another of Ron’s older brothers, Percy, called all the first years to follow him to the common room.

They had to travel up what seemed to be a nearly endless array of stairs—all the way to the seventh floor. Along the way, they encountered a funny little man who was floating high above their heads, carrying a bundle of walking sticks.

“Oh hoo! Ickle Firsties! Peeves loves little firsties!”

“Peeves! Go away! I’ll call the Baron!”

Peeves blew a raspberry and dumped the walking sticks so they rained down on everyone’s heads. Percy shook his fist at the retreating poltergeist and then checked them over before continuing on.

“That’s Peeves, he’s full of trouble that one. The only one he’ll listen to is the Bloody Baron—he’s the Slytherin house ghost. He doesn’t even listen to us prefects!” he added, sounding scandalized.

They stopped at last in front of a large painting of a fat woman in a pink dress.

“This here is the entrance to the Gryffindor common room. You need a password to get in. It’ll change every week, so be sure to check the notice board in the common room to be sure you know the latest one.” Percy explained.

He turned to face the fat lady “Caput draconis” he said clearly so they all could hear.

The fat lady nodded and swung open. They climbed through the hole that was revealed and found a large common room filled with squishy chairs and couches, with a large, blazing fireplace to one side, done in red and gold. “Boys to the right, girls to the left, up the stairs. The dormitories are all clearly marked. Get a good night’s sleep, you have an early start tomorrow. Breakfast begins at seven, and you’ll receive your schedules then.”
Having discharged his duties for the evening, Percy wandered off and joined his own yearmates near the fire. Harry and the others climbed yet more stairs until they found the doorway marked ‘1st year’. Inside was a circular room with a fireplace, a single window, and five canopied beds with curtains, also done in red and gold. Their trunks were at the foot of each bed and a red and gold striped tie was hanging on one of the bedposts on each bed.

Dean unpacked a poster for Manchester United and hung it on the wall above his bed. Ron wandered over and poked it. “Move damn you! Move!”

When nothing happened he shook his head, quite bewildered. “I think it’s broken.”

“It’s a muggle poster, Ron. The picture doesn’t move.”

“Really? Weird. What are they doing?”

“It’s Man U! Football, mate.” Dean laughed, hardly able to believe he was serious.

“Football? Bah, quidditch is where it’s at. Right, Harry?”

“Why are you asking me? I’ve never seen a quidditch game. I have at least seen football. For myself, I’d have to put the vote in for croquet. It’s quite the rousing game, once you get the hang of it.” He joked.

Ron gaped at him. He seemed to do a lot of that, Harry thought to himself. “Never seen quidditch? What are you on about?”

“What do you mean, what am I on about? When would I have seen quidditch? I didn’t even know I was a wizard till I got my Hogwarts letter.”

“Didn’t know you were a wizard? What rubbish! You’re Harry Potter.”

“I was raised by muggles. I went school shopping with Dean, Hermione and Justin.”

“They’re muggleborn. You’re not muggleborn!”

“Might as well have been. Raised by muggles. What part of that is causing you difficulties?”

“How could you not know you were a wizard? You’re having me on! What about your teacher’s hair turning blue? Or when you ended up on the roof of your school that time?”

Harry stiffened and turned to look at Ron. “Excuse me?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah, my dad works at the Ministry. I know all about that.” Ron scoffed. “Didn’t know you were a wizard. Pull the other one, mate. It’s got bells on.”

Ron wandered off to the bathroom, and Harry sunk down on his bed, fuming.

Alright there, Harry?”

“No, Nev, can’t say I am. Apparently, even my schoolmates, folks I just met this very day, know more about my life than I myself do.”

He changed into his pajamas and climbed into bed, still fuming. He pulled his curtains closed with a snap, and left Dean, Neville and Seamus staring at them. The three exchanged glances, and quietly got ready for bed themselves.
Even as annoyed as he was, Harry fell right to sleep. It had been a long day, and he was full from the large dinner they’d had. That night, he dreamed. The purple turban that was worn by one of the teachers at the head table clamped down on to his head and told him it was his destiny to be in Slytherin. It began to squeeze, and high, cold laughter began to echo in his mind. Harry rolled over and fell more deeply asleep.

Harry woke up and was out of bed bright and early, long before any of the rest of his housemates were up, which suited him fine. They seemed a boisterous lot, and he wasn’t sure he was up to dealing with them this early in the morning.

He was just going to do his usual morning exercise there in the common room, but he could hear footsteps coming down the stairs.

“Well, there’s another obscenely early riser in the house.”

He dithered a moment, and then headed back upstairs to bed. Keeping his skills sharp was too important to let lapse during the school year, but he couldn’t afford anyone asking too many questions about them either. He’d have to find someplace he could go to, maybe after classes were over for the day, where he could slip off unseen and do his workout.

As he’d been denied his usual routine, he opted to head towards the bathroom to shower and get dressed for the day. While passing Neville’s bed, he backtracked and gently shook the boy to wake him. Neville blinked at him blearily.

“What?”

“I dunno what time it is, mate, but it is morning. I was gonna get dressed and head down to breakfast.”

Neville yawned, and pushed himself to a sitting position, and then climbed wearily out of bed. Harry left him to it and continued to the showers.

Both boys were much more awake afterwards. Neville shook Dean awake before they left, so he could wake the other two, and then followed Harry down to the common room. Once they were down there, Harry discovered who it was who had inadvertently ruined his early morning practices. It was Hermione Granger—wide awake, obsessively reading a giant tome nearly as large as she was. She started talking excitedly the moment she spotted them and followed the two of them out the door and, after a few wrong turns, down to the great hall.

When they got down to the great hall, they found most of the teachers already seated at the high table, and the whole of Hufflepuff house seemed to be present, along with a scattering of Ravenclaws sipping coffee and debating something or other. Harry suddenly found himself thankful he hadn’t gotten sorted into Hufflepuff. He was used to having the earliest morning hours completely to himself, and resented having to share it with Hermione as it was—she had yet to take a breath and was still talking; at least Neville was quiet.

If he’d been trapped with a whole house of cheerful early risers, he had a feeling he’d have gone slowly mad. Maybe Gryffindor wasn’t such a bad choice after all… though Slytherin might have been better, since it seemed there were no early risers there.
“Oh well. Too late to do anything about it now.” Harry lamented.

“What’s that, Harry? Did you say something?”

“No, I’m still not quite awake.” Harry answered rather pointedly.

Hermione stared at him a moment, and then glanced at Neville, who was sporting glazed eyes and had his mouth hanging slightly open. Looking rather abashed, she stuck her nose back in her book and let them get on with eating breakfast in peace.

That peace was shattered not too long after, when the remaining students came down for breakfast. What had been a low background murmur of chattering voices became a loud cacophony. The remaining first years settled themselves around the two of them, all of them loudly complaining that they’d left without them, wondering what classes were going to be like, and grabbing all the food in sight. Harry found it all just a little overwhelming—he was used to leading a somewhat solitary existence, only seeking company at times and places of his own choosing. All these loud, chattering people were quite outside his experience. It was going to take some getting used to.

Professor McGonagall came around before breakfast was over to hand out everyone’s schedules. When breakfast was over, they all had to make the long climb back to Gryffindor tower to gather their books.

Getting ready for classes was actually a fairly simple matter for Harry. He had gotten himself a satchel while school shopping that was large enough inside to hold all of his school books, parchment, ink, quills, telescope, potions equipment, dragonhide gloves…best of all, it was charmed to be a fraction of its actual weight. He just had to grab his bag, and he was ready for the week. He was rather glad he’d made the investment when he saw the other boys all scrambling to sort their books, and gather everything they might need.

Getting to class was another story. Not only was the castle a huge, sprawling building, the staircases moved, and the classrooms occasionally rearranged themselves. They ended up having to backtrack long distances out of their way when staircases moved and left them stranded, and having to roam the corridors looking for their classrooms. It didn’t help that everywhere they went, crowds of older students seemed to be following them and trying to get a glimpse of Harry. When they finally got to their first class of the day, they were all breathless and exhausted.

Harry could feel eyes on him, and turned to look over his shoulder, only to spot students peering into the glass on the door, pointing at him and chattering excitedly together when they caught him looking. Harry turned back around and resisted the urge to bang his head on the desk. The whole fame thing was already getting old, and it was only the first day.

“What is wrong with those people? They saw me at the bloody sorting. I’m not so interesting that they need to follow me in the halls and make a nuisance of themselves.”

“I’m sure it’ll die down eventually.” Hermione tried consoling him.

“Folks in this school are mental.” Dean laughed. Seamus turned around in his seat and spread his arms wide. “You can stare at me, if you like! I don’t mind!” Dean snickered and turned him back around.

They were all rather disappointed to learn that doing magic involved more than just waving one’s wand around. They were forced to take reams of notes on magical theory before even being
allowed to pick up their wands.

When they tried getting to their next class, they had the same problem—gawkers pointing at Harry like an exhibit in a zoo.

“It’s him! Do you see the scar?”
“I see it! I see it! A lightning bolt, just like they said!”
“Do you think he remembers it?”
“I can’t believe it’s really him!”

Harry tried his best to ignore it, but having to fight his way through the crowds, when Hogwarts was so difficult to navigate anyway, was really trying his patience. Harry’s fists began clenching, his eyes began narrowing, and a faint shimmer began to manifest around the edges of his body. The other first years looked at him, and saw he was ready to snap.

“Can you see it? Can you see the scar?”

“Alright, I’ve had it! What the hell is wrong with you people? Are you really so sad and pathetic that you have nothing better to do than stalk an eleven year old boy? Don’t you have classes? I’m trying to get an education here! GO AWAY! The next person I hear wondering if they can see my BLOODY scar—which is a memento of the night MY PARENTS DIED, in case you’ve forgotten—is going to get my FOOT up their ASS. Any questions?”

As Harry shouted, it began to seem as though he was slowly growing larger, until he seemed to fill the hallway. The shocked students began unconsciously holding their breath while he raged. His eyes flashed in fury as the last ringing syllables faded away. The chastised students mutely shook their heads, and parted to allow him to pass when he stormed away. The other Gryffindor first years shook off their stupor and hurried after him.

Their next class was Charms. Professor Flitwick was a tiny man who needed to stand on a stack of books to see over his desk. He took the roll after everyone was seated. When he got to Harry’s name, he squeaked and fell right off the books. Harry’s shoulders slumped and he leaned forward till his head landed on the desk in front of him with a ‘thunk’. Neville reached over and patted Harry consolingly on the back, and the rest of them eyed the professor with obvious disapproval. Flitwick climbed back onto his stack of books and cleared his throat, obviously embarrassed.

“So sorry. Don’t know what came over me there.” He apologized.

The remainder of class, and the rest of the day progressed without further incident. Harry slowly relaxed, and stopped grinding his teeth and glaring at everyone. Once he relaxed, the rest of them did as well.

All seemed well, until just after the last class of the day. They were all sauntering along the hall, chattering about classes so far, on their way towards Gryffindor tower to drop off their books before heading down to dinner.

There was a trio of Ravenclaw boys—upperclassmen, by the look of it. One of them spotted the Gryffindor first years and nudged the other two, pointing them out. One of the boys smirked at them as they came closer, and eyed Harry with obvious dislike.

“Hey, Potter…can I see your scar?” he taunted.

He and his two friends started sniggering—until an apple beaned him in the head with a meaty ‘thunk’. His head flew back, hit the wall behind him. He clutched at his head, groaned, and slid to
a sitting position on the floor. His two friends gaped at him and then glanced back at Harry, who was bouncing another apple in his palm. They smiled at Harry uneasily, each grabbed one of their fallen friend’s arms and hustled him out of there.

Wide-eyed, the other first years turned to look at Harry, who seemed quite cheerful as he put away the other apple.

“I had no idea those would come in so handy when I stuck them in there this morning.”

“Cor, Harry. Remind me to never get on your bad side.” Dean laughed as he clapped him on the back. The rest of them laughed as well, and continued on their way.

By dinner time, it was all over that Harry had just savagely attacked seventh year Gilthwait Knocknoll for daring to ignore his commands. The students that had witnessed his fit of temper in the corridor were eager to share their version of the story. The whole school had worked themselves into quite the tizzy by the time the Gryffindor first years made it to the great hall. All eyes were on the group of eleven year olds as they made their way to their seats, and the volume of whispers rose with every step they took. By the time they sat down, even Ron, who was easily the most oblivious one there, was feeling oppressed by the weight of the combined stares of the whole school.

“You know, I’m beginning to think it’s not worth it…being here, I mean. Does studying magic rot your brain or something?” Harry wondered as he filled his plate.

“I’m beginning to wonder that myself.” Parvati agreed, while glaring at a Hufflepuff third year who was gaping at all of them with his mouth hanging open.

“If this keeps up, I’m might just say the hell with Hogwarts. There has to be other schools outside of Britain, right?”

“There’s Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. I don’t know if you’d really want to go to either of them—Durmstrang teaches dark magic, and Beauxbatons wears powder blue uniforms with sparkly wands on the chest. No one’d ever take you seriously if you went there.” Neville explained.

“Australia or America then.”

They were nearly finished dinner when Professor McGonagall came by the table and told him that the headmaster wanted to see him in his office, and to come along.

Her lips were set into a thin, disapproving line.

“Why does the headmaster wanna talk to him?” Ron wondered.

“I thought you said you didn’t know him.” Hermione accused. Harry sighed and raised an eyebrow at her tiredly.

“I’m sure that’s none of your concern, Mr. Weasley.” McGonagall scolded, sounding scandalized that he would even ask.

“This has to be a record, called into the headmaster’s office on the first day.” Harry muttered nervously.

He followed McGonagall from the hall, and behind him the whispers and speculations rose to a
crescendo as everyone began wondering whether the seventh year he attacked had died or something.

Neville heard the speculations get wilder and more ridiculous with every breath.

“You know, I really can’t believe these people.” He decided, as he heard a couple of Hufflepuff third years work themselves into a panic about whether or not Harry was coming for them next. He glanced up and down the table, spotted a bowl of fruit and grabbed himself a couple of apples. The rest of them, seeing what he was doing, grinned and did the same.

“NO! You can’t! We’ll get in trouble!” Hermione hissed.

“If we do, we can keep each other company in detention.” Seamus chortled.

Seeing that none of them had been dissuaded, she cringed and held out her hand. Lavender cackled and handed her an orange, and then let fly with her own.

Neville bounce an apple off the two hysterical Hufflepuffs, while Ron, Dean and Seamus aimed for the Slytherin upper years, and the girls concentrated on Ravenclaw—especially the two friends of Gilthwait who had obviously started the crazy stories.

It didn’t take long before a large-scale food fight was in progress.

Professor McGonagall led Harry up two floors and then to a statue of a gargoyle in the center of the hall. “Sherbet lemon” she said crisply. The gargoyle hopped aside, revealing an open doorway, and beyond it a twisting staircase that was turning like a corkscrew. “Here you are, Mr. Potter. Keep in mind that curfew is at 8 pm sharp.”

“You’re not coming with me, Professor?”

McGonagall halted and looked at him with obvious confusion. “Whatever for?”

“Well, if this matter the headmaster wishes to speak to me about is a school matter, I assumed, as my head of house, that you would be involved. My mistake.”

McGonagall didn’t seem to know what to say. She’d obviously not been expecting him to want her along. “Well…I.” She straightened her shoulders suddenly and nodded. “Very well, Mr. Potter. Come along.”

She stepped onto the moving staircase and was slowly carried upward. Harry followed her. The stairs twisted around, and eventually led to a large wooden door. McGonagall knocked sharply and then went inside, Harry following after her.

There was no sign of the headmaster. McGonagall frowned, shook her head and took a seat in front of the large, claw-footed desk.

“Have a seat, Mr. Potter. I’m sure he’ll be along any minute.”

Harry was about to do as she asked, but he caught sight of a red and gold bird on a golden stand
behind and off to the side of the desk. The bird caught him looking and trilled, a liquid golden sound that seemed to lighten one’s spirits as soon as you heard it. He walked forward, utterly entranced, and lightly stroked the bird’s head, smiling in delight.

“You must be Fawkes. Mr. Ollivander mentioned you. I apparently have one of your feathers in my wand.”

Fawkes trilled and nodded his head, and then cocked his head to the side.

“Yeah, he mentioned that.”

Fawkes trilled a sorrowful note.

“Is that what he looked like? Huh. I expected him to be scarier looking for some reason.”

Another note sounded, more sorrowful than before.

“Yeurch. He got to be pretty gruesome there, didn’t he?”

Fawkes nodded again.

Harry heard someone clear their throat, and turned to find Dumbledore and McGonagall both staring at him.

“Oh. Sorry.” He apologized, moving to sit down.

“Not at all, my dear boy.” Dumbledore assured him.

Harry wasn’t sure, but he thought he wasn’t best pleased that he’d been talking to his bird.

“Thank you, Minerva.” Dumbledore said in clear dismissal as he took his own seat.

“I am his head of house, if this is a school matter, I should be involved.” McGonagall replied, keeping her seat.

Dumbledore blinked, and seemed quite taken aback that she didn’t just make herself scarce, but he seemed to realize that making an issue of it while Harry was in the room would be counterproductive.

He turned from McGonagall, and not-quite-pointedly ignored her, focusing instead on Harry. Dumbledore folded his hands on the desk and sighed, sounding careworn and tired.

“I’ve heard some troubling things about your first day with us, Mr. Potter.”

“Yes, it was very troublesome day. I’m glad to hear you’re going to be more proactive about my wellbeing while I’m a student at this school.”

Dumbledore blinked again, and just stared at him, nonplussed.

“Mr. Potter?” McGonagall queried, quite confused.

Harry glanced at one and then the other, and then frowned irritably.

“You mean we’re not here to discuss me being mobbed, harassed and gawked at? What on earth are we here for then?”
“That would be your unprovoked attack on Mr. Knocknoll.” Dumbledore chided, his face stern.

Harry snorted in amusement, but then the smile left his face in confusion and he found himself gaping at Dumbledore in outraged astonishment.

“You have got to be kidding me!” Harry growled. “I get harassed, hindered and gawked at like an exhibit in a zoo all day, and no one does anything whatsoever. I throw an apple at a seventh year bully, and I get called in to the headmaster’s office? What kind of three ring circus are you running here?”

“An apple?” McGonagall repeated.

“Yes, an apple. Geez. I had it in my bag when he and his thugs cornered us on the way back to the tower, and tried giving us a hard time. You know, when I was just telling my yearmates that I was considering transferring if the harassment was likely to be a regular occurrence I was mostly joking…but I’m beginning to think I might have had the right idea.”

“Now really, Mr. Potter, don’t you think you’re being rather childish?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’m a child. Besides, the British Wizarding World has nothing whatsoever that I want enough to make me willing to put up with rampant idiocy on a regular basis. If it came down to it, I could quite happily live without magic—obviously that wouldn’t be my first choice, but there it is. I was very nearly trampled to death by overeager reporters when trying to visit my godfather and Mr. Crouch in the hospital. It was a rather horrifying experience, and one I wasn’t eager to experience again. So imagine my dismay when my entire first day of school, I was dealing with a similar situation on a much larger scale. There are a thousand students in this school, correct? There’s only one of me, and not only am I one of the youngest students that’s currently part of the student body, I’m also one of the smallest. That’s my situation.. and yet, you didn’t call me in here to discuss my safety and wellbeing…you called me in here to scold me for throwing an apple at a kid lots older and twice my size who was giving me a hard time.”

Dumbledore sighed and stroked his beard.

“There seems to have been a terrible misunderstanding here. I was told that you shot Mr. Knocknoll in the face with a stunner and he had to be taken to the hospital wing. I called you up here to get your side of the story.”

“I’m a first year, and this is my first day of classes. I don’t know how to do a stunner.” Harry pointed out.

“If you had, you wouldn’t have been the first child within these walls to know more than you should.”

“I feel that I should point out that I was raised by muggles in complete ignorance of the existence of the magical world--something I know you’re quite aware of.”

“That’s not as much a bar as you might think.”

“Headmaster! You might want to get down to the great hall. There’s a food fight riot going on.” A portrait announced from above as it slipped into its frame.


“The Gryffindor first years started pelting the upper years with fruit.” Dumbledore and McGonagall both turned to glare at Harry.
“What? I didn’t tell them to do it.”

“They took offense at some things the other students were saying.”

“What were they saying?”

“That the boy there killed someone and was about to be hauled off to Azkaban.”

“WHAT?!”

“Well, rumors were already going around that he savagely attacked another student. When he got called up here in the middle of dinner, they all seem to assume he must have killed the boy. No one gets called up here, especially not in the middle of dinner. What else were they to think?”

“Gee, thanks a lot, headmaster.” Harry huffed as he slumped backwards into his seat. “You’ll be making an announcement of some sort, I hope.”

Dumbledore sighed again and rubbed his face. “I’m getting too old for this.” He muttered before rising to his feet. “Let’s go.”

The great hall was a war zone when they arrived. There were many-colored splatters on all the tables, the walls, the floor. There were gobs of unidentifiable substances dripping from the floating candles overhead. Here and there, a felled warrior twitched on the ground, liberally spattered in gravy and mashed potatoes, and groaning. Many of the Slytherins were hiding under their table and shrieking whenever a gob of food passed their way—those who weren’t hiding were chucking everything they could get their hands on. The teachers, prefects and several Hufflepuff volunteers were trying to restore order. The Gryffindor first years were lined up against one wall and being shrieked at by a hysterical Snape. They were liberally plastered with all manner of foodstuff, and stood stiffly at attention, staring straight ahead with stony expressions as though awaiting the gallows. McGonagall put a hand to her heart and staggered, to sag against the doorway, and Dumbledore slumped in place, eyeing the devastation with the eyes of a man who’s lost all hope.

“Holy moly!” Harry summed up their feelings nicely.

Snape spotted them first. “Headmaster!”

The students who were still battling faltered and then cringed upon spotting the headmaster and professor McGonagall in the doorway. “Do you see what they’ve done! They should be expelled!”

Harry glanced over and saw Hermione’s face had gone white and her lip was wobbling. The rest of them didn’t look much better.

“There will be no expulsions, Severus.” Dumbledore sighed. “However, students, you WILL be cleaning this mess up. NOW.”

Harry cleared his throat and arched an eyebrow when Dumbledore glanced at him.

“Just so everyone knows, the rumors that seem to have been circulating about Mr. Potter were all wildly exaggerated or outright fabrications. Mr. Knocknoll was beaned in the head with an apple by Mr. Potter earlier when he ‘tried giving him a hard time’.” He said, while making air quotes. “There was no savage attack, no one is dead, and Mr. Potter is not going to Azkaban. Now, get cleaning.”

With much groaning and moaning, the students started shuffling around and gathering the dishes
and cutlery and stacking it on the ends of the table, while others started casting cleaning charms and vanishing the smashed fruit. Harry wandered over to his yearmates, who were practically fainting in relief at their reprieve. He couldn’t help the goofy grin that split his face when he saw them all there.

“You know, guys, I think this is easily the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me. You’re all just made of awesome, aren’t you?” At his words, they straightened and grinned back. “You know what? This calls for a group hug.” Harry decided. The boys all stirred and looked at each other uncertainly, the girls all grabbed Harry.

“Actually, this works much better” Harry decided, smiling at the girls. “But now I’m all slimy too.”

Parvati grinned at him, ran her hand down her long braid, till she had a handful of mashed potatoes, which she cheerfully smacked on to the top of his head. Lavender and Hermione giggled, and added some gravy and a bit of cranberry sauce to each shoulder.

“Yeah, thanks.” Harry sighed. The boys chortled and clapped his shoulders and back, then the group separated to go help with the cleanup.

Everyone was tired, not to mention filthy, when they were finally finished, and heading back to the common room.

Ron’s stomach gurgled loudly. “Damn. I wish I’d finished eating before we started chucking fruit at people.”

The rest of them nodded glumly. “I called away before I actually had a chance to eat all that much.” Harry agreed. “And seriously, what was the man thinking? I couldn’t have been questioned before dinner, or after? No, right in the middle, which naturally makes everyone think the worst. It seems that guy told people I hit him with a spell or something.”

“That bastard.”

“Yeah, what a jerk.”

“Everyone…I just realized something.” Hermione interjected quietly. “We have our first potions class on Friday.”

“Potions” Neville repeated weakly.

“With Professor Snape.” Lavender agreed.

“We’re all dead, aren’t we? We didn’t exactly make a good first impression.” Seamus mused cheerfully.

“Yeah” the rest of them concluded.

Everyone was filthy, covered in splattered food, so they split up upon reaching the house. When they were done cleaning up, Ron, Dean and Seamus headed off to play exploding snap, and Neville settled in to write to his gran. There was still a little bit of time before curfew. Harry seized on the opportunity presented to slip out of the common room.

He peeked his head in a couple of abandoned classrooms in the area, but soon stopped—they all seemed to be full of amorous couples taking advantage of the privacy presented.
He drummed his fingers on his thigh while trying to think of where else he could look, when he remembered something Sirius had told him about the castle—the kitchens were full of house elves who took care of the cooking, cleaning and laundry for the whole castle and everyone in it. If anyone knew of a good place for him to workout, it would be them. Sirius had given him an approximate location—it might have moved since he’d been a student; the whole castle seemed to rearrange itself on a near daily basis—and told him to look for a painting of a bowl of fruit. Resolved, he headed for the nearest staircase and started heading down.

“Huh, painting of a bowl of fruit, just like he said”

He hesitantly reached out and tickled the pear. The pear giggled and squirmed and then turned into a door handle.

“What do you know, that actually worked. I really thought he was having me on.” Harry opened the door, and found a room that was a mirror of the great hall up above—there were long tables laid out, upon which the many (many) house elves were washing dishes from that evening’s dinner. They mostly ignored Harry’s presence—everyone was too busy to pay him much mind. The elf that was closet bustled closer once it was done putting away the dishes it had been responsible for.

“Young sir should not be in here. We is no allowed to be giving snacks tonight.”

“Too bad, though I’m not actually looking for snacks tonight. I was actually hoping one of you would be able to help me with something…?”

“Itsy will try. What is yous problem being, young sir?”

“Well, I like to exercise, but my common room is too crowded to really use for that purpose. I was hoping one of you would be able to tell me somewhere else I can go. I need room to move around.”

“Well…young sir can be trying come and go room—is having a opening place near Gryffindor tower, so young sir will not be wandering around very far.”

“The come and go room? What’s that?”

“Is room that is not always being there, of course. When you calls it, it is being what you needs it to be. Is this good for young sir?”

“Sounds perfect, actually. Where do I find it? How do I call it?”

“On seventh floor is being funny picture tapestry of man teaching trolls to be dancing—they is not liking it much, and keeps clubbing him in the head.”

“I think I vaguely remember seeing something like that”

“You is finding that, and you is walking back and forth three times while thinking about what you is needing, and then door is appearing for you.”

“Great, thanks; you’ve been a lot of help.”

“You is being welcome, young sir.”

“The meals here have all been wonderful so far. My compliments to the chefs.”

The elves straightened and bustled with a bit more pride and animation—they loved knowing their work was appreciated.
Harry hurried back up to the seventh floor, where both the entrance to Gryffindor tower was located, as well as the mysterious come and go room. Harry wandered down the hall until he found a tapestry of a guy trying to teach trolls to dance ballet—Barnabas the Barmy, he thought his name was, and tried pacing back and forth three times, while thinking about how he needed someplace to train where no one would bother him. On his third pass, a door appeared in the wall. Harry opened it and stepped inside, gaping. It was a large, open space, big enough to fit a couple dozen people. The floor was springy underfoot, as though covered in mats, though it appeared to be stone just like the floor of the corridor he’d just left.

“This is perfect—plenty of room to move around, cushioned floor so I don’t break a leg by accident. The only thing that would be more perfect was if there was something to use for target practice, or an opponent to test….whoa!”

As he mused on the things he needed, they appeared; there were now targets scattered about the room at different heights, an obstacle course, and a man-like wooden dummy standing next to a rack of swords.

“It becomes whatever you need it to be” he repeated, remembering the elf’s words. A big grin split his face and he patted the wall fondly.

“Thank you, Hogwarts!”

He wasn’t sure, but he could have sworn he felt the room get warmer for just a moment.

Hermione spotted him coming back in to the common room and immediately began interrogating him.

“Where have you been? Why’d you leave? Why didn’t you tell anyone you were leaving?”

“Geez, calm down. I figured there was some time left before curfew and I wanted to look around.”

“Well why didn’t you say anything? I would have come with you.”

“Probably just as well you didn’t. I only looked in a few rooms right nearby, and they’re all full of teenagers snogging like their life depends on it. It probably wouldn’t have looked too good if we’d been together—they all would have assumed we were looking for an empty room to use ourselves.”

Hermione flushed and went back to reading.

Harry went upstairs and got out some parchment to write a letter to Sirius. He told him all about the trip in, the sorting, his new dorm mates, and the food fight—he thought he’d get a kick out of it. When he was done, he dug out and included the limited edition ‘Harry Potter Boy-Who-Lived’ card; he certainly didn’t want it. Honestly, it was too embarrassing for words, not to mention the fact it seemed to celebrate his parents deaths. He really had to wonder about wizards. He had been a baby, and yet they were so quick to attribute his survival to something he’d done, rather than
something his parents had done. It didn’t seem very sensible to him.
Hedwig, bless her heart, seemed to know when she was needed. She tapped on the window outside
the dorm when he was finished.
He fed her an owl treat and spent some time petting and fussing over her, before attaching the letter
to her leg.

“Wow. You must be a really powerful wizard if you’ve got a familiar already.” Neville said rather
wistfully.

“A who the what now?”

“A familiar. Only really powerful wizards have them. I’ve heard headmaster Dumbledore has a
 phoenix, but then everyone knows he’s the greatest wizard of the age.”

“He does. I was talking to him earlier.”

Neville’s eyes bugged out in astonishment, but he soon collected himself. “I guess I need to head
out to the owlery.”

“I’ll walk with you. I went out to look around earlier, but the rooms are all filled with teenagers. I
mean, seriously, you’d think they have nothing better to do with their time than sit around sucking
each other’s faces off.”

Neville snickered in embarrassment as they headed off to the tower that held all the school owls.
They tried looking around a bit on the way, but much as Harry had said, all the empty rooms
seemed to be filled with teenagers. They ended up having to run back to Gryffindor to escape the
last couple, who were none too pleased by the interruption.

When Friday rolled around they all left for the potions classroom a bit early, not wanting to get any
further on Snape’s bad side. They’d been told over and over that Snape hated Gryffindors and went
out of his way to make Potions class as miserable as possible for them. Between their house, the
food fight, and the bad blood Harry knew existed between the Professor and his parents, their
experience as the man’s students was bound to be miserable even by Gryffindor standards—it was
a double class period too, and with Slytherin—many of whom still hadn’t forgiven them for the
flying food.

When the professor arrived in a billow of robes, sneering at all of them, they meekly shuffled
inside and took their seats. Harry sat with Neville—poor Ron ended up right in front with
Hermione; he didn’t look too pleased about that. Professor Snape strode to the front of the room,
pivoted and turned in place, making his robes flare dramatically before settling in place. It was a
cool entrance, Harry thought; he’d have to try it sometime.

“You are here to learn the subtle art and science of potion making…”

He had a nice voice, and seemed to have a gift for controlling a room with his presence alone. The
only other teacher they’d had so far who could do that was McGonagall, and Harry thought he had
her beat on that score.

“…bottle fame, brew glory and put a stopper in death…unless you’re as big a bunch of
dunderheads as I usually have to deal with.” He ended sourly.

The whole class was sitting at the edge of their seats, hanging on his every word. Hermione was
practically quivering in place, desperate to prove she wasn’t a dunderhead. He scanned the class and his eyes settled on Harry. “POTTER!” The whole class jumped.

“Yes sir?”

“What do I get if I mix asphodel with an infusion of wormwood?”

“It forms the basis for the draught of living death.”

Snape blinked and just stared at him.

“Where would I find a bezoar?”

“In the stomach of a goat. It will protect you from most poisons. I have one in my pocket right now, in fact.” Harry replied, digging out said item and holding it up, before tucking it away again.

Snape frowned and looked at him like he was quite mad. “Why are you carrying around a bezoar?”

“On my first day here, people for some reason decided I was a mad killer who was planning to go on a rampage and off the rest of the school. It seemed a wise precaution.”

No one seemed to know quite what to say to that.

Snape evidently decided he’d had enough of talking to Harry. He turned his eyes to his next victim.

“LONGBOTTOM! What’s the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?”

“T-they’re the same p-plant, sir. It’s also known asaconite. I have some in my greenhouse at home.” Neville squeaked.

Snape glowered at him, like a child who’d just been told Christmas was cancelled. He’d obviously been hoping they wouldn’t be able to answer, and he wasn’t happy with either of them for ruining his fun.

“Well? Why aren’t the rest of you writing this down?” Snape barked. “Open your books to page 37. We’ll be making a boil cure solution. The instructions” he flicked his wand, and writing appeared on the blackboard up front “are on the board. You have until the end of the period. Get moving.”

Harry opened his book, and glanced up at the board. “Huh.”

“What?”

“The instructions on the board are extra steps for the potion. He likes to keep people on their toes. I bet he’s going to erase that before too long, just to see who’s paying attention. We’d better write all that down before he does.”

Neville went digging for parchment. Harry started jotting the extra steps down in the margins of his book.

“Oh. That’s a good idea, keep it all together.” Neville noted. He decided to do the same.

“Alright, extra steps noted. Why don’t you get the cauldrons started. I’ll get the ingredients.”

Neville nodded, consulted the book, and went to fetch water enough for both of them.
Harry came back a few minutes later, and handed over half the ingredients he was carrying. He went down the list, and laid everything out in the order it would be needed. When he glanced over at Neville, he found his all mixed up.

“They’re not in the right order, you know.”

“That’s the order they’re in my greenhouse.”

“Oh. Well, whatever works, I guess.”

They started working on their potion, and were relieved to see that everything seemed to be going the way the book said it should. They were nearing the end of the process, when they realized Ron and Hermione were arguing very quietly.

“You’re doing it all wrong!”

“Leave me alone. Worry about your own.”

“You can see it’s the wrong color. You waited too long.”

“It’s fine. It’s almost the right color.”

“Here, let me fix it”

“Bugger off”

“If you would just”

“Stop, get off that”

“Not paying attention and ruining everything”

“Would you stop! You’re completely mental. Worry about your own!” Ron hissed, grabbing the first thing that came to hand and tossing it in Hermione’s cauldron.

They both froze when the cauldron began to hiss and smoke. Hermione’s eyes widened and she dropped to the floor, just as the cauldron began to shake and then exploded, spewing the contents in every direction—most of it on Ron. Ron began screaming and boils erupted all over his body, wherever the liquid had touched.

Hermione covered her mouth, aghast, as Snape came stalking towards them like the wrath of god.

“Idiots! Did you forget to take it off the fire before adding the porcupine quills?”

“He tossed them in my cauldron! See, mine are still there” Hermione defended herself.

“Traitor” Ron growled under his breath.

“It serves you right! Look at what you did! It’s ruined.”

“Take him to the hospital wing, girl.” Snape gripped, as he vanished the ruined cauldron, the ruined potion, and what remained of Ron’s, which was gloopy and the wrong color. “No marks for either of you. Go.”

Hermione got teary-eyed and scowled at Ron, with a look promising pain. She grabbed his arm and hauled him along, howling and protesting that she was hurting his boils.

The Slytherins all enjoyed the spectacle and were sniggering as the two of them vanished out of the room.

“Time’s up. Bottle a sample and bring it up here for grading.” Snape called out to the rest of them.

Harry and Neville’s potions had turned out perfectly—at least, they seemed to look more or less
how the book described. Harry grabbed a few extra empty vials, and stored away several samples, and set one aside to be graded. Neville, seeing what he was doing, did the same.

“Those ingredients were expensive. No sense wasting them, right? I suppose a boil cure could come in handy at some point.”

Neville nodded, carefully stowing away the extra vials in his bag for later.

“I wonder how long they keep for?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, stuff goes bad sometimes right? It wouldn’t do us much good to hang on to these for say, a month and then try to use one of them if we get boils, only to have it make us sick and we still have boils because it doesn’t work anymore.”

“Oh, yeah. That would be a problem. What’s the book say?”

“It says it keeps well. That’s amazingly unhelpful and unspecific. Do they mean a month? A year? A couple of years? Bah. I guess we have to ask the professor.”

They took their samples up front and handed them in. Snape held each up to the light in turn, grunted and made a notation in his book.

“Amazing. Gryffindors who can follow directions. Will wonders never cease?”

“Hey, professor? How long does the boil cure keep for? The book wasn’t very helpful.”

Snape eyed him like he was some strange species of dog, who had one day decided he was done with the status quo, and so started walking on two legs, wearing clothes and got a job as an accountant. He had a very expressive face.

“Six months. After six months it gains in potency and you have to reduce the dosage by a quarter teaspoon for every six month period that has passed.”

“Huh. Well, thanks.” Snape nodded and motioned for the next students to hand in their samples.

“History of magic next. I wonder if Ron’s still in the hospital wing?”

“I guess we’ll find out. I like history, but his voice just lulls me right to sleep. I can’t help myself.”

“Yeah. Your idea to just do homework, or read the book was a good one. It’s a much more useful thing to do during that class than trying to listen to him.” Neville agreed.

History of magic was taught by Professor Binns—the only ghost professor at Hogwarts. It was said that he’d died one day while taking a nap between classes, but didn’t notice; he’d just gone on and continued teaching. It was commonly believed that he’d probably bored himself to death—and was now trying to kill the rest of them the same way.

Hermione and Ron made it in before the bell rang—Ron seemed quite put out that he was recently
injured, and yet still had to attend class. He made the mistake of voicing that opinion out loud. Hermione took offense and began lecturing him in a bossy voice. He stood it for a couple of seconds, and then began sniping back at her. They argued till they were both red in the face, and practically vibrating in irritation. When things got to that point, they stalked away from each other in a huff. Ron sat as far from Hermione as he could get; that is, in the very back of the room, while she sat front and center. He put his head down and immediately went to sleep. She got out her parchment and ink, and sat with her quill poised to take notes, looking utterly determined to stay awake at all costs.

Harry got out his book, as did Neville. When Binns started talking, he listened long enough to find out the topic—pre-Hogwarts civilization of Britain—found the correct chapter and started reading. He tuned back in every so often to see if the topic had changed, but Professor Binns was going in the same order the book did, so he was actually keeping pace pretty well. He glanced over to check on Neville, and found him absorbed in the textbook. The history of magic was a lot more interesting when it wasn’t recited in Binn’s monotonous drone.

He glanced around at the rest of the class; a few Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were trying to take notes, but falling asleep and their heads nodding every few minutes. The remaining class were either sound asleep on their desks, or passing notes, or playing games. What a waste of a class period, and they had History three times a week. This was even worse than DADA class, where the teacher kept jumping at shadows, and stuttered so bad no one could understand half of what he was saying.

When the bell rang, it took a few moments for the students to rouse themselves enough to realize class was over. Once they did, everyone perked right up. History was the last class of the day—the school week was over, and they had a whole weekend to look forward to. Of course, they had enough homework already that their overall free time was going to be greatly curtailed, but it was still the weekend. Harry couldn’t wait. He wanted to get exploring the castle and grounds. Hopefully this time he wouldn’t be stumbling across teenagers every few feet.

After dinner, Harry settled down by the table near the fire in the common room, got out his books, and started on his homework.

“Mate…what the bloody hell are you doing?” Ron demanded. “It’s Friday night!”

“Yes, I know that. I’m getting my homework out of the way so I don’t have to worry about it over the weekend.”

“Don’t be daft! Come on, let’s play exploding snap…or chess! You’ve never played me in chess yet. I’m pretty good, if I do say so myself.”

“That’s nice, Ron.”

Ron spluttered indignantly when Neville came down from upstairs and settled down to do his homework as well, as did Hermione a few minutes later.

“Are you all mad?” Ron whispered, completely unable to believe his eyes.

“Sunday night, when I’m free to do as I please, rather than scrambling to finish everything last minute, and you are, ask me again.” Harry quipped. “I’ve just got the potions essay left to go, and I’m done for the week.”
“How could you be done? I haven’t seen you doing homework before now, and I haven’t seen you in the library” Hermione protested.

“History of magic” Neville explained. “We read the chapters Binns was talking about, and then did homework for other classes. We’ve been caught up all week, actually. The only thing we have left is Potions, but we just had that today.”

“The potions essay isn’t due till next Friday!” Ron moaned. “You’re all mad—completely barmy, in fact.”

Ron shook his head at them, unable to fathom willingly doing homework on a Friday night—especially work that wasn’t due for days and days. He went and found Dean and Seamus and suggested a rousing game of exploding snap, and found them much more amenable to goofing off on a Friday night—in other words, they were normal, unlike the freak parade at the table.

Harry was just finishing up his essay, and blowing on it to help the ink dry faster, when Hermione checked the time and began packing up.

“In a hurry to go somewhere?”

“I want to get to the library before it closes. I need to grab a couple of books so I can finish my essay.”

“Which one are you doing?”

“Potions, same as you.”

“The potions essay was three feet.”

“Yes, I know.”

“You already have more than that.”

“I know, but I’m not finished.”

“Uh, Hermione? Does Professor Snape really strike you as a guy who will be happy to get a few extra feet of essay?” Neville asked quietly. “Everyone knows he hates Gryffindors, and he likes people who can follow directions. He’s probably going to mark you down if you give him all that.”

“Mark me down? For doing extra work? For being thorough?” Hermione scoffed.

“For not following directions. I can see stuff in there about charms, hiccups…Merlin? How the heck did you work Merlin in?”

Hermione opened her mouth to answer, but Harry cut her off. “Nevermind. He’s totally going to mark you down, Neville’s right.”

“But I’m not finished yet!”

“You need to trim that down till it’s three feet—no more no less. You can do that most easily by sticking to the topic. I bet you’ll have three feet easy if you cut out all that extra stuff.”

“But there’s so much more to say!”

“Chances are you’ll be able to work it into another essay at a later date.” Neville consoled her. “For this one, you probably should just stick to the directions.”
Hermione seemed torn for a moment, but then she straightened her shoulders and jutted her chin out stubbornly. “If you want to coast by, doing the absolute minimum required, I suppose that’s your prerogative, I however, plan to make the most of my education.” With a sniff, she packed away the last of her things and marched off towards the portrait hole to head to the library.

“That Snape is probably going to have her head.” Neville sighed.

“Well, she can’t say you didn’t warn her.”

They put away their homework once they were finished, and upon returning to the common room, Neville was persuaded into a game of exploding snap. Harry looked around, and realized no one was paying much attention to him. Harry seized the moment to go exploring in the direction of the ‘come and go’ room.

"This castle is so old, I bet there’s all sorts of history here…lost and hidden things too" he thought as he paced three times and then smiled in triumph when a door appeared. Eager now, he opened the door and hurried inside, only to come to a stop right inside the door, as he looked around in shock and awe.

“Good lord! They must have been stuffing this place since the founding!”

For as far as the eye could see there were shelves, giant ones, that seemed to disappear into the gloomy reaches of the high ceiling, and every last one of them was filled with…stuff. A lot of it seemed to be trash, but there were treasures hidden among the refuse: antique furniture, oddities, cauldrons and trunks, and tapestries, stuffed magical creatures, magical items, books….

Harry was wary, but couldn’t deny what a treasure trove he had stumbled upon.

Harry set off walking, peering down the different aisles as he passed, and then turned down one in particular when he spotted a stuffed troll and a stuffed griffon hidden among the refuse. He glanced around at the other stuff nearby, picked up an old tiara and studied it for a moment, before putting it back, and then set off back to the center aisle to look around some more.

“There’s so much stuff here. I could probably spend a lifetime in here and never see all of it. I wish there was a way to sort everything.”

“Wait…if this room can be whatever you want, then there’s no reason it can’t be a sorting room, right? I wonder…”

He hurried back the way he’d come, to the large empty space in the very front.

“Maybe if I think about all the trash disappearing, so only the good stuff is left? No…that probably won’t work. If everything in here was put away because it was no longer useful, it might all technically be considered ‘trash’. I know, I’ll start with something simple….books! I want all the books in the room to stack up where I’m at.”

Harry jumped when all the available empty space was suddenly filled with books, stacked in high piles all around him.

“Wow. There’s a lot more of them than I thought there would be…okay, let’s try this again. Um… all the fiction books.”

A much, much smaller pile was left. Strangely, a lot of them were muggle paperbacks.
“Must have been lost or left behind by former students.” Harry mused. There were some wizarding fiction books as well, none of which he’d ever read or heard of before. Harry sat down in front of the pile and started sorting.

“From Russia, with Love. A James Bond Novel” Harry read out loud. “Huh.” He opened the front cover and noticed some writing.

“This book is the property of the half-blood Prince. Weird.” He set the book aside. He’d already seen the movie at the library.

The next book had a cover with a man and a woman in a passionate embrace. For some reason, the woman’s dress seemed to be in the process of falling off. “Passion’s Fury…a romance.” He flipped to a random page in the middle and started reading. His eyes slowly got bigger and bigger, and a hot flush began creeping up his cheeks. He slammed the book closed, heart pounding.

“B-blimey!” He hurriedly set the book aside with the James Bond book, and then stood.

“Let’s try something else. How about all the charms books?” he said firmly.

A new, smallish but respectable pile of books appeared. Harry sorted through them, and aside any that he didn't think he had. He repeated the process with Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures, Astronomy, DADA, Potions, Transfigurations, History, Arithimancy, Runes, Divination. Each time a smallish, but respectable pile appeared.

“What on earth were all the rest then? Show me all the books I haven’t looked through yet.”

A large pile, about half the size of the first huge pile, appeared. “Alchemy…etiquette…cooking…household management…grooming…wards…curse breaking…dark curses…magic theory, charms…magic theory; dark arts, magic theory, transfiguration….oh, I see. It’s everything that doesn’t fall specifically under the categories I gave earlier, and magic theory. I guess that makes sense…most of the stuff I grabbed earlier had lists of different spells, but not much about the theory behind them. Most of these will probably be useful, but where on earth would I keep them all?”

Harry suddenly slapped himself in the forehead. “Of course! I’m such an idiot! I bought a bottomless pouch, didn’t I? I also still have my parents trunk with its library compartment.”

He spent awhile going through the piles and adding them to his library, which gave each book added a book plate with 'Property of the Potter Family and the family crest to the inside cover of each before tucking the trunk away again.

“I’ve been here quite a while, haven’t I?” He did a quick ‘tempus’ charm—a handy charm Sirius had taught him that told you the time, and realized it was very nearly curfew. With a muffled curse he darted out of the room and hightailed it back to Gryffindor. He would have loved to have explored the rest of the room, but there just wasn’t time. He wanted to tell Neville all about what he’d found, but inborn caution—not to mention a selfish desire to keep his wonderous find to himself for a little while—held his tongue.

Everyone was still busy playing around in the common room when he returned, so Harry decided to go up to the dorm, out of sight of the others. He started pulling out his new books and sorted through them, hoping to find something interesting. He settled on a thin tome titled ‘Beginner Guide to Magic Theory’ and settled in to read.
The next morning, at breakfast, the morning mail deliveries came in—hundreds of owls bearing letters and packages all swooped into the great hall together, and sought out their respective owners.

“Good morning, Hedwig, my dear. Was the trip alright?”

Hedwig made a little bow that could be taken for assent and looked at Harry meaningfully. “No worries, luv, I saved one for you. Let me just get this…” he removed the letter tied to her leg “and you can eat in peace. There you go.”

Hedwig hunkered down to eat the sausage he’d saved her. When she was done, she landed on his shoulder and tried getting his hair to lay flat, before finally giving up and heading out. “Regular mother hen, that one.” Harry sighed, while the others laughed at him.

“So, you can understand her, then?” Lavender asked curiously.

“Oh, sure. She’s not shy about letting you know she’s hungry, or she wants to go out, or wants her cage cleaned. She’s a funny little thing, really.” Harry agreed. “I guess all magical birds can talk though. I mean, I did talk to Dumbledore’s phoenix. He showed me what you-know-who looked like.”

“Why would Dumbledore’s phoenix show you You-know-who?” Neville asked curiously. “It’s just…it seems a strange thing for it to do.”

“Oh, I mentioned I had one of his feathers in my wand. Fawkes only donated two, you see. You-know-who got the other one. He showed me what he looked like as a student, and then later. Yeurgh! He got pretty gruesome there. He didn’t even look human anymore.”

“Really? Show us!”

“Uh, how?”

Hermione flipped through the book she had with her and withdrew some parchment from the back. “Here. I know a spell that will make a picture of things you saw. You’re supposed to hold the image in your mind, tap the parchment firmly…”

Harry did so, and an image began forming.

“But…but…I didn’t even tell you the spell!”

“Oh, there was more? Well, it worked, so no worries” Harry said dismissively as he tapped the parchment a second time.

“That’s pretty neat.” Ron decided, as he dug in his pockets. He found a smallish piece of parchment wadded up in one of his pockets. He smoothed it out, concentrated, and tapped his wand firmly. “Hey! It worked!” When the image was finished he brandished it proudly. “Look at that! It’s me, as captain of the Chudley Cannons!” he crowed.

“But that’s impossible! You didn’t say the spell! And…and…that’s not something you would ever have seen! It doesn’t work like that!”

“Well, obviously it does. Relax, would you?” Ron complained. He smiled at the picture he made, carefully folded it, and put it back in his pocket.

“That’s cool. Wow. Let me try.” Dean enthused. He opened a sketchbook that he had with him and
began flipping through, looking for an empty page.

“You do all those?” Seamus asked, as he peered over his shoulder. “You’re pretty good.”

“Thanks. I was going to make some sketches of the castle today, since we don’t have classes. That charm will make it a lot easier, if I can get it to work.”

“I write stories. I always wanted to do a comic book. You interested?”

“Sure!”

“But…it doesn’t work like that!” Hermione wailed.

“Wow, are you sure these are the same guy?” Neville asked, while peering at Harry’s finished pictures.

“You were right; he did get gruesome” Ron agreed. On the page were two faces—a nice looking teenage boy with wavy dark hair that was neatly parted and firmly gelled down in an old-fashioned looking style, and dark eyes. The second was of a bald man with a reptilian face; noseless, lipless, with menacing red eyes and chalk-white skin. They were both glaring at all of them.

“My god! They can’t be the same person! What on earth could have happened to him to make such a change?”

“I don’t know. I’m just showing you what Fawkes showed me.”

“Hey! It worked.” Dean crowed “look!”

The group peered into Dean’s sketchbook and found a drawing of the boy’s dorm room. The beds were unmade, Ron’s shoes were in the middle of the floor, Harry’s bag was at the foot of his bed, and some of his books were spilling out of it, dirty clothes were strewn across the end of Seamus’ bed, and beside Neville’s was a tank containing his toad, Trevor, who blinked his eyes when he saw everyone looking at him, hopped out of the tank, and took off, hopping across the room to escape. They all had a good laugh about it—Neville was always trying to find the thing, which kept escaping every time he took his eyes off it for a moment.

“You obviously need a lid for your tank, mate!” Seamus chortled.

“You were going to make sketches, you said?” Harry asked Dean. “I was going to go exploring today. Want to come with?”

“Yeah, alright. You coming, Seamus?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“What about me?” Ron complained, as he rose to follow the rest of them.

“What about you?”

“I want to come too!”

“You already are.” Neville pointed out.

“That’s not the point!”

“What is the point?”

Bickering, the five of them left.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The kids decide to write a book, someone tries to kill Harry.

“It’s about time you all got back! It’s almost curfew!”

“Geez, Hermione, give it a rest already.”

“Damn, I’m tired. All damned day, and we didn’t get to see anyplace but the dungeons.”

“I got some nice pictures.”

“Oh, can we see?” Lavender asked.

Dean nodded peaceably, and handed over his sketchbook. Inside were several pictures of the other boys in various poses standing around or pointing, or goofing around, all with a fairly similar background—stone corridor, torches, and doorways.

“I know it looks like they were all done in the same place, but they weren’t. There’s some weird places down there—there’s actual dungeons, you know, they don’t just call it that. There’s rooms with barred doors, and chains hanging and I think we even saw a rack and an iron maiden. They were all covered in several centuries of dust, and the metal was all rusted through, but still.”

“Really? I wonder if we can get extra points for charms for cleaning down there.”

Everyone looked at Hermione oddly.

“You want to go trekking down into the dungeons to clean up the torture chamber?”

“Well…it doesn’t have to be the torture chamber…anything that requires use of cleaning charms would probably do just as well.” Hermione defended herself.

“We still haven’t seen all of it. We were walking for hours and hours, and missed lunch and everything, and I don’t think we saw it all. I think the castle might go down as many levels as it goes up!” Neville explained.

“It’d be nice if we had brooms. It’s going to take us so long to get back to where we left off, we might miss all the meals tomorrow!” Ron groaned. “Let’s go look somewhere else. I’ve had enough of dungeons to last me a lifetime.”

“Fair enough. Start at the top tomorrow?”

“I’ve got a better idea—let’s explore the grounds tomorrow. We need to take advantage of the nice-ish weather while we’ve still got it. Soon enough this whole area is going to be buried beneath several feet of snow.” Seamus warned.

“Actually, you’ve got a point there. Alright, grounds tomorrow then?”

“Yeah, let’s do that.” The other boys agreed.
“These turned out nice, but you’re right, it does all look the same.” Parvati interjected, as Lavender handed the sketchbook back.

“Yeah, I know. I probably shouldn’t have done so many, but I was practicing. You can see I got better as I went along.”

“It’s too bad you can’t just, you know, spruce them up some.” Seamus lamented.

“Why can’t he? Just point and ‘poof’, right?” Ron asked.

“It doesn’t work like that!” Hermione complained.

“Let’s try it.” Dean decided, flipping to the first picture.

“Make the walls have a banana pattern or something” Ron pointed.

Dean shrugged and pointed his wand. The lines began rearranging themselves. When it was finished, the stones on the walls were shaped like bananas, instead of the irregular rectangles they had been.

“Make the flagstones on the floor octagons.” Harry suggested.

“Costume change!” Parvati added “Make everyone a pirate or something!”

“Put Dean in, someone!”

Neville pointed, and Dean appeared in the picture with the rest of them, while Parvati and Lavender began making everyone look like pirates.

“You know, if we’re all going to be pirates, there should be treasure in the hall there for us to find. Hermione, why don’t you add that?” Harry spoke up.

Everyone turned to look at Hermione, who was sitting at the end of the table, with her arms crossed, looking miserable.

“I can’t!” she burst out “the charm doesn’t work like that! The book I read it in says so!”

“Except, obviously it does, and the book was wrong. You can do it, Hermione. You just have to believe that you can.” Neville said quietly.

Everyone sat, and waited while Hermione waged what was obviously a painful internal war. Finally, she pulled her wand, glanced at Neville, who nodded firmly, and tapped the picture they all were working on. A spill of treasure formed in the entrance to a hallway opening off the hall all the boys were pictured in—coins, and chests filled with jewels, golden goblets, and strings of pearls. A hesitant smile appeared on her face.

“I did it!” she exclaimed. “It worked, it really worked!”

“Well” Harry said cheerfully “we’ve got the treasure…what did we have to battle to get to it?”

“A dragon!”
“A manticore!”
“A troll!”
“Goblins! A whole tribe of them, riding on armored wargs!”
“Skeletons and mummies!”
Dean laughed and held up his hands “Whoa, whoa! I don’t actually know what a troll looks like… or a manticore for that matter. I don’t even know what a warg is.”

“Hang on!” Hermione announced, jumping to her feet. She ran up to her room and returned a few minutes later with a large book in hand—Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them.

Dean began flipping through the book, which was filled with color pictures of the various creatures mentioned, while the rest crowded around to see too.

“Oh, blimey! These pictures are going to be awesome when we’re done!” Seamus decided.

“You guys are getting to have all the fun. I want to battle monsters and get treasure too!” Lavender complained.

“How about this? You three are a rival pirate gang, and you’re somewhere else in the castle, battling other things? We can do a whole series” Harry suggested, getting into the idea.

“We can do pictures of us on our separate pirate ships, traveling to the dread castle filled with treasure, and have adventures, and then meet up at the end, where the treasure is, and split it, and then have a party or something.”

“I’ve got more paper upstairs” Parvati announced, hurrying up to the girls dorms.

“Oooh! I know just what our pirate costumes should look like!”

“What sort of adventures?” Hermione asked.

“Whatever we want, that’s the beauty of it all being pretend, isn’t it?” Ron scoffed.

Harry’s pocket crinkled and he frowned, before pulling out the pictures he’d made earlier of the Dark Lord, young and old. “Hey, guys? I think we just found the villains who own the dread castle where the treasure is!”

“You’ll have to give them bodies first…although, scary floating heads could be cool too.” Ron mused.

“Ah, I’ll give them bodies. This guy here, the Dread Warlord You-Know-Who turned to a life of villainy because he has no nose and has been pissed off about it all his life.” The kids all laughed, while the picture of the older Dark Lord glared at him hatefully. “This here” Harry pointed to the second picture “is his son…Tom” The younger Dark Lord looked decidedly sulky at Harry’s pronunciation.

“Tom?”

“Why not? It seems to fit him. Tom, the Dread Warlord’s son and second-in-command. Their goal is to rule the world, and get the Dread Warlord a new nose so he’ll stop angsting already. By a strange twist of fate, it is left to two bands of pirates to stop him.”

The kids all laughed, and then formed into groups to start working.

The kids were up until lights out, and had to be forcefully shooed to bed by the Prefects. Their pirate story was coming along nicely; so far, a third of their yearmates had made appearances as townsfolk, or proprietors of pubs, or weapons shops that they encountered on their adventures. Several of the teachers had made appearances as well—as law enforcement officials who were trying to stop the pirates. The ‘Dread Warlord’ had gotten a band of followers from somewhere—
none of them actually remembered putting them in, but there they were, dressed all in black with a skeleton pattern printed on the front of their outfits. They had taken to calling them the ‘dread knights’. They’d even gotten their own pirate ship, somehow. Tom, the ‘warlord’s son’ was the captain—strangely he had ended up in an outfit identical to ‘Captain Harry’s’, though in reverse colors. He seemed sulky and out of sorts in every picture he’d featured in so far, and no one was quite sure why—they certainly hadn’t tried drawing him that way. It was a mystery, though naturally, that only made the whole project more interesting to the children.

“I’ve heard people say sometimes stories seem to write themselves. I guess this is what they meant.” Dean remarked.

The following morning, they went roaming the grounds. The weather was beginning to turn chill already, and it was a blustery day as well.

“You were right. We definitely need to take advantage of the ‘nice-ish’ weather while we’ve got the chance, if this is what it’s like in September.”

Unfortunately, there wasn’t actually all that much to see on the grounds. There were the rows of greenhouses—but they had to go to one for Herbology class, so they were no real mystery. They were forbidden to go into the forest, so that was out. They wandered around the lake for a bit, and threw bits of roll to the giant squid, who waved at them before disappearing back into the depths of the lake. They encountered a tree that might have killed one of them, had not Neville recognized it as a ‘Whomping willow’—a rare tree that had been specially designed to attack people when they came too close.

While wandering back towards the castle, they encountered Hagrid, who invited them all in for tea. Having nothing better to do, they accepted.

Hagrid’s hut was a one-room building made of wood. Inside, everything was sized for someone his size, so they all felt strangely dwarfed while in there. There was a large fireplace, a large table and chairs, and on the far side of the room was a giant-sized bed.

Hagrid’s boar-hound, Fang, greeted them all enthusiastically by jumping all over them and licking their faces till they were all covered in drool. Hagrid served up tea and offered them some of his homemade rock cakes, which they all ended up hiding in their pockets when he wasn’t looking, as they discovered they were all rock-like enough that none of them could eat them without breaking their teeth.

After everyone was served, Hagrid sat himself down as well, and beamed at them all happily—though Harry noticed he seemed to avoid looking at him, for some reason.

“So, lads, how’s yer first week been? Alright?”

“Yeah, it’s been great, really. Everything’s going well.” Neville agreed.

“Staying outta trouble, I hope?”

“Well, I was nearly accused of murdering someone, but other than that…”

Hagrid blanched and looked at Harry in horror.

“There was some big kids who were trying to intimidate us and give us a hard time. I threw an
apple at one of them. Later, it was all around the school that I ‘savagely attacked’ him. Dumbledore called me up to his office in the middle of dinner, so naturally everyone decided the guy must have died. It’s okay though, the others started a food fight to punish them for telling ridiculous stories. It was great.”

Hagrid laughed joyfully, but then seem to think better of it. He made his face stern and wagged a giant finger at them.

“Now, yer shouldna be going ‘round doing stuff like that. Shame on all of ye.” He scolded. He grinned at them and winked while telling them that, so none of them took him seriously, they just grinned back.

There was a pile of papers on the edge of Hagrid’s table, which Dean began flipping through while Hagrid was fetching them all more tea.

“Gringott’s was robbed?”

“The bank was robbed, really?”

Dean opened up the paper and read through the article. “It says they tried, but the vault had been emptied out earlier that day.”

“A lucky thing I made it there in time.” Hagrid muttered, as he began pouring out everyone’s tea.

“You emptied the vault?” Harry asked curiously.

“Who told you!?!”

“You just did.”

“Oh. Right. Heh.”

“What was in there?” Ron wondered.

“Never you mind! That’s between Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel!”

“Nicholas Flamel? The alchemist?” Seamus asked. “Was it the philosopher’s stone? That would be so cool!”

“Damn. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Philosopher’s stone?” Dean asked.

“Oh yeah, it makes gold and makes you immortal and stuff. I’d like to get my hands on that.” Seamus enthused.

“That’ll be enough o’ that! It’s hidden away safe, and all the teachers have added protections to it, so there won’t be no getting to it, not with Dumbledore on the case!” Hagrid said firmly. “No more talk of it, please. I’m gonna get in trouble if you lads are all walking around talking about it.”

“Is it hidden in the third floor corridor? The forbidden one?” Ron wondered.

“NO MORE!” Hagrid yelped. “Yer gonna get me sacked for sure!”

“Alright, guys, lets drop it.” Neville urged. “So, what’s out in the forest that makes it forbidden?”
“Oh, well! What isn’t out there?!” Hagrid said cheerfully, once the rest agreed to drop the subject of the philosopher’s stone hidden up in the castle. “Unicorns and centaurs, acromantulas, dryads, thestrals and hippogriffs, there’s a manticore, and a fire crab, trolls…Fluffy was in there till recently.”

“Fluffy?”

“Oh, he’s a cute lil’ fella. Twenty feet tall, three heads. Jes’ the sweetest little doggy ye ever met. I got him from a Greek chappy a few years back. They’re bred as guard dogs, you see.”

“Oh, he’s guarding the third floor corridor, is he?” Ron asked.

“STOP ASKING ABOUT THAT!”

“You’re the one brought him up.” Ron sulked.

“There’s a twenty foot tall dog with three heads in the school, right now?” Seamus asked worriedly.

“He’s away in a locked room, so never you mind.” Hagrid snapped, as he began mopping his brow with the large pink hanky he pulled from his pocket.

“Thanks for having us, Hagrid. We should probably go now.” Harry announced. “We won’t say anything to anyone, don’t worry.”

Hagrid nodded, though he still looked vaguely ill. “Much obliged if’n ye could.”

The rest of the boys said their goodbyes and left, while Hagrid dug out an oversized bottle of whiskey, and started downing it at an alarming rate.

“Well, we can look at this positively. We now have some more ideas for our pirate story.” Harry announced as they made their way back to the castle.

“A giant three-headed dog”

“And the Dread Warlord wants to get the Philosopher’s stone so he can rule the world forever!”

“And hopefully give himself a new nose while he’s at it.” Harry added.

The boys all chortled and made their way inside to grab lunch before heading back to the common room to work on their story.

That evening, two things of interest were posted up on the notice board in the common room.

“Flying lessons! Alright! I’ve been waiting for those!” Seamus said happily “Pity it’s with Slytherin though. They’re all a bunch of ruddy brats, that lot.”

“Quidditch tryouts too! Oh man, it’s no fair, first years not being allowed to try out. I bet I’d be brilliant! I’ve been playing Quidditch all my life, you know.” Ron informed them.

“Good for you. Some of us grew up with muggles and have never flown before.” Dean said sourly.

“Yeah. The only time I’ve ever seen a flying broom was in a window of a shop on Diagon Alley when we were school shopping.” Harry agreed.
“I’m afraid of heights. Can I opt out, do you think?” Hermione said worriedly.

“I’m not too fond of heights myself” Neville confided “but it’s a class, so I don’t think we can opt out. People have been flying for hundreds of years and all, and it seems to have been alright. We’ll be fine…maybe…hopefully.” He trailed off in worry. Hermione looked even more nervous upon seeing how uncertain he was about the whole thing.

“Oh, there’s the twins.” Ron noted. “Oi! Fred, George!”

“Ah, ickle Ronniekins. What do you want?” one of the twins asked.

“Put in a good word for me so I can try out for the quidditch team!”

“Ah, we’d like to help”

“Really, we would”

“Honestly”

“But, not only would mum have our heads”

“Professor McG probably won’t think much of it either”

“Since first years are forbidden and all.”

“Besides, if it came to it that we had no choice but to use a first year”

“You wouldn’t even be in the running, would you? You’re the one of the tallest of our ickle firsties.”

“Yeah, Oliver would want the smallest kid he could get—fast and light.”

“Sorry” they then chorused together.

“That’s no fair!”

“Ah, can it, Ron. None of us first years is allowed to try out, not just you.” Seamus scolded him.

“I don’t care about that! It’s them saying I’m not even in the running. Ruddy bastards. I don’t know why I ever thought you two might help me. You never have before!”

“Sorry, Ronniekins, but that’s just the way it is. Now, ickle Harry there, he’d be good seeker material.”

“Hermione’s shorter than I am. Go bug her.”

“Ah, don’t be that way, mate!”

“Don’t ask me! I’m afraid of heights!”

“Oh well, Harrykins. Looks like you’re the lead favorite.”

“I was raised by muggles and have never flown a broom before. Go bother a second year. We’re busy anyway.”

“Oh, ho! Listen to him! They’re busy”

“Indeed! Might we inquire as to the nature of your business?”

“No. Go away.” Ron griped as he threw himself back down with the rest of them.

“We’re writing a story about pirates.” Parvati informed them.

“Traitor! Don’t talk to them! They’re jerks!”
“I like them better than I like you.” Parvati sniffed.

“Ah! Ickle Ronnie, shot down in his prime”
“He’ll never be a ladies man, poor lad.” The twins chortled.

Ron’s face went tomato red, which prompted much pointing and laughter from not only the twins, but many others as well. Neville patted him on the shoulder and handed him back his section of the story.

“You can always slip them in as villains we have to defeat.” He whispered quietly. Ron brightened at the thought, and got to work.

The days slipped by. Slowly, they fell into the routine of Hogwarts. Flying lessons went by with only a minor glitch—Neville lost control of his broom during the first lesson, fell and broke his arm. Madame Pomfrey fixed it pretty easily, and he was back for the next lesson. Gryffindor had their quidditch try-outs. A second year named Marvin Keane became seeker—he was the only one who had tried out. The team captain, Oliver Wood, wanted desperately to win the Quidditch cup that year. He began booking the quidditch pitch for every available slot, and had the team out there for hours at a time. Watching the team stumble in after long practices, covered in mud, or wet from the rain, or just looking half-frozen from being in the air so long, even Ron began feeling better about not being allowed to try-out.

The days got shorter, the weather got colder, and before they knew it, it was Halloween.

“That girl is a nightmare!” Ron complained about Hermione as they exited charms class. They started across the courtyard “Always bossing everyone around.”

“Her heart was in the right place. She was trying to help. She did manage to make the feather fly.” Neville pointed out.

“Well, she should keep her help to herself! Stupid know-it-all!”

Hermione sped past them, looking teary-eyed. Parvati and Lavender passed the boys by and glared at him reproachfully.

“Boys!” Lavender sniffed.
“Yeah!” Parvati added.

“Don’t lump us with that miserable git. I’d have been happy to let the girl help me. Heck, my feather caught on fire!” Seamus replied amiably.

“Mine rolled over and looked dead.” Neville admitted.

“Mine exploded.” Dean added.

“I couldn’t get it to work either. I don’t understand it, myself. Everything else I’ve ever tried has worked just fine. Surely it can’t be that hard, right? If it was, they wouldn’t be teaching it to us first year.”

“I know what you mean. Neither of us could get it to work right either. I think Hermione was the only one who did. It’s so odd…not to mention frustrating.”
“Wingardium Leviosa!” Ron suddenly shouted, while pointing his wand at a nearby rock.

The rock slowly began rising into the air. It was wobbly, but it was definitely levitating.

The rest exchanged glances and tried lifting twigs and other loose rocks scattered about. One after another they succeeded.

“What the hell?! Did she do something to us?”

“I doubt that, Ron. Maybe you were just determined enough this time. The rest of us saw it work for you, so we knew it’d work for us too. That’s all it was, I’m sure of it.” Neville protested.

“That better be the case. If I ever did find out she was doing something to us…” Ron growled.

“Why would she? She works three times as hard as anyone on schoolwork. She doesn’t have even a third the free time the rest of us do—she’s always writing fifteen foot essays for every class and doing extra reading, and sucking up to the teachers hoping for extra points. When the heck would she have time to be sabotaging the rest of us? It’s just a fluke.” Neville concluded firmly.

Ron shook his head. “It better be. I’m not having my mum sending me howlers and bitching at me just because she’s a mental case who’s addicted to good grades.”

They headed up to the tower to drop off their books. While on the way down, they heard some girls talking about Hermione and how she was in the second floor girls’ bathroom, crying. Neville turned around and headed back up, dragging Harry with him.

“Oi! Neville! What’s the big idea?”

“We’re going to go get Hermione, of course. She’s going to miss the feast otherwise.”

When they reached the girls’ bathroom, Neville knocked soundly.

“Go away!” they heard Hermione shriek from inside. She was the only one who answered, so Neville opened the door, though he kept his eyes covered as he crept inside.

“Hermione? Stop crying and get out here. You’re going to miss the feast.”

“Go away!”

“No!” Neville declared boldly.

“Yeah, Hermione, come on. We’re all going to miss it at this rate. We were all frustrated—even Professor Flitwick. You could see it. Ron probably shouldn’t have snapped at you, but that’s no reason to hang out up here crying when there’s a feast to be had.” Harry added his two cents to Neville’s.

“I don’t feel like it!”

“Hermione…this is the anniversary of my parents’ deaths. I could really use everyone’s support.” Harry added, sounding sad.

Hermione peeked her head out of the stall she’d been hiding in, looking stricken. She ran to Harry and threw her arms around his neck.

“Oh, Harry! I’m so sorry! I didn’t even think!”
“It’s alright…no reason you should have. Give Nev a hug, and let’s go, yeah?”

Hermione blinked and looked at Neville who shifted from foot to foot rather bashfully. Hermione gave him a stiff hug, and he patted her on the back. They broke apart, both looking slightly pink.

“There, all friends again. Let’s go.”

When they got down to the great hall, they all halted in the doorway for a moment to take it all in. There were lit jack-o-lanterns everywhere, and bats flying overhead. All the school ghosts seemed to be present, and seemed to be having their own party overhead. The elves had outdone themselves. Every table was filled to groaning with all manner of food, and treats. The three kids shared a grin and ran to join the others at the table.

They loaded down their plates, and joined in with the others, who were trading stories and trying to scare each other.

Suddenly, Professor Quirrel staggered into the hall, out of breath and obviously frightened.

“TROLL! IN THE DUNGEONS! I thought you’d like to know.” He gasped out, before falling over in a dead faint.

There was a moment of dead silence, and then

“GRYFFINDORS! TO ARMS!” Neville shouted, jumping from his seat.

Harry stared at him for a half a heartbeat and then jumped up as well.

“DEFEND THE CASTLE WITH YOUR LIVES!”

The rest of the Gryffindors stared at them for a second, and then jumped to their feet in unison with a roar. As one, they began pelting towards the doors, while the remaining students gaped at them in astonishment.

The doors slammed shut just before the first students reached them.

“ARE YOU ALL INSANE?” McGonagall shrieked, as Dumbledore put away his wand, and stared at them over his half-moon glasses.

“What’s the problem? They fear fire. We’ve got that covered.” Fred (or possibly George) demanded.

“Yeah! Fire! Burn it to the ground!” Oliver Wood shouted, his eyes agleam. Percy, who was next to him, reached out, and grasped his hand (the one brandishing his wand) and lowered it by his side, and then patted him on the shoulder bracingly.

“Sit down! All of you. You will stay here. We teachers will be going in search of the troll, not you!” McGonagall spat, looking affronted that there seemed to have been any question of it being otherwise.

The Gryffindors, feeling very sulky indeed, made their way back to the table, muttering under their breath.

The teachers made their way out of the hall, and barred the doors behind them.

“Ruddy unfair, if you ask me.” Ron muttered as they sat back down.
“They probably didn’t want us showing them up.” Seamus replied.

The kids exchanged glances, decided that was probably the case.

“Oh, well. Maybe next time.” Neville sighed. They went back to eating. After a few minutes, Professor Quirrel pulled himself off the ground, and tried to creep out of the great hall without anyone noticing.

Everyone did, and commented loudly about what an incompetent he was—after all, even the first years were braver than he was.

The teachers didn’t come back for two hours; they hadn’t been able to find the troll in the dungeons. Somehow, it had gotten to the second floor. They found it in the bathroom there—the very one they’d gotten Hermione from earlier. It seemed to have been thirsty; it had ripped up several of the toilets in an attempt to get a drink.

McGonagall, Snape, Quirrel and Dumbledore had all stunned it several times in unison, and it had finally fallen unconscious—after destroying the bathroom and a portion of the hall. The troll was taken out to the forest and left there, and the students were finally released from the hall to return to their common rooms.

House Gryffindor made a detour to see the wreck on the second floor. They all agreed they probably could have taken care of it with less mess—there were no portraits or tapestries in the hallway there to have caught fire. They really should have just let all of them take care of it.

The following day, November 1st, there was an early end to classes—it was time for the first quidditch game of the year. After being denied the right to hunt down the troll the night before, the Gryffindor team was fired up and ready to inflict some damage. The Ravenclaw team seemed rather thrown off their game even before it began—one look at their gleaming eyes and feral grins seemed to take the heart right out of them. Gryffindor scored five goals one after the other in the first twenty minutes of the game—it seemed like it would be a quick and easy victory for the red and gold.

“Hey…that bludger is…”

“EVERYONE SCATTER!” Harry shouted desperately.

He and the other first years dove to the sides as one of the bludgers—iron balls charmed to try knocking the players from their brooms—came shooting at them at high speed. It crashed into the stands—right where Harry had been sitting a moment ago, in fact—and smashed the bench to splinters. It continued down, smashing several of the supports holding the stand up high in the air so they could see the action, and then turned around to make another try for the audience.

It came right for Harry a second time. He threw himself out of the way again, though just barely; he could feel it ruffle his hair as it passed. It smashed into the stands a second time, and took out more of the supports, while leaving another sizeable hole in the bench. The kids began stumbling towards the stairs, desperate to get down from the stands, which were now swaying rather
alarmingly.

Harry wanted to follow them, he really did, but the ball was coming for him. If he got too close to the rest of them, that were trying to get down the stairs, it was going to go tearing through the whole densely-packed crowd, and possibly kill someone.

“Go! GO!” he urged his friends, shoving them towards the stairs as well.

He made it look like he was going to follow them so they would hurry, but he held himself back, every sense on high alert for the next passage of the bludger. He jumped backwards a split second before the thing burst upward in a shower of splinters through the wooden slat beneath him.

Fred and George were suddenly there, their faces white and teeth clenched. One of them hit the bludger with his bat towards his twin, who tried sending it back out towards the field. It immediately circled back around, making another try for Harry. One of the twins intercepted it a second time and knocked it away from him.

“Go, hurry! The thing is mad. I’m not sure how long we can keep it away from you!”

Harry glanced towards the stairs—the crowd was only halfway down and still packed too tightly for his liking. He glanced towards the holes nearby, and made his decision. He’d take his chances on the ground. He dropped down through the nearest hole, and climbed down the supports beneath like a monkey, alternately swinging and sliding. He heard the twins shout in horror, and let go of the supports, just as the bludger came tearing through, right where he’d been hanging just a moment before. He dropped the last ten feet to the ground, rolled and came up running.

He ran for all he was worth towards the teachers, who he could see hurrying out of their own stands across the way. Following his instincts he dropped flat, and the bludger whistled through the space where his head had been just a moment before. Fred and George landed to either side of him, bats at the ready. Professor Snape, face furious, and lips pressed into a thin, white line, pointed his wand at the bludger and reduced it to ash. The rest of the quidditch players landed around them, wide-eyed.

“Whoa. Way to go, Professor!” Angelina Johnson, one of the Gryffindor chasers shouted.

The Ravenclaws echoed her cry and both teams began clapping and whooping loudly. There was a sudden groan, and they all turned to look. The last of the Gryffindor students dashed away from the stands, just as the whole structure swayed and then began to collapse in on itself.

Several of the students screamed, and the students in the other stands began hurrying out of theirs, just in case. Professor Dumbledore tapped his throat with his wand.

“Sonorous. STUDENTS! EVERYONE RETURN TO THE CASTLE. HELP ANYONE WHO IS INJURED. EVERYONE TO THE GREAT HALL. QUIETUS.”

The twins turned Harry around, and stuck close to him on either side. The rest of the quidditch players formed up around them, and they headed up towards the castle as a single group.

“Thanks for the help, by the way.” Harry said quietly, once he was sure his voice wouldn’t shake.

“Couldn’t have you become a Harry pancake, now could we? Ickle Ronniekins would have been inconsolable.”
“And we’d have had to listen to him crying. So you see, it was completely self-serving.” They joked.
“Oh, in that case, glad I could help.”

The group laughed, which eased some of the tension they’d all been feeling.

“HARRY!”

Harry tried bracing for impact, but he was still nearly bowled over when Hermione pounced on him with one of her ‘super-mega-glomp hugs’, as he’d taken to thinking of them. He staggered back, and groaned, his face tightening in pain.

“You alright there, mate?” Ron inquired cheerfully, smacking him hard in the back.

Harry had landed badly on his one leg when he’d dropped so suddenly from the stands—and now that the adrenaline was wearing off, he could feel his knee and ankle throbbing.

“Harry! What did you do to your hands?” Neville demanded, when he noticed he was careful to keep them away from everyone. Neville grabbed his wrists and turned them over.

“Merlin’s beard! What did you do?”

“I climbed down wooden poles at high speed while trying to escape an iron ball trying to smash my head in.” Harry sighed, rolling his eyes at everyone’s idiocy. He nudged Hermione and Ron to get them off of him; now that he could feel his ankle and knee, the extra weight wasn’t helping at all.

“I can’t believe you did something so stupid!” Hermione shrieked.

“You would rather I led the bludger into the densely-packed stairwell? That would have meant death or serious injury for not just me but likely a whole lot of other people as well.”

“That’s not the point!”

“Of course it is. I did what I had to, to protect not only myself but everyone else as well. Anyone would have done the same if they kept their head and thought about it.” Harry disagreed. He started back towards the castle, noticeably limping, and holding his hands carefully away from himself so they wouldn’t be further injured.

Neville and Dean each threw one of his arms over their shoulders and hurried him towards the castle, ignoring his protests. Ron ran ahead to get Madame Pomfrey.

Harry was settled in the medical wing, his knee and ankle were seen to, as were his hands. He was then handed a goblet and told to drink up.

“What’s this?”

“A little something to finish healing you, and put you to sleep.”

“Put me to sleep?”

“Drink up! You’re not moving from this bed, and if I have to spell it directly into your stomach, I will do so!”

Harry finished drinking and handed a very satisfied Madame Pomfrey the goblet back, before lying down, feeling very resentful about how blasé they all were towards his safety and wellbeing.

He did his best to send part of his consciousness into the shadows under the bed before the potions kicked in.
He was not going to lie here like a sitting duck and let whoever just tried to kill him a second chance.

The door opened quietly. It was Professor Quirrel. He slipped in and shut the door with a soundless thump, and crept towards Harry’s bed, intent on the sleeping boy lying there. He caught something from the corner of his eyes and turned—but there was nothing there.

He winced suddenly, as though his head pained him, and continued towards his goal. There! Another shadowy image flickered just out of sight. Quirrel turned again, spooked.

“Nothing there.” He whispered, though he was still wary. He stepped up next to Harry and gazed down at him intently, only to jump and turn around when the doors to the medical wing were thrown open and Professor Snape came striding in like he owned the place.

Snape saw Quirrel standing over Harry and frowned, making his way to the boy’s bedside as well.

“S-S-Severus. What brings you here?”

Snape pulled his wand and scanned the boy, before grunting and putting it away. “Checking to see if the arrogant brat was actually injured or just playing the ‘poor me’ card.” Snape grunted. “What brings you here?”

“I w-w-was going to get a stomach soother, but I seem to be feeling alright now. I guess all the excitement was just too much for me.” Quirrel tittered. “The matron doesn’t seem to be here in any case. I guess I s-should go and s-see if there’s anything needs doing.” He turned and fled from the room and a brisk pace.

Dumbledore came into the hospital wing a short time later. “Ah, Severus. Still here?”

Just then, Madame Pomfrey came bustling out of the back, and became visibly startled when she saw the two men standing there, letting out a small shriek.

“Poppy?”

Pomfrey frowned and looked back towards her office and then at the doors leading to the wing. “How long have you both been here? I didn’t hear anyone come in. My alarm seems to be malfunctioning.”

“There seems to be a lot of odd malfunctions today.” Snape grumbled.

Dumbledore shot Snape a warning look, before turning his twinkling stare on Madame Pomfrey. “I’ll take a look at your alarm, shall I? Could you give young Mr. Potter another once over while I do so?”

“Whatsoever for?”

“Just set my mind at ease.”

Pomfrey huffed, but drew her wand nonetheless. “He’s fine. His hands, knee and ankle are healing up nicely, and the skelegrow and bone mender are doing their work reinforcing his skeleton.”
"Reinforcing his skeleton? What on earth?"

"I found a lot of small fractures in his bones, and some weak spots. Nothing serious, though it could have become so if left untreated. I’m going to be giving him some nutritional supplements to help reinforce his bones and teeth—children prefer candy to nutritional meals, and don’t always get everything they need to grow properly."

"Well, really, who doesn’t prefer candy?" Dumbledore tittered, removing some from his pocket. "Sherbet lemon, anyone?"

Pomfrey rolled her eyes, and Snape glared at him. Neither seemed to faze him in the least. "Poppy, your alarm should be fine. I’d best go supervise the rest of the game."

"The game! You aren’t honestly going to continue the game after everything that’s happened!" Pomfrey gasped.

"No one was seriously injured, thank goodness, and the rules do state that the game must continue until the snitch is caught. We don’t really have much choice in the matter. If you have some objection, I’m afraid you’ll have to complain to the Ministry."

Dumbledore wandered off, humming under his breath and eating candy.

"Oi! Harry! Wake up already!"

"Oh! You don’t think he was brain damaged by the bludger and has fallen into a coma, do you?!" Hermione fretted.

She ran off into the back to find Madame Pomfrey and demand she do another check-up.

Harry stirred and his eyes fluttered open. He was still groggy from whatever the matron had given him—having Ron grab him by the shoulders to shake him around like a rag doll while screaming his name into his face certainly didn’t help.

"Ron, geez, leave him alone." Neville protested, nudging the red-head away. "He was probably given something to knock him out."

"Ron" Harry croaked. His throat was rather dry. Ron smirked at Neville and nudged his way back to Harry’s side and leaned in. "Yeah? OW! Ruddy bastard!"

Neville started snickering, while Ron backed off, rubbing the ear Harry had grabbed and twisted.

Harry’s eyes fluttered closed and he drifted back to sleep—there must have just been too much sleep potion still in his system for him to wake up all the way.

Madame Pomfrey came out, irritated with the lot of them, and shooed them away, telling them to not come back before breakfast time the following morning.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The kids decide to publish their story. Harry makes some new friends.

“You know what? This pirate story we wrote is actually pretty good. We should try having it published or something.” Harry mused.

He and the other first years were sitting around in the common room after breakfast. It was late November, and there was a thick blanket of snow over the grounds outside. It was too cold to really be outside for long.

“I know a guy, Xenophilius Lovegood. He lives right by my house. He has a paper or something. He’s got his own printing press. We could ask him.” Ron offered.

“Sure, why not. It couldn’t hurt. Write to him and see if he’ll do it, and find out what he wants in exchange.”

Hermione dug out parchment and settled herself at the table. “He’ll do it all wrong. You’d best let me handle it.” She declared. She started writing.

Fifteen minutes later, she was still writing, and her neat, tiny handwriting had already filled a foot of parchment. She didn’t look like she was going to be stopping anytime soon.

“Troublesome.” Harry muttered, digging out his own parchment. He began writing a short, simple inquiry to see if Ron’s friend was interested, asking that he reply sometime soon and give them an answer. Hedwig appeared at the window and tapped until the student sitting nearby opened it and let her in. She landed on the arm of the chair near Harry, and allowed him to attach the letter to her leg, and then flew off again.

“You can stop writing. It’s done. We just have to wait to hear back.” Harry told Hermione, who was up to three feet and counting.

Hermione began spluttering indignantly. “But I was already doing it!”

“We just needed a yes or no answer—he’s a businessman; he probably doesn’t have time to read a thirty foot letter. What all are you writing there, anyway?” Harry wondered, snatching the parchment away.

“Were you planning to get to the point anytime soon? Geez. We don’t need a treatise or a contract, just a yes or no. You really need to learn how to get to the point.” Hermione snatched back her letter and stomped off in a huff.

They received a reply two days later at breakfast. Hedwig came in, looking rather disgruntled, and wearing a radish on a string around her neck. She landed on the table with a thump and began screeching and flapping her wings, demanding the thing be taken off. Harry raised an eyebrow and
put a calming hand on her head after unrolling the letter.

“What’s it say, mate?”

“He says he’ll be happy to print our book, he’ll even advertise it for us to help generate sales. He wants the proceeds for the first thousand copies. Anything after that is ours.”

“First thousand?!” Hermione spluttered.

“He says his readership is a hundred thousand, so he’s confident we should sell enough just to his readers to make it worth our while. He’s the one who’s going to be footing the bill, so I suppose it’s only fair. What do the rest of you think?”

“Chances are we couldn’t get a regular book publisher to carry it for us, not at our age. I say we take it. If it sells good, we’ll have a better chance at getting regular publishers in the future.”

“So we’re agreed?”

Everyone exchanged glances and nodded.

“So, why is Hedwig wearing a radish?”

“It’s to protect her from glibbering humdingers.”

“What on earth are glibbering humdingers?”

“You’ve got me.”

He set down the letter and removed the radish from around her neck. “Alright there, girl?”

Hedwig ruffled her feathers and started grooming herself. Harry took that as a positive answer. He fed her some bacon and let her fly off.

Breakfast finished and a couple of Hufflepuffs called to Neville.

“Oh, that’s right. I joined the Herbology club. I’m going to the first meeting today. It should be fun.” Neville explained.

“We’ll see you all later.” Seamus called as he and Dean left to go do something or other—probably work on the comic book Seamus wanted to write. Now that they were going to be having the pirate book published, they were probably going to be forging ahead on that.

“I need to get to the library. I want to finish my transfiguration essay.” Hermione offered as she ran off as well.

“Wow. I suddenly feel so unpopular.” Harry sighed mournfully.

“I’m still here.” Ron grumbled.

“So you are. What do you want to do today?”

Harry glanced over when he didn’t get an answer and found Ron glowering across the room. He saw the reason why a second later. Draco Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle were headed their way.
“What do you want Malfoy?” Ron spat as soon as the three boys got close.

“Nothing from you, Weasel.” Draco sniffed dismissively. “Potter, I and some of my chums were going to go visit the chess club. I thought I’d invite you along.”

“We have a chess club?” Ron muttered.

“That’s thoughtful of you, but I don’t play chess, I’m sorry to say. I don’t think I’d offer any sort of challenge to anyone. Ron, however, plays. In fact he’s always looking for an opponent.”

“I’m not interested in playing him” Ron asserted, glaring at Malfoy hatefully.

“I should think not. You’d obviously lose terribly. Your family is so poor, I suppose all you really have is your pride. Never let it be said that I cannot be a gentleman when I choose to be.”

“Who are you calling poor?” Ron hissed, his face going red.

“You, Weasley. Do try to keep up.” Draco huffed.

“That’s it! You and me. Chess. Right now. Let’s see you put your money where your mouth is!”

“A wager, is it? Can you actually afford that?”

“It’s just a saying” Harry interjected. “You know, put up or shut up, that sort of thing. So it’s to be a chess challenge, is it?”

“Yeah. You up for it, Malfoy, or are you too scared?”

“Scared? Of you? Please! I am the chess master!”

Ron and Draco scowled at each other and then marched off. Harry, Vince and Greg watched them go.

“So, fellows. How have you been?”

“Allright, I guess.”

“Can’t complain.”

There was an awkward silence.

“So…um, do you agree that muggles are a plague upon the world?”

Harry just stared at Vince, dumbfounded.

“Please tell me that wasn’t you being smooth.”

“Uh…?”

“My god, man. How did you get into Slytherin with such a lack of subtlety? You’re supposed to lead up to things like that, not just blurt it out. You’re supposed to steer the conversation towards directions where you can insert anecdotes or points that support your position, so you can steer your audience towards your way of thinking. More than that, you need to be able to blend with,
operate and make friends with people at all levels of society, many of whom might not hold the
same ideals you do. You need to be able to uncover your audience’s feelings on a number of
positions that you feel are important, but you also need to be flexible enough to compromise in
order to reach larger goals. What on earth are they teaching you?”

“Um…nothing?”

“It certainly seems that way.” Harry agreed.

Vince’s shoulders slumped and he looked dejected.

“Hey, don’t be so hard on him! He’s a Slytherin, which means he must be cunning, and stuff,
right? He just needs practice.”

“It constantly amazes me how much stock everyone puts in house divisions. In case none of you
noticed, everyone sorted themselves.”

“What do you mean? The hat did that.”

“No, all of you did. Take Hermione Granger, for example. She wanted Gryffindor. Believing that
she had to face a troll, she decided to charge at the thing, brandishing a torch. The group she
actually gravitated to, however, were the future Ravenclaws, who were all standing around
discussing how one actually went about dealing with a troll. You two, Malfoy and Parkinson all
thought you had to throw someone else to the troll in order to be Slytherins, so you all started
plotting how to do that, and who to throw. Those who wanted Hufflepuff tried to figure out how to
make friends with the thing. Why do you think the sorting went so quickly? Everyone sorted
themselves before they even put the hat on, that’s why.”

Both boys began looking very nervous. “But…if I sorted myself…”

“Again, I say people put too much stock in house divisions. Hannah Abbot offered to distract a troll
so you could sneak off. That was pretty brave, wasn’t it?”

They nodded, looking perplexed.

“She’s a Hufflepuff, not a Gryffindor. Hermione Granger is pretty smart, right?”

They nodded again.

“She’s a Gryffindor, not a Ravenclaw. You two seem quite loyal to one another.”

Another nod, more tentative.

“You’re Slytherins, not Hufflepuffs. Do you see where I’m going with this?”

“Just because you’re sorted into one house doesn’t mean you don’t have qualities that are from
another, right?”

“Got it in one. I think everyone worrying so much about living up to their house qualities limits us.
In fact, there’s a saying that fits – if all you have is a hammer, every problem becomes a nail.”

“Like, there’s times when maybe it would be better to be sneaky than to be brave, but if you’re a
Gryffindor, you figure sneaking is out because that would be Slytherin?”

“Exactly. You can be a loyal, brave, smart Slytherin.”
“Or a loyal, sneaky, smart Gryffindor?”

“Or a sneaky, smart, brave Hufflepuff?” Vince added, getting into the spirit of things.

“Or a sneaky, brave, hardworking Ravenclaw.” Harry concluded. “I think it’s a shame more people don’t feel as I do. I think we’d all be better for it.”

The two boys nodded thoughtfully. They’d obviously been given a lot to think about.

“You might as well sit down. No need to just stand there.”

The rest of the great hall was nearly empty; breakfast was over and most everyone else had gone on to do whatever it is they did in their free time.

The two boys exchanged a glance and sat down.

“It’s weird, sitting over here.”

“I imagine I’d feel the same, were I sitting on your side of the room. So. What do Slytherins do for fun?”

“Um, the usual, I guess. Sometimes we practice singing songs Draco writes, or we have talent shows, sometimes we have poetry readings…”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. Why, what does Gryffindor do?”

“Exploding snap, chess or gobstones, talk about quidditch, pranks—though that’s mostly the twins.”

“Sounds like fun” Greg admitted rather glumly. “I’m not really a big fan of poetry.”

“You’re alright with the rest?”

“Well, some of Draco’s songs are pretty funny. He does impressions too. He’s usually a big hit at the talent shows.”

Bit by bit, Harry drew them out. He got the impression that most people probably didn’t take the time to just talk to them—they were eager to talk, and once started, he needed to do very little to keep them talking. He learned a number of small things about not only the two of them, but the various people in Slytherin house as well; inconsequential things, really, but things that would nevertheless give him a starting point to talk to other members of the house should he ever need to. He’d been trying to cultivate friendly contacts in all the houses. He didn’t want a repeat of what had happened his first day in Hogwarts. No one in the school knew him then, with the exception of his fellow Gryffindor first years; because of that fact, it was very easy for a ridiculous rumor to spread and be believed. He wanted to start building insurance against future incidents like it. If he had people in all the houses that would disbelieve such rumors and speak up on his behalf, it would probably go a long way towards being able to protect his reputation in the future.

While they were talking, a group of Hufflepuffs, who were on their way outside, spotted the three of them sitting in the great hall. Justin Finch-Fletchley and one of his roommates, Ernie Macmillan, as well as Hannah Abbot, came in to see them, and invited them to join them for their snowball fight. Vince and Greg seemed surprised at being invited to join some Hufflepuffs, but they shrugged and headed off to grab their cloaks. Harry had his cloak, gloves and scarf in his pouch.
The four of them lingered in the entryway waiting for Vince and Greg to return. While they were waiting, a couple of Ravenclaw first years were invited to join as well—Michael Corner and Anthony Goldstein. They had already been on their way outside, so they waited with the rest for the Slytherins to come back. They showed up about twenty minutes later, with Millicent Bulstrode in tow. She had apparently gotten tired of hanging with the other girls, who were all gossiping, and wanted to do something more active. She was a big girl, and seemed a bit of a tomboy. Harry sympathized; it probably wasn’t easy for a girl like her, when all the other Slytherin girls were the girly, make-up wearing, giggling type. Maybe she could become friends with Hannah, he thought. Hannah, in spite of being a tiny, plump little thing in pigtails, was a bit of tomboy as well.

It was cold as anything outside, and the snow lay rather deep in the courtyard, but they had fun. They were frozen, apple-cheeked and had numb fingers and toes by the time they called it quits, but it had been worth it, Harry thought.

When Harry headed back up to Gryffindor to change out of his wet clothes, he didn’t see Ron or Neville or Hermione anywhere, which was just as well.

After being attacked at the game, he had realized he’d become a bit too lax about his safety. Someone either in, or with access to, Hogwarts, seemed to want him dead. They made a try for him at the game, they might try something less public next time. He needed a way to escape should it become necessary. While musing on that, he’d remembered something: the come and go room. Itsy had told him there were entrances all over—she told him the one near Gryffindor tower so he wouldn’t have to wander far. In theory, at least, he should be able to use the room and the various entrances to travel swiftly throughout the castle. There was no one around to stop him, or to poke into his business at the moment. It was a perfect time to do a bit of experimenting.

Harry headed down to the room, and paced back and forth, while thinking how much he really, really needed to get to the first floor. A door appeared, and Harry smiled in triumph. By the look of it, his theory was sound.

“I could activate the prepared parchment Sirius made me to make a new map. I had thought it untenable because I’d have to be at the places I want to plot; however, if I use the room to travel the whole castle very quickly and just plot the area around the entrance, I should have most of the map done in a few hours. I would just have to go back later and fill in anything missing, and I know the general location of the secret passages the Marauders found, so I could add those as well.” He realized.

Brimming with new purpose, he decided to do just that.

“Harry! I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in here before.”

“Quiet!”

“Sorry Madame Pince” Hermione quickly apologized.

“Eh, I thought it about time I took a look. I’ve been wandering.” replied.

“But I’m right here. You don’t have to leave.”
“It’s my first time in the library, remember? I want to see the place. You can go back to whatever you were doing. I’m going to take a look around.”

“Don’t be silly, I’ll come with you.”

“Hermione, we can’t really talk in here without getting scolded. I don’t need a chaperone in any case. Just relax, would you? I’m going to take the five sickle tour and I’ll be around.”

Harry took off before Hermione could complain further. She had a number of books—both her own and library books, as well as a half-finished essay (it was only five feet, after all) spread out on the table she’d been working on. He could see her dithering about whether to just leave everything there and follow him, so he took off before she could decide. He had his new map in his pocket, plotting out the room while he walked. He didn’t want Hermione jumping in the middle of things. He was only halfway done the castle, after all. She had the tendency to make far too much of a nuisance of herself for him to want her anywhere near the come and go room, or its convenient elevator function; there’d be no escaping her then. It was a thought too horrible to contemplate.

He made a quick circuit of the library-upstairs and down, and peeked in all the side rooms, making a circuit of them as well. He came across a locked room while roaming, and sent his shadow under the door to check it out. He found the original manuscript of ‘Hogwarts: A History’ in a locked glass case…as well as what looked for all the world like a computer. “Interesting.”

He perused the shelves, taking note of the sections as he passed. If he’d done everything correctly the shelves should be labeled when he was done—allowing him to both see who was in the library, and what they were looking at. He snagged a book on quidditch—‘Quidditch through the Ages’, completed his circuit, and went to Madame Pince’s desk to check the book out. While she was busy doing that, he again sent his shadow into her office behind the desk, under the closed door. He wanted to be thorough, after all.

Hermione caught up to him while Madame Pince was checking his book out.

“There you are! Are you leaving? What are you getting? Quidditch. Feh! You shouldn’t waste your time on such frivolous things…”

“And there she goes.” Harry sighed to himself.

He kept one ear half on her tirade so he could grunt in the right places, and tried to think of how to ditch her. He eyed the groaning book bag on her shoulder, and the three big heavy books she had with her to check out, and decided it wouldn’t be too hard to do. She wasn’t going to want to wander aimlessly while lugging all that around. He was just going to continue what he was doing—though with her along he’d have to do this floor completely on foot. He’d head back to the come and go room entrance he’d found already and map the rest once she’d gone on her way. Hopefully she’d get irritated quickly and leave so he could finish at least the upper parts of the castle today.

Hermione’s books were duly checked out, and she fell into step beside Harry, who purposefully kept his stride slow and ambling. She was practically staggering under the combined weight of her book bag and the other books she gotten, which didn’t fit. She was obviously in a hurry to get back to the common room and drop everything off, as she kept outpacing him and then would wait till he caught up, fuming and impatient and shifting all the weight she was carrying. The third time it happened she growled and stamped her foot.

“Honestly, Harry! You’re as slow as slug! Get moving!” she snapped.

She turned and began bustling towards the staircase just ahead and started up. She glanced over
and saw he hadn’t caught up, and turned around to go back down and see what was keeping him. He was examining a man-sized vase in a niche while listening to a nearby portrait who was regaling him with the thing’s history.

“Harry!” Hermione shrieked, cutting off the portrait in mid-spiel. The man sputtered indignantly and huffed at her. “Well! Really!”

“Hermione, that was rude.”

“Come on!” she repeated.

“If you’re in such a rush, go ahead. I’m exploring. I never said I was going back to the common room.”

Harry turned and continued ambling down the hallway—examining portraits, peeking in the rooms along the way, making a circuit of some, and opening any doors inside. Though casual to the observer, he was getting very, very irritated. Hermione was still following him.

“Harry, this is ridiculous! What on earth are you doing?” she demanded, staggering after him. She kept casting longing looks back towards the staircase.

“I told you already. You should learn to listen to the answers when you ask people questions. Hello there” he added to the next portrait in line.

“Hello dear. Enjoying your free time?” The elderly woman in the portrait asked kindly.

“I was.” Harry replied, slanting a look towards Hermione from the corner of his eye.

“Harry, would you stop goofing around and come on?!”

“See? Not exactly pleasant company. Thinks she’s my mother, she does.”

“Oh, sweetie, that’s not the way to win a man at all.” The woman scolded.

“Why do people keep saying that!” Hermione growled.

“Because you act like a loony whenever you’re around me. Maybe you shouldn’t have thrown out your medication.”

Hermione gasped in outrage.

“I’m just saying. Yeah, you’ve got magic. That doesn’t automatically rule out insanity, you know.”

“He’s right, you know, dear. Why, my poor great-grandfather was mad; heard the call of the fwooper once while out camping. He got lost in the woods and had to go to the bathroom, and startled the fwooper in its nest. He was never quite the same after that.”

“How tragic.”

“It really was. The long-term care ward at St. Mungo’s was named for him before they renamed it for Janus Thickey. Everyone thought he had a more interesting story.”

“He’s the fellow who claimed he was eaten by a lethifold, right?”

“The very same. The man was obviously an idiot. It was his wife’s sister who ran the Green Dragon Inn! Did he really think she was never going to find out?”

“I wonder what they saw in him?”

“I heard tell he had a fabulous wand.” A stately looking gentleman in an adjoining frame interjected.

Hermione turned pink and gasped and Harry sniggered. “That would do it, I imagine. It was lovely talking to you both.”

“You as well, dear.”

Harry continued ambling, and Hermione doggedly staggered after him.

They had just completed their circuit of the fourth floor, and were back in front of the library, when the bell rang.

“Oh. It’s lunch time already.” Harry noted.

Hermione frowned at Harry reproachfully, and stomped towards the stairs. “I’m going to go put my books away!” she snapped.

Harry waited till she was out of sight and headed back to the come and go room entrance on that floor. He could quite happily forego lunch if it meant mapping out the remaining entrances. Hopefully, once he was done, he would always be able to slip away if Hermione decided to make a nuisance of herself again.

“Although…I suppose I could get some food from the kitchen, and just have lunch on my own while I map out the remainder. I’ve missed enough meals in my life. I’m not missing any more if I don’t have to—not because of her.”

Decided, he slipped into the room and reappeared on the ground floor—a short hop from the kitchens. He could hear students in the distance, all of them heading towards the great hall. He stayed where he was until the noise died down, and then hurried to go get some food.

After eating, Harry decided to travel down to the very lowest dungeons and complete mapping those while lunch was in progress, so he’d be back in the ‘occupied’ parts of the castle when the students were out and about once more. If Hermione got it into her head to start a search for him, he didn’t want everyone going into a panic because they couldn’t find him anywhere.

“I need to get to the lowest level. I need to get to the lowest level. I need to get to the lowest level.” He thought while pacing back and forth.

The door appeared, he stepped inside and then back out, and found himself in a place he never imagined.

“I must be nearly at the base of the mountain. There isn’t even really much stonework down this far.”

Indeed, Harry had found himself in a hallway that looked more like a natural cavern than part of the castle. He glanced behind him worriedly and found the stone wall and the door he’d just exited, and let out a relieved breath.

“This must be the very bottom of the castle.” He glanced up and shivered. It was creepy down here—it was dank, and damp, and the only light was a diffuse green light that seemed to come from
nowhere. He was all too aware of the weight of the castle and the mountain itself hanging above his head, and it made him nervous—but at the same time, he was too curious for his own good. There was a doorway that let one travel directly down here—there had to be a reason for that.

Harry pulled his wand as he stepped away from the wall, and looked back and forth, wondering which way to go first. He picked a direction at random and started walking, only to stop, flinching, when something crunched underfoot. He looked down and found the ground was littered with small animal bones—likely rats. Feeling a bit nervous now, he held his wand at the ready, all senses on alert. If there were wild animals or something down here, he wanted to be prepared. It would be rather embarrassing to die such a stupid death.

The cavern hallway he was following twisted and turned like a snake, and branched off several times. He continued following it, carefully marking the intersections with an arrow, until it opened into a large cavern. Seeing stonework up ahead, he sped his steps. There was a stone building sitting in the middle of the cavern, in the middle of one side there was a carved doorway, inset with a large silver door that towered far overhead, completely covered in snakes. In the flickering light, they seemed almost alive, writhing in place, and their eyes—inset with emeralds-- glittered as though watching and judging him.

Harry looked for a handle, and tried pushing at them to get them to move, but they didn’t budge. “I wonder how to get them open?” he said to himself out loud. He frowned when he realized his magic had flickered oddly. He jumped when the snakes froze in place, and a split opened in the center. Those snakes that crossed the split broke in half and began turning in place as though they were lock latches being flipped, one after the other. The doors slid soundlessly apart, vanishing into the wall at either side.

Harry stepped through the doorway, his heart pounding in his chest. Inside, he found an ornate chamber, with pillars running the length of it to either side, each of them twined around with more of the almost-alive carved snakes with their glittering emerald eyes. At the far end of the chamber stood a large statue of Salazar Slytherin—he recognized the man from his chocolate frog card, though he was older here, and had a fuller, longer beard that reached his feet.

“I don’t believe it. I’ve found the Chamber of Secrets. That doesn’t make any sense though. Only Slytherin’s heir is supposed to be able to. People have been searching for it for years, but it’s believed to be a myth because no one has ever found it. That’s what Hogwarts: A History said, anyway. Why couldn’t anyone find it if it was so easy? And how did I get in?”

He thought back and remembered the odd flicker in his magic as he’d spoken while staring at the snake-covered door.

“I’m a parselmouth? Like Slytherin was?” Harry mused. “Oh, this is bad. Salazar Slytherin is a known parselmouth, and people are fine with it because he lived a thousand years ago—even then, many still act like he was the devil himself. Nowadays, it’s feared and despised as the sign of a dark wizard. They were hunted nearly to extinction—in fact, it’s likely many assume it is extinct—the Slytherin line is gone, and the rest hunted. Just my luck it cropped up somewhere in my family tree. Well, Griphook did say that, depending on how long ago my mother got her magic from, there could have been any number of things in her background. I guess that means muggleborns are genetically more closely related to their magical forebears than to their muggle families? I suppose that would make sense, in a purely illogical magical way, if the magical genes that make one a witch or a wizard come as a package deal. Of course, I might have gotten it from dad’s side of the family…it might explain his fierce hatred of anything dark wizard related. If he was afraid of being
outed as a dark wizard parslemouth, he might have gone the opposite extreme and been an ultra-light champion against all things dark as a way of obscuring his own murky background. It would sort of explain the family motto – bold and crafty as well, if there were both Gryffindors and Slytherins in the family, and some of them were parslemouths."

Harry paced the room, and eyed all the corners of it while he mused. “I can’t let anyone know about this. I can only see it ending badly for me. I should try to get a handle on the parslemouth thing though—it’s no good if I’m lapsing into it without realizing. I’ll be outed for sure, probably completely by accident. Think, Harry, think. I should finish mapping out the cavern, see if there’s anything else down here to see, and then I should finish mapping the dungeons. Lunch will be finishing soon. I should probably add a second password to obscure the map of this place, just in case the map ever falls into someone else’s hands as well.” Harry nodded to himself and exited the chamber, calmer now that he had a plan. He explored the remaining tunnels and found they mostly looped back on one another, though at the end of one there was another snake-covered door.

“Probably leads out to the forest.” Harry realized. “The first edition book did say there was rumored to be a monster down here—though the Chamber was already believed to be a myth by the time the book came out, as no one ever found it. It doesn’t look like it was intended to be used to ‘cleanse the school’ though—these looping tunnels make it look as though it were intended to be contained here at the bottom of the mountain, though it could go to the forest to hunt—it would probably have to be let out to do so though. Depending how deep in the forest that door is, even being let free it likely would never have come in contact with anyone from the school unintentionally.”

He followed one last winding passageway and found it came to an end against another wall; however, high overhead, someone had cut a hole into a pipe, one that likely led up into the castle.

“What kind of idiot did that? If there was a monster down here…someone gave it access to the castle that it wasn’t ever supposed to have. There wasn’t anything about that in any of the copies of Hogwarts: A history though.”

He looked around on the ground, and prodded at the muck and animal bones underfoot. It took a while, but he did in fact find a perfect, circular piece of metal—the missing piece of the pipe. Harry cleaned it off, and considered the muck underfoot while he thought about that. “This wasn’t done very long ago, in terms of the castle’s history. Someone in recent memory found this chamber and did this.” He realized. It was a mystery, and one he intended to solve. Why did no one know that the Chamber of Secrets had been found?

He tapped the piece of metal in his hand and said ‘reparo’ very firmly. The metal flew out of his hand and fitted itself back to the pipe and merged seamlessly with the rest of the pipe. He cast an ‘unbreakable’ charm on the pipe as well, and then turned to go find the ‘come and go room’ entrance so he could get away from there.

His hands, shoes, and the bottom of his pants were dotted with muck, so he gave himself a good once-over with cleaning charms before stepping back through the doorway.

“I’ll have to thank Hermione for being such a nuisance. I never would have found this place if not for her.”

Once back in the ‘come and go room’, he password protected the map of the Chamber of Secrets and the surrounding caverns. He tried remembering the feel of his magic rising, and the
otherworldly sounds and hissing that had come from his mouth when he opened the Chamber. He pictured the doors with their writhing snakes and could feel it after a couple of tries. He tapped the map firmly with his wand.

“Set password: Show me Harry’s secret” he hissed. “There. Now the only way that map can be found if it falls into someone else’s hands is if they’re a parslemouth as well. So long as I keep it a secret that I am, even if they are, they probably won’t be looking for such a thing.”

Considering the possibility of the map falling into someone else’s hands raised another worry.

“It would be bad enough to have the map of the castle do that…it would be catastrophic if the location of all the come and go rooms did. I’ll separately password protect those, and the secret tunnels as well as the map itself. That way, the only way someone other than me will get the full benefit of my work is if they uncover all four passwords. If I put anti-theft charms on it, and designate it as a family heirloom on top of that, I shouldn’t have to worry. Yeah, that’s what I’ll do.”

In spite of his best efforts, it was still late afternoon by the time he finished mapping the dungeons —just before dinner, in fact. He was rather frustrated, because even though he’d accomplished quite a lot, he still had the ground, first, second, and third floor to map, as well as all the secret passages, and the level of the dungeons the classrooms were on. He hadn’t gotten into the Divination tower, the Astronomy tower, or the Headmaster’s tower with the map either. He hadn’t gone to the owlery, he didn’t know the location of any of the houses except Gryffindor, except in the most general terms, and he wanted to get the courtyards and grounds mapped as well. He’d need another whole day, possibly two or three, on his own to do that—and fat chance of shaking Hermione for that long. As it was, he was already dreading dinner, even though he was hungry, because he knew she was going to spend the whole time bitching at him for not being at lunch. He was half-tempted to skip dinner in the great hall as well, but if he did that, he knew people were going to come looking for him—of that, he had no doubt.

He decided to get started on the ground floor while waiting for the dinner bell to ring. While he was wandering around down there, he saw a gaggle of Hufflepuffs exit their common room. He knew he couldn’t go into their house, but he thought of another way he might be able to get a map of the inside—the same for the other houses. He’d have to find some way to hit a couple of the members of each house with a spell to make them plot for him, and link it to the map. The Marauders had done much the same to Pettigrew, which is how they ended up with such a complete map. Running around as a rat, he had found many of the hidden tunnels. If he did that, it wouldn’t matter if he couldn’t go in there himself; he could get the members of each house to do the work for him! He wondered if he dared try hitting the headmaster and the teachers with similar spells so that they’d map out their classrooms, offices and quarters for him?

“It couldn’t hurt. It’s doubtful they’d be looking for such a thing, or have anything in place to automatically remove such a thing. If they do, unless the automatic function is alarmed, or set to give them a readout, they’ll probably never know. If I can tag Hagrid and Sprout, they should do much of the grounds and the greenhouses for me. It’s perfect!” He resolved to do just that, as soon as he had a chance. He could concentrate on the public areas that he’d missed, and let everyone else fill in the blanks. If it all worked out alright, he should have a map even more complete than the one the Marauders made.

He managed to surreptitiously tag a half-dozen Hufflepuffs, both boys and girls, while heading in to dinner. Hermione actually helped, oddly enough. She started shrieking and waving her arms, demanding to know where he’d been, and why he hadn’t been at lunch. Everyone was so busy
looking at her, no one was looking at his hand. He kept his wand hidden in his sleeve, and did the spell, while allowing himself to look perplexed and offended by Hermione’s tirade. When he’d tagged everyone in reach, he cut her off.

“Would you bloody well shut up? It’s none of your business where I was, first off, and secondly I missed lunch because I was trying to get away from you. It’s not my fault you can’t take a hint.”

He left her there, spluttering in outrage, and went to take his seat. He had the presence of mind to tag some of the older Gryffindors while walking down the aisle. No sense leaving his own house blank in parts. In fact…

He tagged Hermione when she sat down across from him, from under the table.

“What do you mean you were trying to get away from me?” Hermione growled, sounding outraged and offended.

“A geez, are you two fighting again? Don’t you ever give it a rest, Hermione?” Dean sighed.

“Yeah, seriously. A bloke needs to breathe once in a while.” Seamus added, rolling his eyes.

Hermione began sputtering at the lack of support from their housemates.

“Where were you at lunch anyway?” Ron wondered.

“Hermione was having fits.” Harry admitted, rolling his eyes to show what he thought of that. “Like I told her, I was trying to get away from her for a bit. There I was, innocently exploring. I made the mistake of wandering through the library. I haven’t been in there yet, and she decides to drop what she’s doing and follow me out when I left. She was all weighed down with books and starts complaining about how heavy they are, and let’s go to the common room. I told her I was busy, and she should just go if it was that much bother, but she refused. Kept bitching at me the whole time too. She completely ruined the experience for me. The bell rang, and she decided to go drop her stuff off then. I figured she’d ruin my appetite, bitching all through lunch, so I skipped it.”

Harry explained.

Neville simply sighed glumly and poked at his food. He was still harboring a raging crush on the girl, and her obsession with Harry irked him something fierce—especially as Harry himself was so annoyed by it.

“You’re completely mental.” Ron told her, before turning back to Harry. Hermione began sputtering again.

“Why’d you ditch me earlier?” he wondered.

“You ditched me to go run off with Malfoy.” Harry corrected him. “It’s okay though. I had a snowball fight with some other kids. It was fun. How’d your game go, anyway?”

Ron glowered and stabbed his fork into a potato on his plate.

“Malfoy won, huh?”

“Probably cheated, the ruddy bastard. I’ll get him next time.”

“Next time?”

“Chess club. I joined. They were impressed, even though I lost. Go figure.”
“There can only be one winner. Someone has to lose. It means you played a good game though. Did you have fun?”

Ron shrugged noncommittally and mumbled something indistinct under his breath.

“You’re the only Gryffindor, huh?” Harry realized.

Ron grimaced and nodded, looking sour. Harry would have sympathized, but he thought Ron’s rampant prejudice against the other houses was rather silly. Well, he’d either get over it, or he’d miss out on playing a game he enjoyed against people who could challenge him. It was his choice.

“How was Herbology club, Nev?”

Neville perked up, and began a long, rambling story about repotting some rare South American plant that Professor Sprout was cultivating. Harry listened with half an ear, nodding and making ‘go on’ noises every so often, to cut off Ron beginning any rants about Malfoy or chess. Harry, being neither a Weasley nor a Malfoy, had no interest in their family feud, and didn’t want to get dragged into the middle of it. In fact, he was getting rather tired of Ron’s attempts to do just that. Ron eventually gave up, and took his Malfoy woes to Dean and Seamus, who were more willing to sympathize, and agree that Malfoy was a no-good, dirty bastard. Hermione was sulking and pushing her food around on her plate.

He liked his housemates, for the most part, but he had to admit there were times they became damned tiresome.

“Ha! Look at Weasley over there. He’s still suffering from his humiliating defeat at my hands. It was beautiful…”

“For Merlin’s sake, Draco, would you shut up already? You’ve been nattering on about that damned chess game all day.” Pansy huffed.

Draco gaped at her in astonishment and then pouted, hunching over his food so he could cast reproving glances her way.

Pansy rolled her eyes and shared a long-suffering sigh with Blaise and Theo, her best friends. They were all sick of hearing about the game—he’d been bragging about it for going on seven hours now.

“I can’t believe you two didn’t tell him to shut up long since.” Daphne told Crabbe and Goyle. “I think I’d have gone quite mad if I’d had to watch the game and then listen to him recount it move by move for hours afterward.”

“We weren’t there.” Crabbe spoke up.

“Yeah, he forgot all about us once Weasley agreed to run off to the chess club with him.” Goyle agreed.

“Weasley forgot all about Potter too. It’s okay though. We had fun without them.”

“You were hanging out with Potter all afternoon?” Pansy asked curiously.

“Oh, damn! My father’s going to kill me!” Draco realized. “I had a mission to complete.”

“We asked him about muggles.” Crabbe assured him. “You know, after you ran off and forgot.”
“Oh good! What did you find out?”

Crabbe and Goyle both opened their mouths, closed them, and then looked at each other. Their eyes widened, and then they both started laughing.

“Damn. He’s good, isn’t he?”
“He even told us before he started talking!”

“Uh, hello? The two of you might share a brain but the rest of us don’t. You’re going to have to speak out loud.” Draco grumbled at them.

Goyle opened his mouth to speak, but Draco held up a hand to stop him before he could do so.
“From the beginning, right after I left.”

They took turns recounting their conversation with Harry, his critique of Vince’s blunt fishing for information, and how he demonstrated the proper technique right afterwards.

“So you see, he did it to us, just the way he said it was supposed to be done. He never answered our question, found out a whole lot about pretty much everyone in Slytherin house, while we didn’t really learn anything about him—and we didn’t even notice until just now, even though he even told us what he was going to do before he did it.”

“He’s somebody to watch. He was right about everyone sorting themselves. We really did. Everybody did, except him.” Goyle laughed, sounding admiring.

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it. We all separated into groups, planning to do what he said we needed to do to get into the house we wanted. He stood off by himself laughing at the rest of us, and offering suggestions on how to do things better. He’s probably only in Gryffindor because the hat stuck him there so all the houses would be even.” Crabbe explained.

The others at the table exchanged glances, and then did a quick head count of all the first years.

“He’s right. The houses are all even.” Millicent asserted.

“Maybe we should ask him for lessons.” Crabbe mused.

“Lessons? What are you talking about?” Pansy sighed.

“Well, if he’s right, and we sorted ourselves, we might not actually have the qualities of Slytherin house. He does though, in spades. I think I’m going to do that, get lessons. Whether I’m really supposed to be here or not, I’m a Slytherin now. I’d like to be able to do it right.”

“You know, that’s a good idea. We should do that.” Goyle agreed.

The Slytherin first years all peered at Harry, who waved and smiled.

“He knows!” Pansy whispered, aghast. “Is he spying on us?”

“Yeah, he’s good.” Crabbe and Goyle laughed.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

A new home for the holidays.

As December rolled on, the teachers began weighing them down with loads of work, as if they were trying to cram as much knowledge as possible into their heads before the holidays that were quickly approaching.

Harry’s map was completed in fits and starts—he had to cancel the tags on some of the students he’d marked and tag others to complete the mapping of the various houses. He managed to tag most of the teachers, though he still hadn’t managed to tag Dumbledore. He always seemed to be aware someone was trying to do something to him. It was rather frustrating. He did get part of Dumbledore’s office anyway-McGonagall inadvertently did that much for him, when she went up to see the headmaster one day, but he only got the public area, not the rest of the tower.

There was a Hogsmeade weekend in December for the third years and above. Harry got an unexpected bonus from his tags—a map of Hogsmeade village, and the road leading down from the castle to it. He also got a good portion of the forest during the time that Hagrid was tagged—along with the likely location of many of Hagrid’s ‘pets’, given there were several spots in the forest he regularly visited. He also got a map of the ‘forbidden’ third floor corridor. Hagrid went up there regularly to see Fluffy, the three-headed dog that was being kept up there. Professor Snape and Professor Quirrel both wandered around up there a lot as well.

The second week of December, Professor McGonagall took the names of those who would be staying over the holiday.

“Mr. Potter, you’ll be going home?”

“Yep. I’d have signed up otherwise.”

“Oh…we had assumed…”

“Yes?”

“You’ll be returning to your aunt’s house?”

“Professor? Why all the questions? You didn’t do this to anyone else.”

“Well, your plans are of special concern”

“Really? To who? I’m a student just like any other, professor. I’d thank you to remember that.”

McGonagall got flustered and left soon after that. She didn’t seem to notice that he never answered her question.
As the end of term approached, they were piled with more and more homework, and everyone went into a frenzy of studying as the end of term exams approached. Hermione, especially, was quite beside herself, and fretting herself sick worrying about them.

On the Friday before term ended, the great hall was decorated with twelve Christmas trees. Hagrid had gone pretty deep into the forest to find them. Harry surreptitiously removed the tag from him while he was hauling one of the trees in. He thought he’d gotten enough of the area surrounding Hogwarts to make anyone happy.

Spirits were high—end of term exams were over, the weekend was approaching, and they’d all be leaving for Christmas on Monday.

At dinner that evening, they found they had even more to celebrate than simply the upcoming holidays. A letter arrived from Mr. Lovegood to update them on the sales of their book. He had sold three hundred so far after the first ad. A second issue of the Quibbler had gone out the week before, and he expected a lot of last-minute sales for Christmas, especially as he’d printed up a bulk order which he had sold to Flourish and Blotts to sell for them.

“What’s with all of you?”

“We wrote a book, the eight of us, and people have actually been buying it!” Seamus crowed.

“You wrote a book?”

“Yeah, you all saw us doing it in the common room. We got the guy who runs the Quibbler to print it for us and sell it. Sales at the moment are three hundred and counting!” Ron gushed, already imagining what he’d do with all the money he’d eventually make…once Mr. Lovegood got his share, and the rest was divided eight ways.

When they all got back to the common room that evening, Harry realized something.

“Everyone knows about the book now, but no one here at school who we used as characters realizes they’re in the book. We should probably warn them.”

“What, send them a note or something?”

“Actually, we could send everyone who’s a character a picture of themselves as their character, along with an explanation.”

“We should probably do that now so we can have them all sent out before Christmas.” Dean realized.

“We shouldn’t just put it on a plain piece of parchment, we should try to make it nice—more like an actual present than a last minute thing we’re sending out.”

“We should send a card with each one, signed by all of us.”

“There’s eight of us. We can split up and some of us start making cards, while the remainder finish the pictures.”

“I can do cards. I’ve helped gran do stuff like that before.” Neville volunteered.

“Same here, mum does stuff like that to send to the relatives sometimes.” Ron agreed.
“Show me what sort of stuff to do, I’ll help.” Harry offered.

“Me too. I’ve never made cards with magic before.” Hermione volunteered as well.

“Looks like it’s the four of us on picture duty then.” Seamus announced to Lavender, Parvati and Dean.

“Maybe we should make nice leather bookmarks or something. It will be more of a present, they’ll get to see their character, and it sort of works as a hint for them to go buy the book at the same time.” Parvati suggested.

“Yeah, I like it. Let’s do that.” Dean agreed.

“You’ve definitely got a future in marketing.” Harry added, chuckling.

By the time Monday finally rolled around, they were all eager to get home. They were in the great hall, fortifying themselves for the long train ride, when they began to notice a roaring sound approaching the castle. One by one, the students began quieting down as they noticed. It sounded like a motor—something that was never heard in the vicinity of Hogwarts. Suddenly, Hannah Abbot gasped and pointed at the ceiling.

“Look! It’s a man! He’s on some sort of flying contraption!”

Everyone in the hall gasped, as it looked like the man on the flying motorcycle was going to land in their midst. Fred and George ran to one of the windows and peered upwards and then started laughing and pointing.

“He’s out there! Incoming!”

A big smile broke out across Harry’s face and he started laughing, as he jumped from his seat and went running for the front door. “Sirius!”

Harry’s yearmates, and some of the other students, upon hearing Harry’s shout, scrambled from their own seats and went pelting after him. Harry threw open the front doors and went charging towards Sirius’, where he’d just landed the flying motorcycle, and was met halfway. Sirius grabbed him and swung him in a circle, laughing as well, when they met.

“Go get your trunk, kiddo, and we’ll blow this popsicle stand!”

“It’s in my pouch. We can leave right now.”

“Excellent. Hop in the sidecar there.”

Harry ran to do just that, digging out his cloak, scarf, gloves and hat as he did so, while Sirius got the motorcycle roaring again. He made a wide turn and roared past the curious students, who were spilling out of the great hall, laughing and cheering, and then lifted them into the air, while gunning the engine.

“SEE YOU NEXT YEAR!” Harry shouted down to them.
As they pulled out into the distance, he could see McGonagall, who looked exasperated but amused, Flitwick and Sprout, who were clapping and cheering along with the students—and Professors Snape, Quirrel and Dumbledore, who all looked like they’d just swallowed a lemon.

“Hold on!” Sirius yelled. The motorcycle went ‘pop’ and they disappeared from view.

When Harry and Sirius reappeared, they were in a completely different place. Thanks to his experience with the Knight Bus, their trip wasn’t as disorienting as it might have been—being snug in the side car, rather than on a chair that was tumbling about the bus certainly helped as well. Harry glanced down at the quiet hamlet sprawling beneath them,

“Where are we? Do you live here?” he asked instead.

“This is Godric’s Hollow. You were born here, as was your father, and his father, and his father before him.” Sirius answered. He brought the motorcycle in for a landing in the trees beyond the edge of town, and rode the rest of the way in on the ground, pulling it in to a stop behind one of the cottages on the edge of town—Harry’s parent’s house, to be exact. When the bike had come to a stop and been turned off, Sirius turned to Harry to explain.

“Andi told me you had no idea where you’d lived before. I thought you might like to see your parents before we head back to my place.”

A warm feeling welled up in Harry’s chest, that Sirius would be thoughtful enough to do something like this for him, even though it must have brought a lot of painful memories to the fore.

“Thanks, Sirius”.

Sirius just gave a jerky nod in response. It was obvious he didn’t really want to be there, but he was still willing to for Harry’s sake. It meant a lot to him, more than he probably realized.

While they were looking at the house, and Sirius was telling him the little he remembered of that night

“Everything happened so fast. I realized something was wrong when I couldn’t find that traitorous rat…I was actually worried about him. I was afraid he’d gotten found or captured or something…I came right over…Hagrid was here…must have been for a little while already…he had them laid out right there”

Sirius stared at the spot indicated as though he were seeing the events of that night, and not the present moment.

“He had you in his pocket while he was digging, said he found you on top of the rubble, howling up a storm. I gave him my motorcycle when he wouldn’t hand you over, so he could travel safely to wherever he was going. He wouldn’t say, except that Dumbledore said and it was safe…”

While Sirius talked, he could almost see the scene in front of him, just as he described it, and was left torn between feeling rather lost—the damage, and Sirius’ heartfelt recitation brought the impact of it home in a way that simply looking at the building and knowing it was the sight of a tragedy really didn’t—and fuming at Dumbledore’s presumption, and how gallingly he used simple, trusting Hagrid to commit crimes for him.
What Sirius described was kidnapping plain and simple—even if he had good intentions, he had no right to simply waltz in and make those decisions, not when his parents had already designated a guardian for him.

If Hagrid had handed him over that night, Sirius might never have ended up in prison like he did—worrying over his welfare might have put the brakes on his actions just enough to allow him to clear himself before that scene in the street ever happened.

That he was allowed to get away with such things, even though most thought of him not as one of the ruling elite, but as a ‘simple headmaster’ was the most galling thing of all. What was wrong with wizards, anyway? If the principal of the local school in Surrey had tried pulling something like that, while citing being the principal as all the authority he needed, he would have been tarred, feathered and locked up, not to mention probably forced to get an evaluation to determine whether he was a loony or not! It was absurd!

Even if the principal was a local celebrity, it wouldn’t have made any difference—people were as quick to turn on celebrities as they were to celebrate them. One only had to glance through the papers or watch the telly for a few days to see that.

“Well, hello! We don’t usually get visitors this time of year…”

Harry stiffened and turned to try to signal Madame Bagshot with his eyes to remember their deal—he’d never been here before. He caught her eye just in time. He saw her about to greet him by name, and then visibly change what she was going to say.

“Harry, little Harry, is that you?” she asked instead, her voice just the tiniest bit dry.

“I’m Harry, do I know you, ma’am?”

From there, their conversation was rather identical to the last conversation they’d had—the only real difference being that she also recognized Sirius as being the ‘wild reprobate in the leather jacket who was always gadding about on that muggle contraption’ to which Sirius had cheerfully agreed that he’d often been told he was unforgettable.

She invited them in, and Sirius looked likely to decline, so Harry surreptitiously hit him with a charm he’d learned just in case this very situation occurred. He kept Bathilda—who saw him sneakily hit him with the charm—talking, asking her questions about how she knew his parents, how she knew it was him, etc. to give the charm time to work.

Sirius began to squirm the longer they talked, as he was suddenly in need of a bathroom. He interrupted to agree that, yes, it was much too cold outside to stand around like they were, and by the way, could he use her bathroom?

Bathilda took it all in stride, only the cheerful twinkling of her eyes giving away her amusement. When they were inside, and Sirius had gone to the bathroom, Harry slipped her the shrunken trunk she’d given him before, winked, and held a finger over his lips for silence. She shook her head with a grin, and conjured some tea and scones for them to share.

She suddenly chuckled. “Ah, you’re so much like your father.”

When Sirius returned some time later, he found Harry and Bathilda digging through a trunk.

“Sirius, look! My parents left some stuff with her for me. Gosh, it’s lucky we stopped by, isn’t it?”
They stuck around for a while, drinking tea, and telling Harry stories of his parents, and his father growing up, as well as anecdotes about different things they found in the trunk. After the promised long visit, Sirius excused them so they could go pay their respects at Harry’s parents’ graves.

As they were about to go, something niggled at Harry and he turned back to her before leaving.

“Just out of curiosity…why were you the only one at my first birthday?”

“Well, there was a war on” Sirius reminded him.

“But I know at least one set of order members had a baby as well—Neville. What’s more, our birthdays are only a day apart. It just seemed strange, I guess. I know from pictures that Dudley’s first birthday was a big to-do. Most of my friends first birthdays were. It’s not important, I guess. I just wondered.”

He caught an odd look on Bagshot’s face and his gaze sharpened on her. “Madame Bagshot?” he asked.

She hesitated and eyed Sirius contemplatively for a long moment.

“Whatever it is, I prefer knowledge to ignorance.” Harry prodded.

His words seemed to decide her, because she nodded, and sighed. “I’ve lived in Godric’s Hollow a long time. I’ve known eight generations of Potters, and many of their cousins as well. It’s something of a well-kept secret, that I’m mostly only privy to because of the long association, and having known those earliest Potters while they were young enough that they didn’t know to hide it.”

Harry’s mind raced, wondering, but then the answer came to him. “Parselmouth.”

“Ah, I’d wondered if you’d actually discovered that. I didn’t want to shock you.”

“Was it just my father, or was it both of them? I’d kind of wondered.”

“They both were. It had skipped six generations on James’ side, so it came as something of an unpleasant surprise to his parents, but Charlus at least knew it was a possibility. The Potters descend from the Peverells, as you may know; what isn’t generally remembered in these times is that the gift of parselmouth ran in their line. It was how they ended up marrying into the Slytherin line, as both sides wanted to preserve the gift. James was quite magical, and inherited the parselmouth gift, as well as a slightly larger than usual dose of goblin”

“Which is why he, like I, have to wear glasses; Griphook told me that much. He either didn’t know or didn’t think to mention the rest of it. I told him I had my mother’s eyes, and he thought maybe she had some goblin in her too.”

“Griphook said muggleborns are just throwbacks to when the line had magic. I had kind of
wondered if they might technically be more closely related, genetically speaking, to whoever the last wizard or witch in the line was, than to their immediate muggle kin, if they end up with not only magic, but gifts or conditions that speak of magical creatures as well. It’s an interesting line of inquiry, I think. In any case, why would that automatically give me a very small birthday?”

“Something that isn’t generally known is that when parselmouths are babies, they don’t cry, they hiss. For some reason, they tend to lapse into it fairly regularly, usually when they’re frustrated or upset. I’d always wondered if it was just because a baby’s animal instincts are just closer to the surface…but in any case, they didn’t want a lot of people around until you’d become verbal in human language. They didn’t want it getting out, and ruining your life, not to mention theirs. So, I ended up being the only guest. The Order, from what I understood, was on the whole rather unforgiving towards anyone or anything that seemed tainted by dark wizardry. They didn’t want the members looking at you with distrust, and didn’t want it dogging your footsteps for the rest of your life.”

Sirius sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

“Sadly, they were absolutely right to do so. Hagrid wouldn’t have cared a whit, neither would Remus. McGonagall would have striven to remain impartial, but it still would have colored her view of you. Some of the others...yeah. It was for the best, really. You shouldn’t bandy it around, unless you’re absolutely sure the person is trustworthy. With You-know-who having been one, and considering your connection to him already...yeah. It would probably be a mess, and there’s no telling whether the public would ever forgive you for it. If there are other hidden parselmouths out there, chances are they’d be the most vocal and the most unforgiving about it. I loved James like a brother, but he was pretty inflexible about dark wizards, and I think it was most due to his ‘gift’—which he never really saw as such. He always considered it something of a curse, really. In a way, that makes it all the more bizarre that he ended up with Lily, if she was actually one as well.”

“Like calls to like. If she was both a parselmouth, and had a bit of goblin in her from some long ago ancestor, she must have been nearly irresistible to the boy, and vice versa. Nowadays, it isn’t considered politically correct to say so, but there’s a reason wizards tend to marry their cousins, and it’s not all prejudice. Like calls to like.”

“Even without knowing that, I never quite got why anyone would preferentially marry a muggle. It seems rather mad.” Harry offered.

Harry glanced over and found Sirius looking uncomfortable, and truthfully a bit horrified as well. “You sound like the blood purists.”

“Oh please.” Harry scoffed. “I don’t think muggleborns have dirty blood, and I don’t think muggles should be killed because they don’t have magic. Individually a witch or wizard has the advantage, but as a society muggles have the advantage. They can’t do everything we do with magic with science, but they’re getting closer every generation. Magical society, what little I’ve seen of it, seems to be all about tradition, and it changes very slowly. Muggle society is all about innovation, and it changes very quickly. They went from no real technology to putting a man on the moon in roughly a hundred and fifty years. They are certainly our equals, but they’re very dangerous to our society and our people…and the whole planet. Their technology is increasing in complexity at an exponential rate, and so are their numbers. Not only are they snatching up all the space and the available resources, they’re destroying a lot of what’s left with their technology because a lot of it has very harmful side effects. They’re decimating the forests, poisoning the air, the water, the land, wiping out non-magical species all over the world in droves—they actually have a list of endangered species because they’re destroying so many of them. Toxic build up from
their technology is also altering the global climate, and they think it will eventually become bad enough that the earth will be rendered unlivable for everyone—not for a good many years, maybe even generations, but it will get to that point eventually. I think squandering our numbers in wars about something as meaningless as blood purity is a fool’s errand. We’d be better served as a society if we began moving to secure as many available resources as we can before the muggles use them all up, and start working to reduce some of the damage they’re doing before their heedless race towards progress ends up killing us all.”

Harry ended his rant, blinked and looked a bit sheepish.

“Ah, sorry about that. I hadn’t realized I felt so strongly about the issue.”

Sirius was looking him a bit oddly when he finished.

“You sound like your mother. She used to rant like that when you got her started, didn’t she?” he asked, glancing at Bathilda. He found that Bathilda was also looking at Harry oddly.

“Actually, I was thinking he sounded like early spokesmen for the Knights of Walpurgis. A lot of what you just said was the sort of thing they used to preach.”

“Knights of Walpurgis? Who are they?” Harry wondered.

“They’re the group the Death Eaters formed out of” Bathilda sighed.

“Ah, the militant extremist branch, were they?”

“Pretty much. The only reason they didn’t have even more widespread support than they did is because there was a dispute about how to go about things. They wanted to break the power of the Ministry and go back to the old Warlocks council. The Ministry was originally formed to be a subordinate body to the council, and their only mission was to insure secrecy. One day, they looked around and realized the Ministry had usurped all their power and made our society subordinate to the muggle government. They wanted that undone. That’s why it always bugged me that so many people were surprised by the folks that came out from under the masks—they were all the people who would have been part of the Warlocks council had it been reinstituted. The reason the muggleborn ended up becoming such a sticking point is because they were uniformly against the disbanding of the Ministry. With the Ministry in charge they have a chance to rise to high levels of power, and in theory can one day be Minister of Magic. The Warlocks council would be mostly purebloods, some half-bloods, and the muggleborn would once again be relegated to subordinate positions as keepers of secrecy, unless they were lucky enough to marry well, or win patronage from someone well connected.”

Harry nodded. “I actually figured it was probably something like that. It’s easier to shout ‘they’ve got dirty blood’ or ‘they’re stealing magic’ than ‘they want high positions in government and elsewhere’. Regardless of what sort of rhetoric is bandied about, wars always come down to economics, and the division of power and resources, in the end. “They steal magic and are slowly destroying us” or “they’re monsters who want us all dead” just make better emotional hooks to reel the masses in than “we want to keep all the money and power for ourselves”, which is what the leaders of both sides were actually saying.”

Bathilda smiled at him approvingly. “You have the makings of a fine historian, my boy.”

“I did a bit of reading on muggle wars. I made friends with some old guys who were soldiers in muggle World War II.”
“We should be going. It’s was nice visiting with you, Madame Bagshot. We should do this again some time.” Sirius interjected.

Sirius had been rather quiet through most of their discussion about the Death Eaters, Harry noted. He was still looking thoughtful, and bit unhappy as well.

“Is something wrong?” Harry wondered.

Sirius slowed as they approached the town square, bringing them to a halt beneath the statue of Harry and his parents.

“All that stuff you both were saying back there. I think I’ve just gotten an inkling of why my family was so furious that I not only ended up in Gryffindor, but that I joined Dumbledore’s side of the war. We’re the Ancient and Noble house of Black. If what my grandfather said was true, he and others of his generation were part of the Knights of Walpurgis, and were working towards a moderate movement—muggleborns continue to be part of society, but are treated like the immigrants they are, separation of the muggle and magical governments and return to the rule of the noble families and the Warlocks Council, and aggressive movement towards getting ourselves some more elbow room in this world we all share. They wanted large all-magical communities, and magical centers like the Ministry and the Hospital moved to where there were no muggles about. My family, under such a plan, would have been part of the ruling elite, as we were in ages past—your family as well. Instead we were both fighting to essentially keep Dumbledore and the Ministry in power, weren’t we? That’s not why we joined, of course. We wanted to stop the mad nutters that were running amok, blowing stuff up, and killing and torturing people, and wanted people like your mum dead for simply existing.”

“And that’s what you were doing. Things like war are a lot more complicated than they look on the surface, and even the majority of the people involved in the actual conflict are usually unaware of all the layers. Each individual knows only a small part—and they’re usually not fighting for power or glory, they’re fighting for values they believe in, and what they feel is right. You have to go down pretty deep to find the people directing things and maneuvering things in a certain way. Usually the puppet masters, and the extremists on both sides that are really making the messes are a very small group of people in comparison to the actual numbers involved.”

Sirius shook himself out of his contemplations and laughed a bit bitterly.

“I’m a simple man, with simple wants and simple values. All this kind of sneaky maneuvering and game playing with people’s lives is beyond me. I’m happier believing I was fighting for a good cause and for good reasons. Even the idea that any of that mess was a small group of people playing god so they could have cushy jobs at the Ministry, or cushy jobs on the Warlocks council… So many of the people I grew up with are dead, or maimed, or in the long-term care ward, and I lost a good portion of my youth to the war and its aftermath. If it was just someone playing games…”

“At the root, it probably was. Sadly, humans excel at being repugnant when they really put their minds to it. Never forget that you actually were protecting the world from a group of nutters who were running amok, killing people and torturing them. Regardless of who was behind it at the deepest levels, that part is still true. Be happy that there were so few casualties.”

“FEW?” Sirius growled.

“Yes, few. World War II among the muggles claimed the lives of an estimated sixty-two to seventy-eight million people.”
“Million?” Sirius muttered. He couldn’t even wrap his mind around a number like that. Just how many muggles were there if 78 million could die and there were still so many?

“More muggles die in a year of violent crime just in London, much less the whole of Great Britain, than died in the whole of the wizard war. There are places in the world where violent crime of the sort our world experienced in that time are just a fact of life—you could be murdered, raped, kidnapped, tortured, or just made to disappear. Britain has more violent crime than many places, but we’re actually a lot safer overall than many parts of the world. That being said, there are neighborhoods that are dangerous enough that it really is just a fact of life that you might never come home from work one day because you cross paths with the wrong person. Folks in places like that would scoff at how afraid everyone still is over what was, in most terms, a very minor conflict, that ended over a decade ago.”

Sirius slumped, his face mournful and confused. It was obviously difficult to have a child dismiss the war that destroyed his life as a ‘minor conflict with few casualties’. In fact, Harry, seeing the effect his words were having on the man, decided to get them moving so he wouldn’t dwell on things too much.

“So…a statue, huh? It’s kind of weird. It also makes me rather irritated, truth to tell. Each time I’m confronted with more evidence that the whole world seems to know so much more about my own life than I do…”

Sirius tried to shake off his funk with an effort of will. He followed Harry’s gaze up to the statue of his friends and Harry forever frozen in time as they were a decade previously. “I guess that would be pretty darned irritating.” He agreed with a sigh. “Come on. Let’s pay our respects. I’d like to get out of this town, the sooner the better.”

“Can we see my parents actual house before we leave?”

“Huh?”

“My parents house, the real one. I know people are living in it but…”

Sirius frowned, looking confused for a moment. “That’s right, isn’t it? They moved so it wouldn’t be so obvious… My memory is full of holes like a Swiss cheese these days. I might have kept my sanity, but I can’t really say I kept my mind, I’m sad to say. Hell, I lived with your dad and grandparents for a summer before my last year of school, and I used to visit them there all the time… They were only in that cursed house for a week, but everyone always refers to it as the “Potter house”. I can’t believe I’d forgotten that. Sure, we can swing by before we leave.”

They headed for the graveyard behind the church that was nearby, and Sirius led them through to the back corner where his parents graves were. They came to a stop above James and Lily’s graves.

“I brought him, just like I promised I would, so no scolding me when next I see you, alright?” Sirius joked.

His face looked years older as he gazed down at the gravestones, and Harry felt sort of inadequate in the face of his obvious grief—grief for people he’d actually known, loved and remembered. Harry began to really feel, in a way he never had before, that he’d been robbed of something precious because he wasn’t able to feel the same sort of terrible pain that Sirius did—he had no memories of them at all, and even knowing that they were his parents, and that their bodies lay beneath his feet in the dirt, it was still in many ways academic to him.
“I’ll just leave all of you alone for a bit, shall I?”

Sirius squeezed his shoulder briefly and wandered off deeper into the cemetery.

Harry didn’t really know what to do, so he sat down and told them about his first term at Hogwarts—the friends he’d made, the adventures he’d had, the book he and his yearmates had written, the new Marauder’s Map that he’d made… he talked until he was hoarse, and then gradually fell silent. Sirius reappeared at his side, and they made their way from the graveyard.

He took them out a different gate and led them down a winding lane that was overshadowed by a dense wood to either side. As they walked, the lane wound upward, until they reached the rolling hills that sheltered the Hollow at one end. Eventually, they came to what Harry realized was probably the apex of the ‘triangle’ of the Hollow.

At the end of the lane they came upon a stone wall, with a gate, and beyond it could be seen a tall keep. In the center of the gate was the same symbol Harry had seen on several of the Peverell graves in the yard.

“It’s a medieval keep.”

“Your family has been around for a long time. There’s actually quite a few families living in places like this. Your buddy Lovegood is, over in Ottery St. Catchpole.”

“Should we go say hello to the people living here?” Harry wondered.

“Well, as you are technically their landlord, I suppose it would only be polite.”

Harry reached up to push open the gate, and it slid open at his touch—strangely reminiscent of the doors on the Chamber of Secrets, without all the snakes, actually.

“Well. That’s kind of neat.”

“It recognizes you as the proper owner. The wards are still functioning then. That’s good to know. It used to be you learned how to set up wards at Hogwarts. These days, apparently you need to pay the Ministry to set them up for you. You’ll get fined, and have a load of hassle if you’re found trying to do it on your own, without permission. The Ministry offered the assistance of ward masters to set up my new house. They didn’t seem best pleased when I told them it wasn’t needed, as my family’s home already had every protection known to wizarding kind on it. They tried to convince me that they really should be allowed in to take a look at things. I told them no, and they can’t really get in without my say so unless they take down the wards. They weren’t happy, but they had to accept it, as the public probably wouldn’t look kindly on them smashing down my wards so soon after I was released from unlawful imprisonment. Ruddy bastards.”

“I’ll say. If you read up on the war, something that’s repeatedly mentioned about what made the death eaters so scary is that families were found murdered, with the wards intact until after they were dead, doors locked and whatnot. It sounds like the Ministry is building back doors into ward schemes they set up so they can get in, and the death eaters took advantage of that fact. I’ll bet you anything they were so hot to get in your house because it doesn’t have a back door set up. I’m going to go over this place with a fine-toothed comb before I ever move back in. I have no idea whether anyone has been allowed in to mess with the wards since my parent’s deaths.”

Sirius went a bit grey at the implications and rubbed a hand over his face.

“Harry? Do me a favor and save any further bombshells for another time, yeah? I’m coming over
all queasy from all the hits my worldview is taking.”

There was a wide walkway leading up to the front door which was large, and looked to be made of dark green stone, with a doorknocker made in the shape of the Peverell symbol—a triangle containing a circle, with the line that bisected it being the striking plate. Harry took in the details of the place as they approached, and thought it looked like a place he’d enjoy living in, however odd it seemed to live in a keep, after growing up in the very-muggle Dursley house.

Harry was struck by the welcoming atmosphere of the place—it felt like a metaphorical hug, much like going to Hogwarts did. He’d certainly never experienced such a feeling in all the time he’d lived with the Dursleys. Other than the welcoming feeling, there was also the beauty of the place itself, with its broad lawn and yard, and the woods sheltering it from view beyond the wall—a child would have grown up happy in a place like this, free to roam and play, or even fly if the urge took them. Between the distance of the house from the rest of those in the village, and the woods, one wouldn’t even have to worry overmuch about anyone seeing anything they shouldn’t.

The bottom of the keep itself was a wide, squat tower, with a second tower connected to it at the back which was taller and thinner. One could probably get a good view of the surrounding area from the top, he thought.

They reached the front door, and Sirius rapped the knocker three times. A few moments passed, and then the door opened, and Harry saw a man that looked vaguely familiar. He wasn’t able to place him until his wife joined him at the door, asking who it was. She had a familiar head of bushy, brown hair.

“Dr. Granger? Dr. Granger?”

“Oh! Harry, right? Hello, what brings you here?”

“Hermione…gods, we didn’t get the date wrong, did we?” Mrs. Granger interjected, sounding a bit panicked.

“Oh, no!” Harry was quick to reassure her “My godfather picked me up early. She was still at school, last I saw her. She should be on the train right now.”

“Thank goodness!”

“How long have you both lived here?”

“Didn’t your uncle…oh, that’s right. You left with Augusta and her grandson. It must have slipped his mind.”

“Luv, don’t leave them standing on the doorstep” Mrs. Granger scolded. “Please come in. Pardon the mess, but we still haven’t quite finished moving in all the way. We should probably get on that, it’s been a couple of months now.”

After they were all seated, and the usual pleasantries gotten out of the way, Harry was finally able to get some of his questions answered.

“We expressed some of our worries about what we were going to tell people, once Hermione went off to school, since we weren’t really able to answer questions, or go into any sort of details. Your uncle suggested a fresh start, if we could manage it. He told us about this house, and the fact that it
was a mixed village. We sold our practice in London and moved out here in the beginning of
November. There’s a smaller population to draw from, but we seem to be the only dentists in these
parts, so we’re confident we can build up our practice again, given time. This place really was a
gossend in a lot of ways.”

“What happened to the people who used to live here?”

“They moved to Australia, or something. Your uncle didn’t really know many of the details, just
that they were leaving.”

“Oh. I had no idea. In fact, I only learned that this place was still standing a short time ago. I had
thought the house on the edge of town, that blew up, was my parents house. I didn’t realize their
actual house was still standing or being rented out.”

“You uncle was taking care of things for you, I take it?”

“Yeah.” Harry replied, his voice just a bit curt. It must have come through, more than he’d
intended, because he saw the Grangers exchange a speaking look, though they said no more on the
subject.

Strangely, it cheered him up—there was actual hope that Hermione could learn to be polite and
circumspect someday. He could only hope. He made a mental note to look into things with
Gringott’s, to see if his uncle was trying to pull another fast one, and keep leeching money off of
him. He would regret it if he was.

Mr. Granger changed the subject, and asked questions about the past term at Hogwarts. They spent
a couple of hours with them, answering their questions, regaling them with tales of their respective
Hogwarts adventures, and telling the tale of how a group of eleven-year-old schoolchildren became
published authors.

Harry tried to subtly insert anecdotes that highlighted some of Hermione’s more annoying
behavior. It seemed a longshot, but maybe her parents could do something to curb the worst of it.

It was mid-afternoon by the time they finally arrived in London, at no.12 Grimmauld Place, the
house Sirius had grown up in, and was once again residing in due to his own house being seized
and sold off by the Ministry when he was arrested.

Harry was rather bemused when he got a look at it—it was rather startlingly out of place with the
rest of the neighborhood, which consisted of Georgian style terraced homes. No. 12 was a Gothic
mansion that seemed to crouch broodingly over the muggle residences that surrounded it on all
sides.

“They can’t see it” Sirius explained, correctly interpreting Harry’s look. My family has been in this
spot for seven hundred years. All these” he indicated the rest of the neighborhood with a
dismissive wave of his hand “didn’t get built up till about two hundred years ago or so. We own a
good portion of the land around here. All these muggles are actually paying us rent, though they
don’t realize it. My family was rather incensed when they were told they had to give up some of
their land because muggles were encroaching, but they turned it to their advantage, however much
they resented having to do so. There used to be a lot of empty land around the house apparently,
back in the day, and a few dozen wizard families. Most of the wizard families are gone, and all
that’s left is the muggles, living on our land and making it so we can’t have magical gatherings
hereabouts anymore. London town just kept expanding until we were completely engulfed. I didn’t
really know all that when I was younger. I just thought they were mad, hateful people who wanted
to drive away muggles who had as much right to be here as we did, if not more.” Sirius admitted,
sighing. “However, now that I know that we could have had space, and been able to fly and play
quidditch, or had big garden parties and rowdy celebrations if not for them, I begin to understand
some of their frustration. They didn’t want to give this place up, after it had been in the family for so long, and refused to be driven away by muggles who had sprung up like weeds all around them, and so they got trapped here.”

Harry looked around the neighborhood, and saw there were a few empty houses on the street.

“If these are all yours, you can do with them what you want, can’t you? Why don’t you ward up the empties and advertise for wizard families to move in? Although, maybe word of mouth would be better… it sounds like there’s a organized support for the mugglification of what were once wizard areas. There has to be young couples starting families who would be eager to move to a place that, over time, might become wizarding again. When enough of the places around here are magicked up, the remaining muggle families will probably start moving out, and you could in theory have a completely wizarding neighborhood again at some point. It’s worth looking into.”

“It seems a much more sensible plan than starting a war to drive them off.” Sirius admitted, looking at the neighborhood with new eyes. Harry could see the possibilities unfolding in Sirius’ head, and so left things at that. Sirius would either run with the idea, or he wouldn’t—it was really up to him. It was a rather depressed looking area, so it would probably be a good idea, but it was still his call.

Sirius stowed the motorcycle off to the side of the stairs and led them to the front door. The steps leading up to it were worn with age, and the whole was overshadowed by a smallish porch. At the top of the steps stood a large black door, with an ornate snake doorknocker—the door looked like it had recently gotten a fresh coat of paint and the doorknocker was polished to a high silver gloss. There seemed to be no handle or any keyhole. Sirius drew his wand and tapped it against the door, which swung open at his touch.

They found themselves in an ornate ante chamber, with a high, vaulted ceiling. Stone flagstones underfoot echoed under their footsteps as they crossed into the next room, and cheerful sconces encased in red glass burned to either side. A small bit of the afternoon sunlight was let into the room through stained-glass windows set high in the wall to either side of the door and above it.

“These used to have green glass on them. I like red better.” Sirius explained as they passed through.

The front hall was next. Here too were high ceilings, and a large staircase that wound upwards out of sight. The floor here was marble, and there was a heavy black curtain covering the wall to one side, which flew open suddenly as they approached. Harry saw Sirius cringe and heard him sigh quietly as a life-sized portrait of an older woman, in a severe black dress with a lace cap upon her head was revealed. She was sharp-featured and had piercing grey eyes. She looked like someone you didn’t want to cross.

She peered at Harry intently for a long moment and then grunted. “That’s him, is it? He doesn’t look like much.” She declared flatly.

“Pardon me, Madame, I don’t believe we’ve ever been introduced. I’m Harry Potter. Delighted to make your acquaintance.” Harry offered, giving the portrait a slight bow. This was a woman cut of much the same cloth as Augusta Longbottom—he wasn’t going to let her abrupt manner get to him, it was likely nothing personal.

Sirius eyed him a bit strangely at his sudden lapse into courtly manners, but he rallied quickly. “Harry, please allow me to introduce my mother Walburga, Lady Black. Mother, my godson, Harry.”
“It’s good to see you suddenly remembering you have manners.” Walburga told Sirius rather pointedly. Sirius grit his teeth in annoyance as she sniffed a bit before turning back to Harry. “I agree, it is a pleasure to meet me.”

Harry bit his lip to keep from laughing as he heard Sirius’ teeth start grinding. He saw the portrait’s lips quirk in a tiny smile and he grinned back before the curtains closed abruptly.

“So…get your sense of humor from your mother, do you?” Harry asked.

Sirius gaped at him, utterly flummoxed by the accusation. “What?” he demanded.

“You go around telling people you’re unforgettable” Harry reminded him.

Sirius wiped a hand down his face and groaned, sounding like he was in pain. “Kiddo, you promised, no more screwing with my worldview today” he whimpered.

“Sorry.” Harry laughed.

Harry heard footsteps approaching from further in the house and turned to look. A graying man in a threadbare suit holding a book in one hand came out of one of the side rooms.

“I thought I heard voices. Hello, Harry. It’s nice to see you again.” He seemed to realize Harry had no idea who he was, because he smiled a bit forlornly. “You probably don’t remember me, but I was once a good friend of both of your parents.”

“Remus Lupin, I presume?”

“The very same.” The man agreed.

“You would be Moony then?”

“Yes” he laughed “It’s strange suddenly hearing that old name all the time again.”

Harry inspected the man, noting the fine tracery of scars that seemed to litter his face, the ample grey threading his hair, the worn clothes and exhausted air he seemed to carry with him, the faint trace of amber and gold in otherwise ordinary brown eyes, put it together with the man’s nickname and hazarded a guess.

“So, you’re a werewolf, then?”

Remus stiffened and looked at Sirius, who was staring at Harry looking rather gobsmacked.

“How? We were fifth years before we figured it out!”

“It wasn’t that hard.” Harry protested. He wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard faint snickering coming out from behind the closed curtain.

“To be fair, you and James were usually off sneaking around under his invisibility cloak, doing your own thing for most of that time.” Remus consoled him. Sirius relaxed, until he added “Of course, Lily figured it out long before that. I guess he comes by his brains honestly.”

“What? When?”

“First year. Well, that was what she claimed, fifth year when we became prefects. I suppose she could have been lying…though honestly, I can’t think of any reason why she would do that. In fact,
“you know what? I stand corrected… it seems you and James were just especially thick.”

Harry giggled, while Sirius sputtered in protest. He pointedly (and comically) ignored Remus’ amusement and turned to Harry.

“Let’s get you settled in. Lunch should be ready by then.”

As if on cue, Harry’s stomach grumbled. “Oh, good. I didn’t get to finish breakfast, and Madame Bagshot’s scones were quite a while ago.”

The two men led Harry upstairs.

“My room is on the third floor” Sirius explained. “Remus and Barty are on the second floor, and there are some guest rooms on the first floor. You’ll be in my old room on the fourth floor.”

“Okay.”

They reached the fourth floor landing. The first door had the words ‘Harry’s Room’ embossed upon it. Sirius and Remus positioned themselves to either side, and made Harry stand right in front of the door, which Sirius threw open with a flourish.

“AH! MY EYES!” Harry shrieked, backing away in horror.

Remus and Sirius started laughing, hard enough that they were falling down and wiping tears from their eyes.

“Oh, Merlin! You should have seen your face!” Sirius gasped.

“I wish I had a camera” Remus added.

“What did I ever do to you?!” Harry wailed.

The two men just laughed harder. It took a few minutes for them to calm down.

“Ah, that was perfect.” Sirius tittered as he drew his wand. He pointed it into the room, and made the horrifying, eye-searing combination of colors that had been in there disappear, revealing a room done in dark blue and maroon.

“I know you said green was your favorite color, but I just couldn’t do it. Sorry, kiddo.” Sirius explained.

“What was all that before?”

“Boggart color charm. It’s my own invention, actually. It makes you see combinations of colors that you find scary. Your reaction was all I could have asked for—people usually just wrinkle their noses or make faces.”

Harry shot them both a reproachful glance and went inside to take a look around. Remus and Sirius followed, still snickering. It was a beautiful room, with a large four-poster bed, dresser, desk and wardrobe done in dark wood. There was a thick carpet underfoot, and heavy velvet drapes at the windows. Harry looked over and saw a couple of shelves in the corner—small ones meant for holding knick knacks.

He peeked in the dresser, wardrobe and desk, and opened the door that led to the attached
bathroom. There was another door on the far side.

“What’s through there?”

“Oh, that used to be my little brother’s room.” Sirius explained. Harry wandered over and opened the door, taking a peek inside.

“Not to sound greedy or anything…but do you think I could have this room too?”

“What do you need two bedrooms for?”

“Not a bedroom. I was thinking of that trunk of stuff I have. The lowest compartment is full of bookshelves full of books. I suppose I could climb down in there whenever I want a book, but I was just thinking it might get to be a bit tiresome.”

“Oh, well, that’s doesn’t sound unreasonable, although there is a library here in the house already. No matter, we should be able to whip something together for you. Kreacher!”

“You is being calling Kreacher?”

Kreacher was a very old, wizened house elf in a loincloth made from a tea towel.

“Can you put this bedroom on the first floor and bring the first floor drawing room up here?” Sirius asked as he pulled Remus and Harry back into the bathroom. Kreacher shut the door, pulled it off the wall and disappeared with it, only to reappear a moment later with another door which he placed on the wall. Curious, Harry opened it and found a completely different room on the other side. “Cool.”

“We’ll let you get settled in. Kreacher can help you. Come find us when you’re done, alright?”

Harry hugged Sirius around his middle before he went. “Thanks for the room, it’s great.”

Sirius beamed at him and gave him a one-armed hug before ruffling his messy hair. “You’re entirely welcome, kiddo.”

After the two men left, Harry looked around at his new suite of rooms and then back at Kreacher.

“Could you put the drawing room first, then my bedroom, then the bathroom, do you think?”

Kreacher nodded and got to work rearranging everything.

“Do you have any empty rooms that can fit these?” Harry asked, pulling his parents’ trunk from his pouch and opening it to the last compartment where the books were.

Kreacher popped down there and looked around, disappeared, and then came back with another door.

“Put the that room first, opening into the drawing room, the drawing room door opening into the hall, the bedroom door opening off the drawing room on the other side with the bathroom last, opening into the bedroom, and then move the bookshelves into the empty room.”

Kreacher did as asked, and then retrieved a simple table and a number of chairs for the library so he and his friends could work in there, and then retire to the drawing room to be more comfortable. Harry walked through his new suite and was quite pleased. The library was simple, but functional,
and would be in easy reach while he was up here. The drawing room was rather fancy, with a fireplace, two glass-fronted cabinets to either side, a couple of delicate looking antique tables, a sofa and a couple of chairs. There were also a couple of large windows, covered in heavy velvet drapes, that let in a nice amount of light, and another thick carpet underneath.

“You know what, on second thought, have the bathroom open off of here, opposite the library. If I have people over, I don’t want them tromping through my bedroom to use it.”

Kreacher sighed, but did as requested.

Once the rooms were set up to his satisfaction, Harry unpacked his things from his trunk, with Kreacher’s assistance, and then spent some time unloading some of the things from his parents’ trunk to decorate. He filled the glass-fronted cabinets with small items and interesting knick-knacks, and had Kreacher mount the family crest with accompanying weapons on the wall above the fireplace. He found some lace doilies that he laid out on the fancy tables in the drawing room, and had Kreacher put a suit of armor in the library, along with a large tapestry depicting a group of witches, wizards, knights, and various magical creatures having a party on a hillside. Some were playing musical instruments and others were writing or reading—he thought it rather fitting for a library. He bracketed the tapestry to either side with more weapons. The rest of the stuff he left in the trunk, which he put away in the corner of his bedroom. When finished, he looked around, and couldn’t have been more pleased—he had the makings of his very own private, secret plotting-lair.

He quelled the urge to break into maniacal laughter with difficulty.

“Thanks for your help, Kreacher.”

Kreacher nodded and fidgeted a bit in place.

“Did you need something?”

“Kreacher is needing help” the elf admitted. “If young sir can be helping Kreacher, Kreacher would be much appreciating it.”

“Well, I can’t promise anything until I know what it is you need help with, but if I can help I’ll certainly do so.”

Kreacher nodded. “If young sir can be waiting here, Kreacher will be returning shortly.”

Harry sat down on the sofa, and waited until Kreacher reappeared with a bundle of dirty rags in his arms.

“Kreacher will be retiring when holidays is being over. Kind master Arcturus is sending Oddment, who is being a cousin of Kreacher, and a young elfling, to Kreacher to be training up so the House of Black is still being taken care of when Kreacher is being gone, and mister Barty is bringing Winky to be looking after him as well…but Kreacher has been very worried, as he is having a final request of young master Regulus that he is being unable to be doing. Kreacher cannot be retiring without completing his mission, but Kreacher cannot!”

Harry patted the elf gently on the back until he got a hold of himself. Whatever the mission was, it was obviously weighing heavily on the old elf.

“Many years ago, the Dark Lord is asking master Regulus if he can be borrowing Kreacher. Master Regulus agreed, and the Dark Lord is taking Kreacher to a cave filled with dead things in a lake, to a small island in the center. He is telling Kreacher that Kreacher will be testing the defenses. He
made Kreacher drink poison. Kreacher was dying, and the Dark Lord is leaving him there to die!” he admitted, his voice shaking “but master Regulus is knowing something is wrong, and called Kreacher back. I could only obey, and used the last of my strength to return to his side. The young master was very upset when he is seeing Kreacher, and nursed me back to health” he sniffled, overcome with the memory.

“When Kreacher is recovering, he is asking Kreacher many questions about what happened, and Kreacher’s answers made him very worried and unhappy. He ordered Kreacher to take him back to the cave.” The elf took a deep breath as though steeling himself to tell the rest. “What Kreacher did not mention earlier was that there was being a locket hidden in the cave, under the poison. It was being this locket.”

Kreacher opened the bundle of dirty rags and revealed a heavy silver locket with a serpentine ‘S’ on the front, picked out in emeralds. It looked very familiar. Harry pulled his pack of chocolate frog cards out of his pack and flipped through them, until he found the one he sought. He held up the card featuring Salazar Slytherin and compared the two.

“It’s Slytherin’s locket. He’s wearing it on the card.” He murmured. “Go on. Regulus had you take him to the cave, then what happened?” he urged.

Kreacher’s lip wobbled and two fat tears began rolling down his face.

“M-master Regulus is drinking the poison! He told Kreacher to take the locket and escape, and to leave him there. He is telling Kreacher, see that it is being destroyed, and tell no one in the family! Kreacher had no choice but to obey! Kreacher left him there, and he is dying!” he sobbed. “And Kreacher tried to fulfill his last request, but he cannot! He cannot! Locket is still being here, and nothing Kreacher has done has hurt it!”

Harry took the bundle and set it on the sofa beside him, before pulling the distraught elf, who was now sobbing into his hands, into a hug. He rubbed his back until he’d calmed down again, and sat back to let him finish his story.

“Kreacher could not tell master Arcturus or young master Sirius, as they is being of the family. Winky is begging Kreacher not to be telling her young master. She is still being very unhappy that her master is killing himself, though she is being happy that her young master is being free and happy again. She is being afraid that the bad locket is hurting her young master. He is being all of her family that is being left, and so Kreacher did not tell him. Kreacher considered telling the werewolf man, but Winky is scolding Kreacher for thinking that. She is telling Kreacher that many werewolves is liking the Dark Lord, and so are not wanting something of his being broken, and if Kreacher is giving it to him, maybe young master Regulus orders is still not being done.” He sighed. “But then master Sirius is telling us elves that you is coming to be staying. Winky told Kreacher to be giving bad locket to Mr. Harry Potter sir, as he is defeating the Dark Lord before, and so can probably be destroying his locket too.”

Harry was admittedly unnerved by Kreacher’s tale, and dithered for a moment, wondering whether he should go tell Sirius and Remus immediately. In the end, he decided to wait and see if they were trustworthy—he liked what he’d seen of them so far, but he still didn’t really know them, and he didn’t know how far in Dumbledore’s pocket they were. He had a feeling, if he were to bring something like this to them, they’d immediately go running to Dumbledore with it. He didn’t trust that man at all, and he was certain he didn’t have his best interests at heart. He didn’t want him any more involved with his life than he already was.

He figured if he couldn’t destroy the thing, he could always take it to them later… though he
worried that, if Kreacher ‘retired’ (he knew that for the euphemism it was—there was a long line of house elf heads mounted on plaques running up the wall alongside the stairs on the ground floor), the location of Regulus’ body would be lost forever…but he couldn’t really take them with him to retrieve it without revealing the rest.

In the end, he decided that Regulus had been there all this time, and had died heroically, doing something he was willing to die to achieve—for whatever reason. He could honor him best by seeing that his last wishes were fulfilled.

“I’ll see it destroyed, Kreacher. I promise you that. If I cannot do it myself, I will find someone who can. You’re released from your promise. You can retire in peace.”

Kreacher sighed and looked like a heavy weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

Harry stowed the locket in the now-empty last compartment of his parents’ trunk, and headed downstairs to rejoin the others.

When Harry arrived back downstairs, he found the house was in the process of being transformed. The house elf heads were now all sporting a jaunty Santa hat, and the mantles were bedecked with garlands and holly, and evergreen boughs. He followed the sound of voices to a parlor that opened off the anteroom, and found Remus, Sirius and Barty all gathered around a bare tree that reached the ceiling. Half-open boxes of ornaments littered the floor around it.

A girl house elf—probably the Winky that Kreacher mentioned—appeared in the middle of the room, and told them lunch was ready.

They ate, and then headed back to the parlor, where they decorated the tree, and Sirius sung strange carols, like ‘God rest ye, Merry Hippogriffs’.

It was already the best Christmas he’d ever had, and the holiday season was only just beginning.

He was already too cynical to really believe it would last, so he carefully stowed the memories of the day, and the warm, fuzzy feeling in his chest away deep inside, where he could pull it out later to examine when things went bad again—and he had no doubt that they would. Until then, he figured he could enjoy himself, at least so long as he didn’t let himself get too fond of the feeling.

The rest of the day—and after that, the rest of the holiday—passed in a blur. They went shopping for last-minute presents, and also for clothes; they’d been invited a number of places for the holiday season. Upon realizing Harry had nothing ‘fancy’ to wear to such functions, there was nothing but that he get some. On that excursion, Harry discovered that Sirius was something of a clothes horse. Harry ended up with several nice robes—formal dress robes for Christmas and New Year’s, and fancy but more casual robes for visiting in between, as well as a nice cloak to wear with them, and some new shoes and boots. While at Madame Malkin’s Harry got a gift certificate for Remus and Barty, as he hadn’t previously bought them a present; he didn’t know either of them was going to be there.

Christmas day was a shock in many ways. He was woken up bright and early by Sirius, who pounced on him in his dog animagus form and licked his face till he woke up. That was the first surprise. The second surprise was that there were gifts for him under the tree. He hadn’t been expecting that.

Harry didn’t notice, but his confusion and shock at there being presents for him had the three men
trading confused, and then angry looks amongst one another. Sirius made a mental note to do some prodding about Harry’s home life while he lived with his aunt and uncle at some later point—in the meantime, he clowned around, and tore into his own presents like a small child on a sugar high and kept Harry laughing and distracted.

After that, there were visits to others—Sirius and Barty’s remaining friends and relatives mostly, parties—Christmas at the Longbottom’s, and New Year’s at the Malfoy’s. In between that, they took in a quidditch game, went to a Wyrd Sisters concert, and a charity function to support St. Mungo’s.

Kreacher was retired, with a smile on his face and tears in his eyes, on New Year’s day. Since Sirius’ mother had died, the house had been empty, and Kreacher had been slowly going mad from both his unfulfilled mission, and the lack of company. Having Sirius returned to the family—even if too late to unbreak his mother’s heart—had been the reversal of fortune the crazed elf had prayed for. He was able to die content, surrounded by the remaining members of the family, in the restored house, knowing his former master’s last wishes would be fulfilled. His head was mounted at the top of the staircase, next to his mother’s, and decorated with a Santa hat, newly made by Oddment, to commemorate his long service and allow him to remain with the family forever.

In no time at all it seemed, it was time to return to Hogwarts.

It was the first time in Harry’s life that he wasn’t looking forward to the end of the holidays and the beginning of school. It was amazing what a difference being with people who wanted you around made. He waved to Sirius until the platform was out of sight.

Once it was, and he was surrounded by his friends, his usual enthusiasm for Hogwarts reared its head once more. He ran a hand lightly over his pouch, where he had secreted away one of his Christmas presents: a small mirror that could be used like a video phone. Sirius had the other. He would be able to talk to him whenever he wanted, but it wasn’t quite the same.

For the first time in his life he was looking forward to the summer holidays. He shook off his faint melancholy and tried to focus in on the conversation his friends were having, and found a fuming Hermione glaring daggers at him.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Back to school. Harry is presented with a puzzle.

“Back with us, are you? I’ve been trying to get your attention for five minutes now!”

“Lost in thought” Harry huffed irritably, rolling his eyes.

He was not in the mood for a bloody Hermione lecture first thing upon coming back. They’d been on the train for, what, five minutes now? You’d think she’d have the decency to at least wait till they got back to school.

“Why did you go visit my parents?” she demanded, eyeing him suspiciously.

“I didn’t go visit your parents, I went to visit the people renting my house; they just happened to be the same people.”

“What’s this? You visited her parents?”

“I’m their landlord, for the moment at least. Naturally I’ll be moving back there once I graduate.”

“Why would you want to live in Hermione’s parents’ house?”

“…”

Harry sighed and looked at Ron like he was a brain-dead idiot.

“Because it’s not Hermione’s parents house it’s my family’s ancestral home. Of course I’m going to live there.”

“What are you talking about, mate? Your parents’ house blew up, everyone knows that.”

“No, a house they rented out from Bathilda Bagshot to go into hiding in blew up. My family’s actual house is still standing, in perfect condition, and currently has Hermione’s parents living in it.”

“But they’re muggles! Muggles can’t live in a wizard house!”

“They can if they’re in on the secret, and the wizard whose house it is lets them.”

Ron’s face settled into sulky lines, and he could see a warning tinge of pink traveling up his neck.

“Of course he’s got a bloody ancestral home.” Ron muttered under his breath.

“Ron?” Harry asked through gritted teeth “Didn’t you once tell me that your family had lived in the Burrow for nigh on a hundred years?”

“Yeah? What of it?”
“That makes it a bloody ancestral home, you berk.”

Harry suddenly felt restless—he had been in a good mood, but it was quickly dissipating under the combined force of Hermione’s bossy interrogation, and Ron’s jealousy, and he wasn’t in the mood for it; not in the least.

“I’m taking a walk. If either of you follow me, I’m hexing you, fair warning.” He barked over his shoulder as he stormed out of the compartment. Ron, Hermione and Neville jumped as he slammed the door closed behind him.

Harry ended up spending most of the ride with a group of Hufflepuffs: Justin, Ernie, Hannah, Susan and Zacharias. They were cheerful and talking about nothing consequential, so it was a nice, relaxing ride. They were nearly to Hogwarts when Harry thought of something that he’d been meaning to run by Dean—having Susan here was just as good.

“Hey, Susan? Do you know if your aunt has access to any kind of list of muggle identities created by the Ministry over the years?”

“Why would you want to know something like that?” Zacharias demanded.

“Dean Thomas has a different father than his younger brothers and sisters, and he’s the only one of them with magic. He had thought his father might be a wizard, but can’t find anyone who recognizes the name the man gave his mother, so I thought…”

“That he might be a wizard using his muggle identity for the name he gave the woman?” Susan concluded. “It could be, I suppose. I can write to her and ask. What was the name he gave?”

“Dean Richards—his mum named him after him, even though she was apparently pretty pissed that he upped and disappeared one day. If you find out anything, I guess just tell Dean directly. I was going to run the idea by him, but I saw you first so…”

“Understood. I hope she finds something.”

“Yeah, me too.”

It was raining buckets when they arrived at the castle. Shrieking at the cold rain, he and the others ran for the carriages that were parked and waiting to take them to the castle. When they got up close to the carriages though, Harry spotted movement through the gloom and then stopped dead when he spotted what looked to be skeletal winged horses hooked up to them.

“Alright there, Harry?”

“What the hell are they?”

“What?”

“The horses.”

“There’s nothing there”.

Harry slanted a look at Justin, disturbed. He could see the things there, clear as day. The rest of the
Hufflepuffs seemed to agree with him though that there was nothing to be seen. He needed to check his sanity, and so he did the only thing he could. He went up to the horse and touched it.

“There’s something here. I can feel it. Up this close I can smell it too.”

Zacharias snorted and marched up to stand next to him. “You’re cracked, Potter, see? There’s noth…ing…bloody hell.”

“Zack?”

“There’s something here, just like he said. I can feel it. HEY!” he yelped when Harry suddenly grabbed him by the arm and yanked.

“Sorry, but he was about to bat you with his wing.”

The other Hufflepuffs crept up and reached towards the harness, and gasped one by one when they too felt the presence of some invisible animal under their hands.

“It’s getting cold” Hannah sneezed. Agreeing to set aside the mystery until some day when it wasn’t raining buckets of ice water, they piled into the carriage and began the trek upwards to the castle.

They were almost to the castle when Harry realized he could easily have his question answered.

“I’m so stupid! I should have thought of that. Hagrid is who gets the coaches ready, so he must harness up those horses…which means he can see them too. I’ll just ask him about them when I get the chance.”

That chance came sooner than expected, as Hagrid was roaming around the other end of the road, unhitching the carriages as they came in and then tapping them with his umbrella, at which point they’d disappear.

“Hagrid! Those horse-things, what are they? Where did they come from? Why can Potter see them but the rest of us can’t?” Zacharias demanded, striding directly to where the large man was at work the moment he exited the carriage.

‘Eh? What’s all this? ‘arry? You ken see th’ thestrals?”

“Thestrals? Is that what they’re called?”

“Oh, aye. Beauties, aren’t they? You have to have seen someone die to see them, otherwise they’re as invisible to wizards as they are to muggles.”

“I didn’t see anyone die recently.” Harry protested, he then realized that wasn’t true—Kreacher had been beheaded right in front of him…he hadn’t thought of it at first, because it had made the elf so happy.

“It’s more’n that. You have to come to terms wit it, really unnerstand what it means”

“I visited my parents graves over the holiday.” Harry admitted quietly.

Hagrid’s kindly face fell into mournful lines. “Ah, Lily and James. Fine people they were. Fine. I suppose that would do it, iffn ye couldn’t see ‘em before.” He sighed, patting Harry gently on his head with one enormous hand. Harry staggered under the force of it even though Hagrid was obviously being careful. Hannah and Ernie each grabbed one of his arms to keep him from toppling into the mud.
“Best get inside. It’s not fit fer man nor beast out tonight.”

It was a slightly subdued group that made their way into the castle.

“Potter” Zacharias barked “Do you mean to tell me you hadn’t come to terms with your parents deaths in all this time? How is that even possible?”

Harry tapped himself on the top of his head with his wand, causing the water that had soaked through him to squeeze out of his clothes, shoes and hair, and off his skin, and pool beneath him. He flicked his wand at the resulting puddle and vanished it and the mud mixed with it, from sight.

“I don’t have any memory of them—none at all. I’ve always known my parents were dead, but it was a fact, like the ‘sky is blue’, or ‘my eyes are green’. It didn’t mean anything…that doesn’t sound quite right, but you understand what I mean, right?”

He saw Hannah was still shivering, and dripping wet, so he repeated his actions on her, doing the wand movement slowly and enunciating the spell so the rest of them could see what it was he did, and then repeated the action again at regular speed on Susan. “Evanesco” he added, vanishing the puddles and mud. “It’s hardly fair to leave all the mess for Mr. Filch to clean up. This castle is really too large for a single man to take care of, and the house elves are busy most of the time with the food and laundry.”

He picked up his story where he left off, while Zacharias, Justin and Ernie got themselves dry.

“I went to visit their graves over the holiday. That’s where Sirius and I went after he picked me up here. I’d never been there before. I didn’t even know where they were buried, actually. It was the first time that it really came home in a tangible way that there used to be two living, breathing people who were my parents, who were taken away from me. Standing on their graves was the closest I’d been to them in over a decade—and they were far beneath the ground, and after all this time there’s probably not much left of them. It just made it real in a way it never really was before.”

Hannah sneezed again, and shattered the gloomy atmosphere.

“Let’s get into the great hall. I’m starving.” Justin suggested.

After an enjoyable return feast, and filling Dean in on the new avenue he’d helped open up in the search for his father, they retired back to Gryffindor tower, full and sleepy.

Upon reaching his bed, Harry discovered a package wrapped in plain brown paper and tied with string.

“Lucky! Looks like a late Christmas present.” Ron muttered, coming over to stare at it. “Well, open it up!”

“What, now? Don’t be absurd. I’m too tired right now to appreciate it, whatever it is. Besides, if it was a Christmas present, one assumes I would have gotten it on Christmas, right?” Harry tossed it into his trunk, dug out his pajamas, and began getting ready for bed.

Harry found the package again in the morning when he got up to go do his exercises, and took it with him to the ‘come and go room’, setting it aside until he was finished. While cooling down from his workout, he grabbed the package and unwrapped it, revealing a spill of silvery material
that ran across his hands like water. He shook the thing out and discovered it was a cloak. A bit of hunting revealed a note enclosed with it.

“That Father left this in my keeping, but it is time it was returned to you. Use it well.”

The note wasn’t signed, and there was no further explanation given. He had a suspicion about what it was, and a few tests proved him right. It was an invisibility cloak.

Sirius and Remus had mentioned the thing, as it figured largely in many of their school time adventures. Remus had mentioned that Dumbledore had borrowed the thing their senior year, as he wanted to study it and make copies for the Order. He had supposedly returned it before graduation—and Barty said the invisibility cloak he himself had been hidden under had originally come from Dumbledore, given to his father during the war. Sirius and Remus had assumed that the original had blown up with the house.

Bathilda Bagshot had claimed that souvenir hunters had gone over the house and walked off with everything that wasn’t nailed down.

Sirius claimed Hagrid was first on the scene, had recovered his parents’ bodies, and was poking through the rubble when he got there.

The question now was, had he been looking specifically for the cloak, or for anything that survived? Did he find anything other than the cloak, and if so, where was it? Was he ever planning on giving it to him, or was he planning to give him his own things for the next couple of Christmases? While considering that, he then had to wonder if Hagrid had actually found the cloak.

All the stuff Bathilda had given him had a sense of familiarity about them—heirloom magic, according to Sirius. The cloak had none of that, which meant it was likely one of the copies that Dumbledore had made. The question then became, was that done purposefully, because he wanted to keep the real cloak himself for some reason, purposefully because the real cloak had gotten destroyed, or was it a simple mistake?

“I wish I knew if the real cloak, my father’s cloak, still survived.”

Harry blinked when a folded cloak, identical to the one in his lap, appeared in a neatly folded bundle on the floor near where he was sitting. He folded up the cloak on his lap to be the same as the one on the floor, and then swapped them. The one on the floor disappeared back to wherever it had come from. He shook out and inspected the cloak he now had. It was in perfect condition, and had the sense of familiarity that the other had lacked.

He threw the thing over his shoulders and pulled up the hood, while asking the room to bring him a mirror. He studied his lack of reflection, and smiled. There was not a ripple or a distortion to be seen—it granted true invisibility. He had done a bit of reading on invisibility cloaks, after Sirius and Remus had mentioned his father’s. According to all he’d read, most cloaks only approximated invisibility, and the magic faded over time. This cloak was something special, and it was old—it was passed down in the family, according to Sirius.

“So, was it a mistake, or willful deception on Dumbledore’s part? What would be the point? He made copies that are identical! Is there something extra about this particular cloak, and if so, what? Or maybe he wouldn’t be able to keep track of me under this one, and so gave me one of his copies so he could? He made the thing, he might be immune to its invisibility effects, or perhaps just be able to tell when one of his is nearby?”

He began pacing as he turned the problem over and over in his mind. “His note said ‘use it well’, meaning he both expects, and wants me, to be running around invisibly for some purpose…but what?”
He tried thinking of what Dumbledore’s reasons could be.

“Is it the attempt on my life at the quidditch game? I guess it would have to be, there’s not really anything else going on.” His pacing crawled to a halt. “Except that the philosopher’s stone is being hidden here, and someone already tried stealing it once, at the bank.” His pacing picked up once again. “So, is he expecting me to try to find the philosopher’s stone? No…he’s trying to get me to protect it.” He realized, before becoming angry. “He’s expecting me to run off and try protecting the thing from whoever is after it. I’m a bloody first year student! What could I possibly do to protect it that none of the adult teachers in the school could? And where does the attempt on my life fit in? Was it an actual attempt, or was it a fake attempt laying the groundwork for some future event?”

His pacing picked up once again. He could feel a mounting frustration, as he was certain he had all the puzzle pieces, but just couldn’t seem to arrange them in such a way that he could see the big picture.

“Think! What do you know?” he backtracked. “One, the philosopher’s stone was at Gringott’s bank, and someone tried to steal it. Two, Nicholas Flamel is dead. The updating biography I read listed him as being six hundred and sixty five last year, not will be six hundred and sixty six this year. He might have decided it was time to leave the mortal coil—he was probably afraid of inciting an apocalypse, what with him about to embody the number of the beast and all. Three: Dumbledore once worked with him doing alchemical research. I suppose he left the stone to him…although Dumbledore might have offed him in order to get it. That seems less likely though—why would he have waited so long, until he was an old man himself? Would he really have been so foolhardy as to just give something like that away though? Yeah, immortality and endless gold probably sounds nice in theory—but the Flamels had to live their long lives mostly in hiding, and if you made endless gold you would end up wrecking the world economy. Most scholars seem to think the philosopher’s stone is a metaphor for a spiritual transformation…of course, that’s muggle scholars, so they might not necessarily have their facts straight. It would make sense though. You’d have to be a certain sort of person to really be trusted with that sort of power in your hands. In theory, if you were such a person, you would also realize that not everyone could really be trusted with it. If that was the case, would he really have just given it to him?”

He continued pacing in circles while he tried reasoning out his latest thought. “Maybe that’s what he did? He gave him the stone, but in such a way that he’d have to prove himself worthy of having it? How would you even go about doing something like that?”

He spun in place when something new appeared in the room. It was a large, golden mirror on an ornate stand. Across the top was inscribed words in a language Harry didn’t recognize: erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.

“What the hell? Why does a mirror even have writing on it anyway? Mirror writing…Leonardo da Vinci used to write backwards in his journals. You had to hold it against a mirror to read it.” He looked over the inscription again and then nodded, smiling. “I show not your face but your heart’s desire…well, I guess that answers my question about how someone could test worthiness. If I got it into my head that some crazed would-be murderer who was after my hide was also after the stone, I might very well have run off, if only to protect myself from an immortal would-be murderer. I would have had no way of knowing that this thing was the protection. The only protection I knew of was the three-headed dog…and a crazed killer would just kill the dog, wouldn’t he? No would-be murderer would ever be found worthy though…”

Just like that, he understood.
“That’s where I come in” Harry realized. “Dumbledore has the stone but can’t get to it. The killer wants the stone, but couldn’t get to it either…along I come, in my invisibility cloak, wanting to protect the world and myself from a would-be killer with a yen for immortality. Wanting to protect the stone and the world and myself from a bad man, but not covet the power myself would probably make me worthy, wouldn’t it? I’m a first year student though, a child. Dumbledore swoops out at the last minute to protect me from the bad guy…and surely I would agree that he, old and wise and powerful as he is, would be far more effective at protecting the stone from the crazed man than I would be, right? He gets the stone, and my eternal gratitude-slash-hero worship, the bad guy is defeated, and all is well. I guess the only question remaining is—is the ‘killer’ a real person, or is he a minion of Dumbledore’s playing a role for a cut of the stone after they trick me into retrieving it for them? The second question is, what do I do about it?”

Curious, he pulled off the cloak, and moved to stand in front of the Mirror of Erised and gazed into its depths. At first he saw only the room behind him. The image blurred and then Harry himself appeared, dressed in his school uniform. The Harry in the mirror winked at him, holding up a red stone between his finger and thumb, and then dropped it into his pocket. He felt a sudden weight in his own pocket at the same time. He stuck his hand in his pocket and withdrew a blood-red stone that seemed to glow subtly from within, as though it contained its own internal fire, though the stone itself was cool to the touch.

Harry stifled the urge to sigh with difficulty. “Geez, first Kreacher and his locket o’ mystery, and now the ruddy Philosopher’s Stone? I do seem to have a lot of responsibilities piling up on my shoulders lately, don’t I? Damn, that reminds me…I need to start learning how to detect the properties of magical items so I can get started on that. I had wanted to research wards too…”

While he mused, a table, chair and a pile of books appeared. Harry smiled, and put aside his worries for the moment, after dropping the stone and the cloak in his pouch.

“That’s right, I can use the room for research. That will make things simpler.” He checked the time. “Not now though. I need to get cleaned up and then get to breakfast. Thanks anyway, room.”

For just a second, the room seemed a bit warmer and more cheerful, as though it were acknowledging his thanks. Grinning bemusedly, Harry gathered up the brown wrapping paper, note and the string that had been used to bind the package the cloak was in and began making his way back to the tower.

When he got back to his bed, he laid the wrapping paper and the note on his bed and dug out an old t-shirt which he hit with a boggart color charm and tossed the shirt, wrapping and note on his bed, before heading down to breakfast. "There. That should answer any questions about what was in the package and why I don’t want to talk about it" he thought with satisfaction. Down in the common room he ran into Hermione, who was just coming downstairs herself.

When the others joined he and Hermione at breakfast, Ron gave him a sympathetic clap on the shoulder and shuddered.

“I’m sorry mate. If I had known it was something so horrifying…”

“What’s this?” Hermione immediately demanded.

“Harry found a package on his bed last night when we got up to the dorm.” Neville explained.

“What I don’t get is why your dad would have a horrible shirt like that in the first place.”

“That’s bad enough—the really puzzling part is that someone else wanted to borrow it”
“Nah, the kicker is that someone wanted to borrow it, and thought Harry’d want it back!”
“Can we not talk about it anymore? I’m trying to eat here.” Harry said forlornly.

Hermione was practically vibrating in place with her need to know. Harry continued eating at a steady pace and let the others answer her innumerable questions.

“So it was a shirt, so what?”

“You don’t understand, it wasn’t just a shirt—it was a Lovecraftian horror!” Dean shuddered.

“Oh honestly! How bad could it have been?”

“Slytherin green and silver. I can’t believe Harry’s dad was such a traitor!” Ron growled.

Harry slanted a look at Ron, and raised an eyebrow.

“Green and silver? That’s all you saw, and you’re this upset? You lucked out! I saw a horrible mix of colors that gave me a headache and made me sick to my stomach!”

“So did I”
“Me too”
“Sickening, it was.”

“So you all saw something different then?” Hermione asked, intrigued anew.

“Apparently. I guess it was just some kind of prank.” Harry agreed. “The note wasn’t signed or anything.” He went back to eating; Sirius’ words about his father’s hatred of dark wizards in general and Slytherins in particular being fueled by his fear of being outed as a parselmouth were on his mind as he did so. Ron had a similar malfunction—could he actually be a parselmouth as well?

“Goodness, look at the time. Classes will be starting soon. We should get going.”

“DADA. Joy.” Dean sighed sarcastically. “It’s such a waste of time. You can’t understand half of what comes out of the guy’s mouth because of his s-s-stutter.”

“Not to mention just reading the book seems to scare him. ‘Today we’re s-s-supposed to learn about p-p-puffskeins…EEK!” Seamus mimed fainting. “Where do they find guys like him?”

“He should have stuck to muggle studies.” Ron griped “Instead of ruining an important class.”

“Ronald Weasley! How dare you! All classes are important! Just what are you trying to imply?”

“And there she goes.” Harry sighed. “Ready, Nev?”

“Yeah.” Neville agreed, shoving the last of his bacon into his mouth. He might have a crush on Hermione—it didn’t mean he wanted to listen to one of her lectures if he didn’t have to.

They left Ron hunched and miserable beneath the wrath of hurricane Hermione, and hurried out of the hall.

It was a bit of a downer, get back into the swing of school life after the holidays. By the time classes were over for the day, and everyone was heading back up to Gryffindor tower for the
evening, most everyone was worn out—except Hermione, who was already making noises about wanting to construct a study schedule so she’d be all set when she started studying for the end of year exams in March.

“March? And you’re already talking about it now? Exams aren’t until June! You’re completely mental!” Ron exploded.

The Gryffindors around them sighed as Ron’s outburst signaled the beginning of yet another Ron/Hermione war of words, and many hurried their steps to get away from them—they never quit with their bickering, and it could get wearing to listen to it day in and day out.

They fell back into the swing of things over the coming days and it was soon like they’d never left at all. February rolled around, cold and dark and stormy; the students found themselves confined to the castle more and more as the month rolled on.

A break in the never ending round of classes and homework didn’t come until mid-February, when it was time again for quidditch.

Both teams played a good game, but in the end, there could only be one winner—and in this case, it was Hufflepuff. Harry shook his head pityingly at the prostrate form of Oliver Wood; from here it looked like he was weeping.

As they were all heading back to the castle after the Gryffindor/Hufflepuff game, he spotted Quirrel and Snape at the edge of the forest. Snape was being his usual intimidating self, and Quirrel was nervous and placating.

“Snape showed up in the hospital wing after the bludger attack and chased Quirrel off, and he’s been the only other person regularly venturing up to the third floor corridor. He’s suspicious of the man, but he must not have any proof that he’s really done anything. If all the teachers added to the security on the third floor, he would have been able to explain away the troll easily enough—and his visit to me in the hospital wing could have been explained away as well.”

Harry, for his part, ignored the two teachers, and followed his housemates back to the castle. It was Friday afternoon, and he was feeling oddly restless.

“You know, we never finished exploring the castle, after that one time roaming around the dungeons.”

“We’ve been all over though.”

“Not everywhere, and anyway, it isn’t like we really have time to look around when running to and from classes.”

“It’s not like there’s much to see—empty classrooms and dust. “ Ron grumbled.

“Where’s your sense of adventure? I don’t feel like being cooped up in the common room—the mood there is likely to be grim after we lost to Hufflepuff.”

The others grimaced—knowing how Quidditch-mad Oliver Wood was, ‘grim’ was likely an understatement.

“I’ll go with you, Harry.” Neville offered.
“Feh. Count me in too, I guess.” Ron was quick to offer as well.

Hermione ended up following them, muttering about ‘wasted time’ and ‘study schedules’. Harry, naturally, invited her to leave since she found the whole exercise so pointless. She scowled at him, and at Ron who was nodding fervent agreement, but stubbornly stuck around. They picked a direction at random and started walking, peeking in rooms, and under dust cloths.

“What’s down here, I wonder? It looks like no one’s been down this way in an age.” Ron pointed.

It was a side corridor, and it looked rather abandoned—Harry was certain he saw mold growing between the stones, and there were even some dusty cobwebs strewn across the corridor itself.

“We should go back. It might not be safe.” Hermione spoke up.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Ron scoffed, striding ahead, and knocking the cobwebs free.

There was a partially ajar doorway just ahead, that creaked open a bit more as Ron approached. Harry shrugged and followed after him.

“Ah, it’s nothing but an old mirror.” Ron complained, eyeing the otherwise empty room. Shrugging, he strode towards the mirror and peered into it. Harry came alert. He recognized the mirror: it was the mirror of Erised.

“Look at me! I’m Head Boy! And Quidditch Captain! I’ve just won the cup for Gryffindor! Do you think it shows the future?” Ron gasped, his face shining and his eyes alight.

“Let me see!” Neville said excitedly. He nudged Ron aside and gazed into the mirror as well.

“There’s writing on the top! I don’t recognize the language though.” Hermione announced.

“It’s a mirror, maybe it’s just backwards.” Harry suggested.

“Backwards? No, it still…wait! The spaces are all wrong!”

A cold chill went down Harry’s spine as Neville’s face went slack with joy and longing. “Mum! …Dad!”

“I’ve got it! I show not your face but your heart’s desire!” Hermione announced proudly.

“You can see me! You know me!” Neville whispered.

“Neville…come away from there.” Harry said sharply, moving forward to pull him away.

Neville pressed up against the mirror as though he was trying to climb into it—he shoved Harry’s grasping hand away, never taking his eyes from the vision that entranced him.

“Mum! Dad! No! Don’t look away! Look at me! I’m right here!”

“Neville!” Harry repeated, grasping for his shoulder again. “Come away from there! It’s not real!”

“No! They’re there, I can see them! They see me! They know me! Leave me alone!”

Harry glanced back at Ron and Hermione for help. Hermione had a fist pressed against her mouth, and her eyes were shiny with the start of tears. Even Ron had begun to realize something was wrong, and his face was pasty, making his freckles stand out starkly against the paleness of his
“Don’t just stand there! Help me!” Harry growled. Ron shook off his stupor and grabbed Neville’s other shoulder.

They had to bodily drag Neville from the room, kicking and screaming and demanding they let him go back. Hermione stumbled after them. Neville desperately clawed at the doorway when they tried dragging him through. White faced and weeping, Hermione pried his fingers off the door jamb, and tried not to meet his eyes, which were desperate and betrayed. As soon as his fingers were free, Ron and Harry heaved with all their might.

“Hospital wing. Hopefully Madame Pomfrey can fix this.” Ron nodded stiffly, and they began hauling Neville along, and hardened their hearts to his broken-hearted weeping. Hermione darted ahead when they reached the hospital wing and stumbled inside, holding the door for the three boys.

“Madame Pomfrey! Madame Pomfrey! Help!” she cried.

Madame Pomfrey came at a run, certain someone was on the verge of death. She was briefly flummoxed when she found two crying children, and two who were white-faced and obviously upset.

“What…?”

“Oh! Madame Pomfrey it was awful! There was a mirror”

“Shows you stuff, it does”

“There was writing on it. I figured it out—it doesn’t show you the future, it shows you what you want. It was backwards, you see, and the spaces were all wrong”

Harry only just refrained from rolling his eyes and glaring at the girl. What did she think she was doing, bragging at a time like this?

“It was a cursed mirror, and Neville saw his parents. We had to drag him away kicking and screaming. He said they could see him and knew who he was.” Harry interjected.

“I show not your face but your heart’s desire” Hermione quoted. “It was pretty obvious what was going on after that.”

Madame Pomfrey was already in motion: Neville was in pajamas, tucked into bed, and filled full of calming draught once she knew what the problem was.

All the while, she was muttering angrily under her breath: ‘Another one, should have been destroyed, going to have words with that man’—and things of that nature.

Once Neville was asleep she put a privacy screen around him and stalked towards the floo, looking ready to do battle. Harry motioned the other two to follow him out the door. Once out, he kept the door from shutting completely, and ducked down so he wouldn’t be seen through the window.

“Harry! What…?”

He glared at Hermione, and yanked her and Ron down beside him and motioned them to be quiet, his eyes promising dire retribution if they weren’t.

They heard the ‘whoosh’ of the floo discharging a passenger.
“Poppy? You bellowed?”
“Dumbledore” Ron mouthed quietly. Harry just nodded, listening.
“Albus Dumbledore! What have you to say for yourself? Why wasn’t that mirror destroyed?! I cannot believe you! After that poor boy nearly died fifty years ago”
“Now, Poppy”
“Don’t you now Poppy me, mister! Your negligence nearly killed that boy because of that damned mirror, and now I have another boy near catatonic in my hospital wing because of it!” We have too many orphans in this school to leave something like that lying around! I won’t have it!”

The three kids eyes widened, and Harry let the door close the rest of the way—slowly, so no sound would be heard and motioned the others to follow. Once past the door, they ran the rest of the way to Gryffindor tower.

The three of them found a far corner of the common room that had empty seats, and gathered around to talk about what they’d just overheard.

“Blimey! Madame Pomfrey can be scary when she wants, huh?”

“Who was the kid who almost died, I wonder? Oh, I wish I had time to go to the library tonight. No matter, I’m mostly done all of my homework. I can just start looking tomorrow.”

Harry briefly considered bringing forth his theory that the boy who almost died later became the Dark Lord Voldemort, but in the end kept his own counsel. He had learned already firsthand how easy it was for rumor and innuendo to get out of control in Hogwarts. Most anything he said seemed to make the rounds more than most things did—were he to start speculating on the childhood of You-know-who, he’d be a death eater by morning, one who had only been friendly with Hermione, Dean and Justin so he could lure them into a false sense of security and murder them in their beds. Little things like logic, or the fact that Harry’s parents had both been killed by the man seemed to matter not at all when it came to the Hogwarts’ rumor mill. No one else seemed to have the same sort of problem—rumors distorted the picture, and became slightly more fantastic, but no one else was regularly pegged to be a murderous psychopath with such ease, just Harry… and Professor Snape, now that he thought about it.

“Hermione, think for second---there are probably no records of a kid nearly dying through Dumbledore’s negligence. There are lots of people out there who don’t like Dumbledore, and want him removed as Headmaster of Hogwarts. Do you really think he’d be able to stay on if there was proof that he nearly caused a student to die, and then for some reason refused to get rid of the artifact that nearly did it afterwards? Chances are, even the kid who nearly died didn’t remember what happened once Madame Pomfrey got done with him. It would have been embarrassing for the school, and personally bad for Dumbledore.”

“I know that” Hermione huffed, rolling her eyes. “I was going to go through the class lists from fifty years ago and look for orphans.”

“You can probably just stick your search to Slytherin orphans—that’s probably why he forgot about the kid.” Ron chimed in.

“Ron! That’s a terrible thing to say!”

“True though. He doesn’t really try that hard to hide his disdain for them.” Harry noted.

Hermione changed the subject, and Ron followed her. Harry was suddenly, viscerally reminded of Vernon and Petunia—Ron and Hermione, it seemed, followed the same credo: even if it happened, it never happened, so long as no one talks about it.
Ron and Hermione started bickering again. Harry rose up and took the opportunity offered and got out of there.

“It just figures, doesn’t it? I get to go away to a magic castle and get away from the Dursleys—only to find that I’ve got a new set here in my house ‘family’. That’s just my luck, isn’t it? Or was it by design? Everything around my life with the Dursleys seems to have been arranged to be a certain way... Were Ron and Hermione shaped to be replacements? Is that why Ron keeps trying to drive other people away, and Hermione keeps trying to micromanage my life?”

He shuddered at the thought that there might be such a level of control in his life—it was too horrible to contemplate.

He reached the dorm and dug around in his trunk until he found one of the sketchbooks he’d gotten for Christmas. He climbed on his bed and opened it up. There, inside the front cover and first page was the drawing he’d made several months ago of Voldemort (young and old). He’d hidden it away because the pictures were a bit too lively for his liking; in fact, Dean had ended up doing all the drawings of “Tom” and the “Dread Warlord” for their pirate book because of that very fact. No one else’s drawings acted the way these two did—actually, none of the rest of Harry’s drawings did. They had started out as heads, he’d later given them bodies, and they found wands in their clothing and proceeded to start decorating their surroundings—they had filled the empty space around them with a floor, and some furniture, last he’d checked. He was curious to see if they were up to anything else.

He had a flash of surprise when he inspected the picture. He recognized their surroundings—it was the Chamber of Secrets. He could see some of the snake entwined pillars, and there was the statue of Slytherin watching over the proceedings. The older, snaky version of Voldemort had made himself a throne which sat between Slytherin’s feet. The teen version had a small desk and chair off to the side. He was writing in a small black book.

“So, the big, scary Dark Lord kept a diary as a teenager, did he?”

Thinking about Voldemort in his younger years brought the whole recent adventure with the mirror back to him. He was certain Voldemort was the boy who’d nearly died fifty years ago—the timing, and the fact that it was an orphan both fit, and he just had a gut feeling about it. He could picture the scene clearly in his mind. With that in mind, he tapped his wand on the blank page in front of him.

The mirror formed first—large, ornate, and with its backwards inscription. The boy formed next—small, thin, dark-haired, seated with his knees pulled up to his chest and his arms wrapped around them, and a look of terrible longing on his face. An empty room filled in around him.

Movement in the first picture caught his eye. Snaky-mort was staring towards the direction of the new picture, and seemed to be having a fit. The teenager moved to stand beside him, and seemed shocked and confused at what he was seeing. Snaky-mort suddenly drew his wand and went charging off-screen. The teen startled, and then took off after him.

Harry twitched at what he saw next. Snaky-mort entered the second picture, wand blazing and began flinging curses at the mirror—the teen version grabbed the boy and drug him away to safety while the Snaky version reduced the mirror to rubble, and then the rubble to ash, which he then proceeded to jump up and down on.

His fit ended as suddenly as it had begun. He put away his wand, straightened his robes, and strolled back to the first picture as though he hadn’t just had a psychotic episode moments before.
When Harry glanced at the first picture, he found the teen had gotten food for the little one, who was now devouring everything in sight as though he were starving—and given what Madame Pomfrey had said earlier, he probably was.

Snaky-mort strode back into the room, and glanced over at the boy and teen sitting at the table…and then his eyes fell on the teen’s little black book and he blanched, before having another fit and striding over to take it. The teen grabbed the book before he got to it, and they ended up wrestling over it—until Snaky-mort grabbed his wand and stunned the boy, and then wrenched the book out of his hands. The little one jumped up, looking frightened and tried to blast Snaky-mort. His spell was effortlessly batted aside, and he was felled a moment later. He fell across the teen in a sprawl, and Snaky strode away towards the statue. Harry’s eyes widened in interest when the statue’s mouth began to open. Snaky threw the diary inside and the mouth closed back up.

“That must be the basilisk’s lair. Interesting. I was right then, it was intended to be a self-contained habitat. A wizard has to open the lair from the outside, as well as the Chamber itself. It was never intended to be able to enter the school. What a dumbass.” he thought to himself.

“Of course…he found it, and didn’t die…maybe he didn’t know what it was? A possibility, I suppose.”

Snaky-mort sat back on his throne and surveyed his empty kingdom with smug satisfaction—until his eyes fell on the two unconscious boys. They seemed to be the only dark spots, to judge by the sour look on his monstrous face when he looked at them.

The teen stirred after a few moments and his eyes flew open in panic, which subsided into confusion when he realized there was someone lying atop him. He sat up, until the smaller boy lay draped across his lap, and shot a sour look at the older version of himself sitting on the throne; a look which was returned with interest. The teen looked back at the younger version and smirked, saying something. The little one cracked open an eye and glared at him, which seemed to amuse the teen further. He sat up and the two of them stared at one another, cataloging the differences between them. The little one glanced over and saw the snaky version watching them and shrunk into the teen just a bit. He obviously asked a question, because the teen glanced at their older self and then said something which made the little one look horrified. The teen seemed troubled by his response, and slanted another look at the older version who was looking rather pissed by this point.

“Interesting—the little one doesn’t like what he’s become, but the teen can’t see the oldest version for the monster it is. What happened to that boy between those times to make such a change?” he wondered.

He heard Ron’s voice on the stairs, so he put the drawing back in the sketchbook and closed it.

“Oh, there you are. We wondered where you’d run off to.”

“You two started fighting, and I’m sick of it. I came up here to get away.”

He saw Ron seemed offended, but frankly, he didn’t really care—they were annoying.

“What’s with the sketch book?”

“I was going to draw, but I can’t think of anything I wanted to do.”

Ron’s ears pinked and he got a petulant look on his face.

“Planning to write another best seller without the rest of us, is that it?” he asked belligerently.
“If you just came up here to start a fight, or be a jerk, you can leave.” he replied, his voice cool.

He put away his sketch book in his trunk, and opened another compartment to search out one of the Christmas presents he’d gotten from Barty—the Little Rune Master’s Project Kit, and the blank notebook he kept with the thing. It was an interesting set—there were a number of pre-cut stones with guidelines for runes to be inscribed with the ‘easy-carver’ that came with it, along with a book that gave several runic arrays that could be used for simple wards and effects, broke them down and explained the different parts and how they worked together. It was rather like the seal script he’d learned at ninja school in the ways it was used—somewhat, anyway.

“What’s that?” Ron asked, choosing to ignore his earlier behavior and Harry’s invite to leave—he and Hermione were both irritating like that.

Harry held up the book so he could see the cover, and Ron made an awful face.

“You’re mental! That’s like doing schoolwork when you don’t have to! Are you mad?”

“Do you actually know anything about runes?”

“I know Bill had to take ancient runes to be a curse breaker.”

Harry’s interest was piqued. “Really? I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, he had to take that and arithimancy. You won’t catch me bothering. He was always complaining about how hard it was, and he said the OWL and NEWT for those classes were awful! He really likes his job, so I guess he figures it was worth it… you won’t catch me doing any of that.” Ron scoffed. “Life’s too short to spend all your time studying. Right, mate?”

“What do you want to do in the future? If you’d like the option to be a curse breaker or something else that uses those classes, it would be kind of stupid to limit your options that way.”

“Pfft. I’ll probably try for something quidditch related. That’d be brilliant! No studying necessary!”

Ron sighed, glancing at his bedside table, where he’d propped up the picture he’d made months ago of himself dressed as one of the Chudley Cannons.

“You still shouldn’t limit your options. I met a guy, Ludo Bagman; he used to be a famous quidditch player, but he’s spent most of his life working for the Ministry. Even if you get the quidditch career you want, it won’t last forever.” Harry warned.

Ron looked petulant again at his words. “I don’t know why you’re so worried about it. You’re stinking rich.” The bitter twist of his mouth showed just what he thought of that state of affairs.

“Because my parents died and I was living elsewhere, and so whatever money they had was sitting untouched and collecting interest for ten years, you berk!” Harry growled. “Are you really that goddamn petty? You’d prefer to be me, is that it? You want to have no parents, live most of your life with people who despise you for being a wizard, who has a godfather that was supposed to raise him instead but couldn’t because he was wrongfully imprisoned? Is that it? You have both your parents and a whole bunch of brothers and a sister who love you and want you around, and you always had enough to eat. You really don’t know how lucky you are. You’d better wise up, Ron, and learn to appreciate the things you have, or one day you might look around and discover you’ve lost them all while you were chasing after things that don’t matter.”

Feeling restless and irritated, he tossed his rune stuff back into his trunk and locked it, before
storming out of the dorm room. He didn’t want to be around Ron right now—his whining and jealousy got old real quick. His constant harping on how Harry was a ‘rich bastard’ especially—it’s not like that money ever did him any good when he was slowly starving to death at the Dursley’s. It was the same with him being famous—what good had that ever done him? It got him harassed by stupid people, hated by others, and no one saw him as a real person—real great, right? The worst though, was when he started complaining about his big, happy family. Really, how awful, to have a whole bunch of people who loved you—Ron really pissed him off sometimes.

“Harry! There you are! Where did you run off to? You should have told us, we’d have come with you. You really should stop being so secretive all the time”

“Hermione? Shut the hell up.”

Leaving her behind, sputtering and indignant made him feel a bit better.

March arrived at Hogwarts, and with it a small, but noticeable break in the weather. Spring was on its way, though it would still be some time before they’d really see signs of it. Seeing no one was paying too much attention to what he was doing, Harry slipped out of the great hall once the tables were cleared. He’d had an idea of what the next step in Crabbe and Goyle’s ‘Slytherin lessons’ were going to be—it would also be helpful to himself in setting up his own network of contacts for the future. He was going to start a club of sorts—more a series of informal gatherings than a club, but that was the general idea. It would just be first years to start with—a place for everyone to mingle with folks outside their house. Once it was established, he was certain he could start reeling in older kids occasionally. It would likely just be the occasional older relative or friend of a first year here and there to start with. With time, if the experiment was successful, others would come. He’d been thinking about it for a while now. He thought Crabbe and Goyle were ready to start learning to use the lessons he’d given them. They’d done the reading, watched his example; it was time to see if they could put any of it into use.

When he and the other boys had explored part of the dungeons, they’d found a nice big empty room down there. It was off the beaten track, but not so far in that it would be a hardship for people to come and go easily. He thought it would be perfect for his purposes.

A few minutes’ walk brought him to his chosen room. He went in and looked around and nodded thoughtfully. A few tables to hold snacks, a few chairs here and there, maybe a couple of decorations, and they’d be set.

He went to the nearest come and go room entrance and paced briefly, waiting for a door to appear. Inside was a large, empty space.

He thought about different interesting pieces of furniture he’d found in out of the way corners during his wanderings, and they appeared, one by one.

“Itsy?”

His little elf-friend from the kitchens appeared. “Young sir is needing Itsy?”

“Could you do me a favor and help me move this stuff to the big empty room down the hall?”

The elf glanced at the stuff and snapped her fingers. All the furniture disappeared. “Is young sir
needing anything else?"

“Thanks! You’ve been a great help.”

The little elf disappeared. Harry rubbed his hands together and went to go rearrange his furniture.

After the furniture was arranged to his satisfaction, he went back to the come and go room and began pacing again. “I want to find interesting things to decorate with that won’t be missed. I want to find interesting things to decorate with that won’t be missed. I want to find interesting things to decorate with that won’t be missed.”

A door appeared and he opened it, only to enter the ‘room of lost and broken things’. He’d spent quite a while in this place, poking around, and knew he’d easily be able to find interesting things to decorate with, even if they were a bit shabby.

He began walking forward, letting his eyes drift across the variety of things on display.

Many of the items seemed to be broken, or tattered or torn, but here and there were things that simply looked old, not really in disrepair. He stopped and glanced down one of the rows of shelves and saw a troll and a gryphon near the end, which he had spotted on his first trip into the room.

“I thought I remembered these two. Good. They’ll look great in my clubhouse.”

The troll’s seams were split in places, and the gryphon missing a few feathers here and there, but he thought they could both be repaired easily enough. He had to wonder, how much of the stuff stowed away in here was that true for?

“Well, I know where to come for projects to work on, don’t I?"

He glanced around the rest of the area he was standing in, to see if there was anything else of interest to grab. There was a cage with a five-legged skeleton that looked creepy but interesting, a bust, a wig, a tiara, an old cupboard…

There didn’t seem to be anything else here he wanted for decorating. He called Itsy and asked her to take his new troll and gryphon to his clubhouse. Once she’d disappeared, he continued on his way, though he did glance back at the tiara briefly…it seemed strangely familiar for some reason…it had last time as well.

“Stop it. You’re not here for jewelry, you’re here for decorations, keep moving. What would you do with a tiara anyway? I’m sure that would go over real well with the boys in the dorm ‘Pardon me, fellas, I just wanted to feel pretty, I did.’ Yeah—that would go over real well.”

He continued walking, and then backtracked to go down another aisle.

“Dragon… Cool.”

After getting some of the ‘clubhouse’ set up to his satisfaction, he decided to call it a day. Even with magic, it took time and effort to move furniture and hang up decorations. Once the room was finished, he could call the ‘planning committee’ together. He’d already broached the idea of an inter-house common room/clubhouse. Once it was all finished, he could call his friends in the other houses together to make it a reality. Feeling cheerful, he headed up to Gryffindor house.
When he arrived in the dorms, he found Neville laying across his bed, staring at the ceiling. He turned to look when the door opened, but didn’t so much as raise an eyebrow.

“Alright, Nev?” Harry asked. The other boy had been different since his freak out over the mirror. He’d spent the night and the next day in the hospital wing after it happened, and had been withdrawn since then. Deciding that maybe it was best gotten out in the open, Harry said as much.

Neville went back to staring at the ceiling. “You must all think I’m a big whiny crybaby.” He said quietly.

Harry sighed and went to sit beside him. “Hardly. You’ve obviously been holding all that in for a long time. Of the two of us, I think you got the worse deal. My parents are just dead, and that’s bad enough, believe me. To have them alive and still not with you… No, that’s worse. It’s a lot worse. You were completely entitled.”

“Do you think that mirror really shows the future?” Neville whispered.

Harry debated a moment—on the one hand, he didn’t want to give his friend false hope. On the other hand, a big part of magic was belief.

“Who knows? It’s always possible, I suppose. It’s going to mean a lot of hard work though.”

The glimmerings of an idea began to form.

“I was thinking of going for twelve OWLs” Harry admitted. “Cousin Barty has twelve. He said it’s doable, but working towards it is best started sooner rather than later. He’s going to help me study a bit ahead during the summers, he said. What do you think? With a wide base of knowledge, and cross-training as healers and curse breakers over the next couple of years, if we work together we may find an answer that the healers at the hospital missed.”

A new resolve drove the remaining shadows out of Neville’s eyes, and he sat up, filled with determination.

“Yeah…yeah we can do that. The healers failed, it’s up to me to fix it.”

“And me. You won’t be alone in this.”

Neville’s eyes filled with tears and he nodded once, embarrassed at getting weepy for a second time in one day. Harry clapped him on the shoulder and pretended he didn’t see it.

“Thanks, Harry.”

“What are friends for?”

The following morning—Saturday— after breakfast, Harry went back to the ‘clubhouse’ he was setting up, wanting to complete the work as soon as possible. He’d stopped and told the others he’d chosen as part of the planning committee to stop by here to see him at ten because he had a surprise. It was almost ten now, and he’d just barely gotten done on time.

Harry straightened and cracked his back and looked around at the finished product in satisfaction. There were small groupings of chairs for conversation, with small tables interspersed among them, along one wall was a long table to hold the snack buffet. Near the center of the room was a grouping of three loveseats facing a large wooden chair and footstool, with a low table between
Sometimes it was really all about the presentation. The wooden chair wasn’t a throne by any
stretch of the imagination, but it would still bring one to mind, even if only subconsciously. This
was Harry’s show, and he wasn’t above using subtle cues to reinforce that in everyone’s mind. To
either side of his chair were a couple of tall candelabras, each holding three fat, white pillar
candles. Just above where his head would be hung a large wooden plaque with a large dragon’s
head. It was a fearsome looking thing—all teeth and scales, with a large crest upon its head. He
thought it made a suitably grandiose statement, without him having to say a word.

After exploring the warehouse room for a while, he’d found a couple of tapestries, that were a bit
worn, but otherwise fine. He had experimented a bit, trying to brighten the colors. It had worked to
some extent—it wasn’t obvious how old and worn they were now unless you really looked at them
closely.

Two of the tapestries—one of Hogwarts, with a scene of dancing witches and wizards on the lawn,
and frolicking through the forest, the second of a gruesome dragon vs. knight battle complete with
shooting flames and spellfire and lots of blood—hung to either side of the doorway, opposite
Harry’s ‘throne’. The third, mermaids and sirens lounging on rocks in a lagoon and combing their
hair—hung at the end of the room, between the troll and the gryphon, which had been tidied up
with Itsy’s help.

At the other end of the room was a large fireplace, and above it a large mirror that ran the length of
it, which reflected the whole room, or at least the top half of it. It made the room seem more
spacious than it already was. All in all, he was quite pleased with his efforts.

He checked the time and smirked. He had asked a few of his associates in the other houses to join
him here today to discuss his idea for regular inter-house brunches on Sundays for themselves and
their fellow first years. If everyone showed up, he had the stage all set to impress them. He lit a fire
in the fireplace, and set the candles alight, and then settled down in his ‘throne’ with his feet on the
stool—the very image of ease.

He heard them before he saw them. He was rather gratified by how they all stopped and gaped at
the transformation that the room had undergone since they’d seen it last.

Goyle snorted and grinned at him. “You never do things by halves, do you Harry?”

“How’d you get all this set up?” Hannah gasped. She had initially been against his idea when he’d
first proposed it, because she was certain no one would come to hang out in an empty room, and it
would likely be too much trouble to try getting furniture in there. She’d just been proven wrong,
and seemed much more enthusiastic about the whole idea now.

“I’ve been getting it set up, with some help from the Hogwarts house elves, since just after
breakfast. Have a seat, everyone. No need to stand on ceremony. We’re all friends here.”

The others sat down on the loveseats facing Harry’s chair.

“I know you said inter-house common room; judging by all the work you put into this place, I’m
guessing you have actual plans beyond the room?” Crabbe inquired.

“Well…not plans, so much as ideas. Mostly I just thought it was a sensible idea, and wondered
why no one had ever thought to do something like this before. With the weather in these parts
being what it is, we’re confined to the castle for large parts of the school year. Students tend to get
shooed away if they congregate or try to hang out anywhere but in their common rooms, which makes it hard for people to socialize outside their house. Parvati Patil, for example; she has a twin sister who she’s close to that’s in Ravenclaw. She and Lavender sit with her in classes when they can, but frankly we just don’t have many classes with Ravenclaw. If they try hanging out in the library, Madame Pince is there breathing down their necks and telling them to be quiet. When one considers just how big this castle is, it really makes no sense that there aren’t really many places students can go, outside of the house common rooms. Really, the current system seems almost designed to keep the Houses at odds with one another. There’s no real way to socialize much outside of them, and they compete against each other for both the House and Quidditch Cups.”

“Well, it sounds good to me.” Justin spoke up.

“We need to think of stuff for everyone to do the first few times they show up. I’ve already gotten the elves to agree to give us some light snacks and drinks for in here—nothing fancy, or heavy enough to spoil anyone’s appetite. We have a lot of work ahead of us…but if we do things right, I think it will be a fun and rewarding experience for everyone.”

The meeting lasted until dinnertime. They had gotten a lot done, though he had a feeling they’d need a few more meetings before everyone was satisfied. Working with groups of people was frustrating and tiresome in the extreme. He wouldn’t bother if he didn’t think it was both important and necessary. He was tired though—he wasn’t looking forward to all the work ahead to make the project a success.

“I just have to keep at it until it becomes self-sustaining. It shouldn’t take that long. The main problem this society seems to have is that people are hesitant to rock the boat, and buck the system. Once the way is laid it will get easier. Once they’ve done things a new way a couple of times, it will be an old way—things should just continue from there.”

That evening, after dinner, Gryffindor first years were on their way back to the tower for the evening. They were nearing the second floor, when Harry suddenly realized he had to go to the bathroom.

Harry slipped away from the group, and headed towards the nearest bathroom. He heard voices as he approached the door, and hesitated briefly after cracking the door open a bit in preparation for entering.

“…impatient. You don’t want me unhappy.”

“I’m sorry master, forgive me! It’s taking longer…”

“Too long!”

Harry pushed the door open with a sudden shove, cutting off the second voice mid-whimper. He did a quick scan of the room, and found Professor Quirrel hunched over one of the sinks, his face pasty, and with tension lines around his eyes and mouth.

“Oh, Professor… You alright there?” Harry asked innocently.

Quirrel straightened, gave him a fake, sickly smile and hurried from the room. Harry glanced after him, but his bladder was getting insistent.

Once back in the tower, while Harry socialized with his housemates and got some homework out of the way, he was also deep in thought.

“What was that all about, really? My bladder just started acting up all of a sudden…and I know there’s a spell for that, because I used it on Sirius once. Who drove me there? Dumbledore? Is this
his way of getting me curious and investigating? Maybe it was Snape? He seems to be suspicious of Quirrel, if his following him and driving him away from the hospital wing is any indication, not to mention all those trips to the third floor corridor. Or was it Quirrel? He’s obviously just a lackey—a spineless one, at that. I’ll recognize the voice of his ‘master’ if I ever hear it again, so that’s a bonus...unless his voice was disguised... Bah. I should just assume for the moment it was his real voice, and focus on what I know. Did Quirrel do it so he could have a reason to cut short his communication with his boss? This is all so troublesome.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Harry and friends open up the interhouse common room, discuss current events and accidentally set off a riot.

It took a few more meetings, but they were finally ready to unveil the ‘inter-house common room’, which they’d had jokingly dubbed ‘the melting pot’—Justin had even made a sign for the door that said as much—on April 1st.

The two Ravenclaws of the group had researched and then cast a silencing spell on the doorway so that the sounds of forty kids all talking in the room wouldn’t carry down the hall and alert Snape to their presence. Harry had searched for and found a way to make the door (and its sign) unnoticeable to anyone over the age of twelve. Hannah, Justin, Greg and Vince had come up with activities for the first meeting.

Harry had made a few more trips to the come and go room, and had found a couple of old chess sets, a gobstones set, and a couple of packs of exploding snap cards, which were now distributed throughout the room for people to use, and a bookshelf that was now filled with the muggle paperbacks and wizarding fiction from the come and go room. He had also found four house banners, which were now hanging to either side of the dragon head—anything that helped remind everyone that this place was intended for all of them was a bonus, in Harry’s opinion. Last, but not least, there were several goody baskets and pitchers of juice laid out on the table, ready and waiting.

The kids showed up in twos and threes—always with members of their own house. He and the ‘planning committee’ greeted everyone and showed them around, but as each group came in, they almost universally made a beeline for the corner the rest of their housemates had already staked out. Their group, in the center, was the only group that contained people of all houses. Harry did a quick head count, and saw that all the first years were present. It looked like it was show time.

Harry sighed, and climbed to his feet. “May I have your attention please?”

Bit by bit the crowd quieted down.

“Welcome, one and all, to the melting pot—the first year, inter-house common room. This is a project that all of us here”, he indicated the planning committee ‘have been working on for a week or so now. It occurred to all of us that there really wasn’t anywhere outside of the house common rooms that people could really hang out—especially if they had friends or relatives in another house. With that in mind, we got the idea for this place. Since this is the first time all of us are gathered together outside of class, we have some games lined up to help break the ice and give everyone a chance to get to know one another. Before we start, we thought it would be a good idea if everyone briefly introduced themselves. Since I’m already talking, I guess I’ll go first. My name is Harry Potter, my birthday is July 31st—I’m a Leo. My favorite color is green.”

Harry sat down, and Hannah stood up. “Hello everyone! My name is Hannah Abbot. My birthday is October 8th—I’m a Libra. My favorite color is yellow.”
Justin stood once she sat down. “Hello everyone, I’m Justin Finch-Fletchley…”

There were forty first years, so it took a while for all the introductions to go around. When the last student—Ron Weasley, birthday March 1st, Pisces, favorite color orange—made their introduction and sat back down, Harry stood again to address the crowd.

“Before we begin the games we’ve set up, I think it might be good to lay down the house rules. This is a place for all the first years of all the houses to socialize. Anyone starting up house-related rivalries will be asked to leave if they start getting out of hand. We have a lot of people, from a lot of backgrounds, with very different life experiences. If you consistently start trouble, you will be asked to leave. We don’t want to have to do that, but we will should it become necessary—so mind your manners. I hope everyone will look upon your time here as both a learning experience, and a time to have fun. Now!” Harry clapped his hands together “For our first game, continuing the theme of getting to know one another, we’ll be playing ‘truth or dare’—those of you raised in the muggle world, like myself, I should warn you: if you pick ‘truth’, you have to eat one of these candies before you answer. It contains a mild truth serum of short duration—just enough to keep everyone honest. Any dares given, I would ask only that you not make any that will likely result in someone getting expelled, or spending a lengthy time in detention—this is a game, it’s supposed to be fun.” He caught everyone’s eyes and saw there were no objections—though he thought a few of the students looked disappointed at the restrictions. “Alright, why don’t we move the chairs so we’re all in a circle?”

A few minutes of scrambling left all of them in a slightly lopsided oval. Hannah put one of the small tables in the center, and placed a spinner on top.

“I’ll spin to see who the lucky person is who gets to start. Does everyone know how to play?”

She glanced around and nodded when everyone agreed they knew the rules. She set the arrow to spinning. When it slowed down, a small beam of light erupted from the end, centered on Seamus Finnegan’s chest.

“Ah, blimey.” Seamus sighed theatrically.

“Seamus, truth or dare?”

“I’m not afraid to live dangerously. Give me a dare.”

“Um…sing ‘I’m a little teapot’ while wearing your tie on your head.”

The crowd snickered. Seamus looked at Hannah a bit oddly, though he complied cheerfully enough—Seamus was a bit of a ham, and he had no shame. The crowd was laughing and clapping by the time he’d finished, so Seamus took a bow before moving towards the spinner.

“Millicent Bulstrode, truth or dare?”

“Truth.”

The stout girl marched towards the dish of candies without needing to be told and ate one.

“What’s the most embarrassing thing you’ve ever done?”

“One time, my mum called me over to introduce to our new neighbors—I ran towards them and slipped in a mud puddle and landed flat on my back. It was real watery mud. The rest splashed up and landed on me. I was covered in muck from head to toe. I looked like some kind of swamp monster.”
The kids all snickered, picturing the scene. Millicent looked a bit grumpy at that, but just spun the arrow. “Harry Potter—truth or dare?”

“Um, truth.” Harry decided. He went and took one of the candies and swallowed it down. It had a faint aftertaste. He nodded to show he was ready.

Millicent looked like she was debating with herself, then nodded. “Do you remember anything from the night You-know-who was destroyed?”

“A flash of green light, and creepy laughter, that’s all.”

“Nothing else?”

“Nope, that’s it.”

The kids around the room shivered, and a couple rubbed their arms. Millicent sat back down and Harry spun. “Draco Malfoy, truth or dare?”

“Truth.”

Draco moved to join Harry in the center and ate one of the candies.

“What is something you don’t like about yourself?”

“I had a dream the night of the sorting of a voice told me I should be in Hufflepuff. I wanted to be in Slytherin to make my father proud, and I am, but I still feel like it’s not quite enough.”

The crowd was quiet after his confession. He very carefully didn’t look at anyone while he spun the arrow. “Hermione Granger. Truth or dare?”

“Truth.” Hermione said hesitantly, before moving to join him. Draco waited for her to eat one of the candies. “What was your first accidental magic?”

“I don’t really remember. I was drugged through most of my childhood.” Hermione paled and covered her mouth, looking horrified.

“Drugged?” Draco repeated, while looking at her like she’d grown a second head.

“My parents are muggles. I kept seeing odd things, and odd things would happen, and I tried telling them, but they thought I was crazy. They took me to a psychiatrist and he put me on medication. I threw it away and told them I was never going back when Professor McGonagall brought me my Hogwarts letter.”

Draco stared at her for a long moment before he went and sat down. Hermione, much like Draco before her, very carefully didn’t look at anyone while she spun the arrow.

“Pansy Parkinson, truth or dare?”

Pansy chewed on one of her fingernails while she debated. “Um…dare?”

“Uh…do an impression of Professor Flitwick!”

Pansy blinked, looked at Hermione askance and then moved to the center of the group.

She squatted down to make herself shorter and then put a manic smile on her face. “What do we do, boys and girls? Flick and swish! Flick and swish! “ she mimed directing
something on the floor. “Dance, my pineapple puppets! DANCE!” she said while chortling.

Her over the top performance helped dispel the heavy atmosphere from earlier, and she got a round of applause for her effort. She spun the arrow, which landed on “Padma Patil. Truth or dare?”

“Truth.” Padma answered, moving to take a candy. Pansy crossed her arms and glowered at her once she’d eaten.

“Why did you stop speaking to me?”

Padma frowned pensively and darted a glance towards her twin. “Parvati asked me to, once you were sorted into Slytherin.” She admitted.

Pansy stared at her stonily and flounced back to her seat. Padma sighed and spun the arrow. “Parvati Patil. Truth or dare?”

Parvati met her twin’s eyes, which held a challenge. “Truth.”

“Why did you really ask me to stop speaking to Pansy?”

“You two would always run off and do your own thing whenever you were together and leave me behind, and she’s mean, and always saying rude things to people. I thought it was a good excuse to make her go away.”

Padma looked at her sister thoughtfully for a moment before retaking her seat. Parvati spun the arrow. “Ron Weasley. Truth or dare?”

“Um…dare?”

“I dare you to tap dance.” Parvati muttered before retaking her seat.

Ron’s face and ears went red when everyone starting snickering. Ron danced—or he may have been having an epileptic seizure, not one was quite sure. The whole crowd was doubled over laughing when he was done, and his face was a bright, hot scarlet. He spun the arrow, wanting nothing more than to sit back down. “Susan Bones, truth or dare?”

“Dare.”

“Uh…close your eyes and pick someone at random. Whoever it is, you have to get on your knees and make a sappy love declaration to them, and sound like you mean it.”

Susan’s face went red, but she closed her eyes and spun in a slow circle with her arm in front of her. She landed on Terry Boot from Ravenclaw. The group started tittering, even before she reached him, and his face went red. Susan sighed, dropped to her knees and grabbed his hands in hers.

“Terry! You are my sun, my moon, my starlit sky! Without you…I dwell in darkness.”

Terry’s eyes bugged out and he began spluttering “my word!” The crowd laughed some more. Susan got up and spun the arrow.

“Anthony Goldstein, truth or dare?”

“Dare. Why not?”

“Um…do an impression of Professor McGonagall.”
Anthony pushed his glasses down to the end of his nose, and pressed his lips together while standing primly with his hands folded in front of himself. He did a slow scan over the audience.

“There shall be no…shenanigans…in my classroom. Is that clear?” he asked, in a passable Scottish brogue. The crowd snickered, he grinned and moved towards the arrow…

Harry sat on his chair, reading the paper and watching the crowd unobtrusively. They had played truth or dare until everyone had gotten a turn, and then had restored the room to its former configuration. The planning committee had done their best to get everyone to mingle afterwards—getting mixed house groups for exploding snap, gobstones and chess, introducing people with similar hobbies and interests to get conversations started. Harry had made the rounds and tried to spend a few minutes talking to everyone there—he didn’t want to be a face in the crowd that people would believe rumors about, he wanted to be someone known to them as just another student like themselves.

The plan seemed to be working so far. The atmosphere in the room was friendly, and while the house colors weren’t perfectly mixed, they were still far more mixed then he’d ever seen them at any other time. It looked like some faltered friendships were in the process of being repaired as well—Pansy and Padma were talking quietly in one of the corners, along with Parvati and Lavender—who had drug her friend over so all of them could make up or something.

Anthony and Terry were showing off the silencing spell and the charm on the door that only let it be seen by those under twelve to a group of rapt listeners, which included a couple of Gryffindors, a couple of Hufflepuffs, and a Slytherin—no other Ravenclaws though; all the ‘smart kids’ were playing exploding snap or arguing about quidditch.

In another corner, Hermione, Justin and Dean were deep in discussion with Crabbe, Goyle, Malfoy and Nott—three muggleborn, and four sons of death eaters cleared by reason of imperious; an interesting combination. He was keeping an eye on the situation—not because he really thought any of them were going to do anything, but because it had the potential to be volatile just because of who they were. He wasn’t the only one keeping a subtle eye on things either; he had noted that Ron, Neville, Seamus, as well as Blaise Zabini, Daphne Greengrass and Sofia Rivers of Slytherin were watching as well. He didn’t know what they thought of it all, but as everyone seemed content to let whatever was going on over there play out, he was as well.

Yes, all in all, things were turning out better than he’d ever dared hope.

That evening, as they were all headed up to Gryffindor tower, Harry took an informal poll. “So? What did everyone think?”

“I think it was a good idea, really. Why didn’t you invite any of us to be part of the planning committee though?” Hermione wondered.

“We always ended up talking about it on Sundays, because I was usually left to my own devices for a few hours. You were usually in the library, Ron, you were at the chess club, Dean, Seamus, you were usually working on your comic book, Lavender, Parvati, you were with your gossip network. Neville, you were with the herbology club. We tossed the idea around for a bit during those times, and finally decided to run with it. Did everyone have fun?”
“I did until I was forced by people I will not name…Lavender—to make nice with bane of my existence Pansy Parkinson.” Parvati muttered.

“How did you two know her anyway?” Hermione wondered.

“She lives nearby. We all grew up together. She and Padma always got along. She and I, not so much.”

“Well, you’ve got your own best friend now, right? No big deal.” Lavender asserted.

“I guess.” Parvati grumbled.

“What were you lot talking to those snake prats about?” Ron demanded of Dean and Hermione.

“They wanted to know if everyone with muggle parents spent most of their lives drugged and being told they were crazy.” Hermione admitted, looking embarrassed.

“What did you tell them?”

“The truth—no, it doesn’t happen to everyone, but it could easily happen. I guess I was lucky in that my mum is kind of superstitious, and she was always willing to believe there was more out there than we knew about. Even if that wasn’t the case though, well, things wouldn’t have worked out for me like they did for Hermione. There’s so many kids in my family, there was never a lot of money to go around. I wasn’t going to be sent to no shrink unless it was a case of everyone thinking I was dangerous-crazy, not just a bit odd-crazy. There’s lots of odd-crazy folks around, people just deal and move on, you know? Dangerous-crazy is different.” Dean explained.

“Justin said his parents just thought he had a vivid imagination, so they started sending him to all sorts of arts classes—music, drawing, painting, that sort of thing.”

“What did the Slytherins think of all that?”

“I don’t know, really. They had a lot of warped ideas about muggles. We tried to set them straight on the worst of it, and give them a more realistic idea of what it’s like growing up magical in the muggle world.”

“Warped ideas?” Neville asked curiously.

“Doctors, for instance. They thought they were just mad sadists who went around chopping people up for no good reason, can you imagine?” Hermione huffed.

“Sure. If for your entire life medical care always involved someone pointing a wand at you, or stuffing you full of potions, I imagine knowing muggle doctors cut you open must seem really appalling and frightening, if you don’t really understand why they do it, or how.” Harry replied, his voice bland.

Dean nodded, and Hermione did as well, though it seemed a bit reluctant. “I suppose that’s true.” She allowed.

“Do you think it’s worth continuing?”

There was agreement all around, although some of them were more enthusiastic than others.

“I was thinking when the next Hogsmeade weekend comes along, we could invite the second years to join us.” Harry suggested. “On the understanding that they keep their mouths shut about the
“Why? I would think you’d want as many people involved as you could get.” Hermione objected.

“Hermione…how long do you think it would be before we first and second years were kicked out if the older kids knew about that room? It wouldn’t be long at all. All the teenagers with boyfriends or girlfriends in another house would be in there snogging night and day, and shooing us out if we tried to use the room. No. I set it up, and I’ve decided we can allow the second years, but no one else. Unlike the older kids, none of us get to get out of the castle all year, except to roam around on the grounds once in a while. Besides—they’ve all been here a lot longer than any of us. If they wanted an inter-house common room, they’ve had plenty of time to set one up themselves.”

“He’s got a point, Hermione. You know what it’s like in the Gryffindor common room. When the place is packed after curfew, we’re usually stuck sitting on the floor by the fire, or wedged into a corner, or have to go up to the dorms because the older kids are all sprawled across all the seats.”

“Well…I guess you have a point. It doesn’t seem right though.”

“Like I said, they’ve had plenty of time to do something like that themselves. Too bad for them if they were too lazy or never thought of it.”

They arrived at the Fat Lady, and Dean spoke the password so they could all climb through. It was just getting towards curfew, and the common room was packed—there were no seats. Hermione huffed and glared sourly at the older kids sprawled everywhere.

“You know what? I take it back. The older kids can go hang.”

“That’s the spirit, Hermione. We’ll make a rebel of you yet.” Seamus laughed.

That evening, an eagle owl winged its way towards Malfoy Manor bearing a letter.

*Dearest Father and Mother,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. Things here at Hogwarts are going swimmingly, if I do say so myself. This evening, we had our first inter-house mixer among all the first years. Some of us came up with the idea for a common room for just us—one does get tired of being shooed off by upperclassmen after curfew, when trapped in the house common room for the evening. Really, is it so difficult to arrange enough seating for everyone?*

*I didn’t feel like bothering with the piddling details necessary to get the place up and running, so I sent Crabbe and Goyle off to be part of the planning committee, and report back to me. They performed better than I expected, and our first meeting was a stunning success all around. Not only was there much fun to be had, but a lot of things came to light during the proceedings. Mother, do you remember me telling you Pansy was having fits because one of the Patil girls dropped her like a hot potato soon after school began? It turns out it was the other Patil that made her do it. Pansy confronted her and it all came out. Happily, they all seem to have worked out their differences, which is a great relief, because all of her moaning and groaning kept getting in the way when I was trying to talk. Hopefully, she’ll now be a better member of the audience.*

*Something else of note that came out was that muggleborn Hermione Granger was being drugged by her muggle parents for years. I thought you’d want that investigated, so I and some of the boys*
from Slytherin interrogated her and the others in our year about the evils of muggles. The other two didn’t have the same experience—the one’s magic was ignored because his mother was seemingly quite observant and smart for a muggle, and was certain there was more out there than she knew of. The other’s parents took it as a sign of artistic merit, and funded an artsy education for him. It seems the muggle problem is more complicated than I realized. I will continue to investigate and send updates as I learn more.

Another thing of note is that Harry Potter remembers the night his parents were killed, though not much. He remembers a flash of green light, and creepy laughter, but that’s all. He was under a truth serum at the time, so that’s probably all he actually remembers. I will write again when I have more news,

In Salazar’s name,
Draco

By the time mid-April had rolled around, the Melting Pot had been firmly established as the place to be after classes—there was company, there were plenty of places to sit, and there was a congenial atmosphere. There was a drawback though, and one Harry hadn’t considered when he had come up with the idea. With everyone in one place, it was now very obvious when he was off doing his own thing by himself. Hermione drew so much attention to the fact that he was trying to slink off by himself, that he found himself without free time to research topics not covered in the curriculum, except in the early morning hours before breakfast, and most of that time was taken up with him keeping up on his exercise and honing his ninja skills. He’d been able to turn Hermione’s interference around on her so far by claiming that he was going to the bathroom, and yelling at her to leave him the hell alone already—but it had happened three times, and people were beginning to look at him suspiciously, instead of looking at Hermione oddly, which was completely unfair in Harry’s opinion. She had completely undercut everything he’d been trying to do, because of her interference, and he was decidedly unhappy about it.

“Well, I guess if a job is too big to do on one’s own, the answer is to get others to do the work for you—just like with the map.” He finally decided. That’s how ‘project corner’ was born.

He spent the remainder of April bringing up the idea to different people in a roundabout way, and letting them run with it, only making suggestions here and there to get them to do things the way he wanted, while letting them think it was all their idea. He scoured the room of broken things for stuff that looked cool and left them on a table in the corner of the room for people to poke at.

Terry Boot (with prompting) made up general questionnaires for people to fill out once they’d fixed something: What is the thing, and what does it do? How did you find out what it did? What spells did you use? What spells did you use to fix it? What books did you consult during this?

Hannah Abbot suggested (at Harry’s prompting) that people who completed projects should do a presentation for everyone, so their hard work and ingenuity could be properly appreciated. Justin (also with a bit of prompting) suggested the questionnaires be kept on file so people could read them afterwards for more information after the presentation, if they were interested. Goyle suggested a bulletin board be set up in project corner for people to post questions, or topics they were interested in, but didn’t have the time or the skills to do themselves. Crabbe bashfully admitted he was struggling in some classes, and would really appreciate something like what Goyle suggested—to Hermione, who puffed up in pride and marched off to start researching stuff.
They, after taking lessons with Harry, had caught on to what he was doing, and just helped him out without prompting. He was really proud of both of them.

Dearest Mother and Father,

I hope this letter finds you well. Things have become increasingly busy in these parts as we near the beginning of May.

The professors are loading us down with work every time we turn around. I’ve written so many essays recently that my poor hand is likely to be permanently disfigured. You will be glad to know that, essay disfigurement aside, I believe I will do quite well on the practical portions of all my exams.

We came up with some games to force us to use the charms skills we’ve been gaining in class with things like ‘levitating ball catch’—we’ve been calling it ‘lebbatch’ for short, and ‘puppet dance off’ for example.

There’s a group trying to come up with other games to widen the number of spells we can use this way. It seems to have been quite helpful for a number of people, as now, even the children who were rubbish at charms have shown a marked improvement since we’ve all been playing.

One of the kids mentioned that it was transfiguration he had problems with—but we came up with a solution for that too. We asked the house elves to stop bringing plates, cups, or cutlery to the room, and left a box of odds and ends on the table instead. Now, if you want a drink, or to get a snack, you have to transfigure something into a cup or a plate or what have you. If you want paper to write on, or a quill, you have to transfigure that too. There’s new materials each day, and so everyone has gotten a lot of practice.

Longbottom and Millie were both terrible at transfiguration, but you should see them now! They make cups and plates and cutlery, paper and quills, push pins and badges and all sorts of things, without thinking twice about it anymore, because it was do that or do without.

I myself have been spending a lot of time in ‘project corner’. A group of us got together and have been researching broken items found around the castle and figuring out how to repair them. I’ve been working on a music box. It’s been quite challenging trying to fit in time to work on it in between classes and homework, but I’ve no doubt I’ll have completed the project before year’s end. I’m quite certain my presentation will both get me a standing ovation, and perhaps a prize.

I will write again when I have more news.

As always, in Salazar’s name,

Your obedient son,
Draco

May arrived, and with it a bit of slightly-warmer weather. Students began venturing outdoors again, though they mostly kept to the courtyards as the thawing snow left the grounds slick and muddy in spots.

The last Hogsmeade weekend of the year saw the third years and above leaving the castle in high
spirits, and laughing at the first and second years that were left behind. Harry had broached the idea of inviting the second years during Hogsmeade weekend, and had been met with approval by the majority of the first years. With that in mind, when breakfast was over, and the third years and up were heading to the carriages to make the trip down to the village, the first years of each house were chatting with their older housemates that had been left behind.

Many of the second years had already had their thirteenth birthdays, and so the first years had been instructed to lead them through the spelled doorway. They explained the reasons why as they approached the Melting Pot, and explained that they’d only be allowed to come back after this if they promised to keep the place’s existence a secret from all the older kids. Bemused, and not expecting much, the second years agreed to come along…and were quite surprised by what they found.

They repeated what they’d done the first time they’d gathered in the room—a round of introductions, a rousing game of truth or dare, followed by snacks and mingling.

The second years were for the most part rather intimidated by the first years ease with magic—they were all transfiguring cups and plates and cutlery like they did it every day. They were rather taken aback when they assured them they did do it every day.

They were introduced to the puppet dance off, lebbatch, and project corner, and those who wished to gravitated towards the quidditch discussions, the game boards, or to the group gathered in the center around Harry on his not-a-throne, who were discussing things that were in the paper that day.

“You’re discussing current events?” Cho Chang, a pretty Ravenclaw second year asked Harry.

Harry glanced up at her over the top of his paper, and she smiled at him, before flipping her long hair over her shoulder. She had nice hair; it was very shiny and seemed to shimmer in the light like a fall of silk. Harry folded his paper and gave her his full attention.

“Yes. It’s something we do, though naturally the groups change day to day, depending on whether a person is in the mood to do it. It’s important to know what’s going on in the world, though I’ll be honest, the real reason for me is that gran Longbottom, who got me the subscription for Christmas, made it clear that she expected me to read the paper, and write to her regularly to let her know what I thought about what I’d read. These discussions help me a lot to formulate what I’m going to say.”

“Gran Longbottom? I didn’t realize you were that closely related to the Longbottoms.”

“I’m not, Augusta and her grandson Neville are cousins of mine, of course. It’s just a nickname, really. Older women just seem to like me.” He gave her a cheeky smile as he said that, which made her blush and start giggling—which in turn did strange things to his insides. He felt the urge to start grinning at her like a fool, so he did his best to push those feelings down, and tried to get his brain to start working again. In desperation, he focused on where the conversation had wandered to, and found the group discussing whether or not they thought Gwenog Jones of the Holyhead Harpies had really turned her former teammate into a woodlouse, and if so, what should be done about it.

“What do you think?” he asked Cho, indicating the arguing group.

Cho shrugged. “Well, from what I read of the article, they have no proof she did anything, just suspicions. I think there’s a good chance she probably did do something to her, but without proof
“There isn’t really anything that can be done.”

“SEE! Cho agrees she’s guilty. She’s a menace to society and something should be done about her.”

“There’s no proof though”

“So? Everyone knows she’s guilty.” Elric Wodehouse, Gryffindor second year asserted.

“You think that’s enough?” Harry asked casually.

“Well, sure.”

“That’s the kind of thinking that got my godfather thrown in Azkaban for ten years.”

“Exactly.” Cho agreed. “Which is pretty much what I said—she might very well be guilty, but without proof it means nothing. I certainly didn’t say she should just be thrown in Azkaban without it.” She added pointedly in Elric’s direction.

“I’m going to have to agree with Cho here. We have laws, and a process for the administration of justice for a reason. It’s all very well to say ‘oh we know, and that’s good enough’ when it’s not yourself who faces prison. I have a feeling you’d feel differently if it was you.” Harry asserted.

“I agree with Harry. Justice, not mob vengeance, is the way a civilized society should be governed.” Justin Finch-Fletchley asserted.

“Exactly. We’ve all seen firsthand how accurate mob mentality is. I don’t know about you, but I sure as hell wouldn’t want to bet my life or freedom on it.”

“What are you talking about?” Cormac McLaggen, another Gryffindor second year demanded.

“The first day of term, the whole school, minus my friends and fellow first years in Gryffindor, were utterly convinced I had viciously attacked a Ravenclaw seventh year with magic, and probably killed him, on no evidence whatsoever. Thankfully, it was cleared up. If it hadn’t of been, and I had been dependent on the good will of the mob to see justice done, I would have been screwed wouldn’t I?”

Though there was no censure in his voice, a couple of the people seated nearby squirmed a bit and looked vaguely shamefaced, a couple just looked vaguely offended that he was calling them on their behavior.

“Um…what did everyone think of that Muggle Protection Act that supposed to be coming up for review soon?” Cho interjected, trying to get the conversation moving.

“I wish they’d included the law itself for review so I could see for myself if it’s as dodgy as it sounds.” Harry muttered.

“Dodgy? I think protecting muggles from magic they can’t defend themselves from sounds admirable.” Justin retorted.

“And I would agree if that’s what it did. According to the article, it’s going to make it illegal to enchant muggle items. My godfather has a flying motorcycle that he loves to distraction. It will be illegal under this law if it goes through. That’s not protecting muggles from magic. If someone who lives in a muggle area magics up a car to act like the Knight Bus so that they can have the benefits of wizarding transportation while still sort of ‘blending’ with their muggle surroundings,
they can’t do it, because it will be illegal. If someone living in a muggle area magics up their appliances to do things quicker and more efficiently, that would be illegal too.”

“No, no, no! It says it’s illegal to magic things up to behave in a way they’re not supposed to.”

“Muggle appliances aren’t supposed to run on magic, so by definition they would be behaving in a way they’re not supposed to. That’s what I mean by dodgy. The way it’s described sounds like it’s loosely worded and open to interpretation. In the wrong hands, a law like that can be used to harass wizards that are just trying to live their lives and blend as best they can, not just punish wizards who get off on tormenting muggles that can’t fight back. That’s why I wish they’d included the wording of the law itself. Plus, think about it—muggles use brooms all the time, to clean with, not fly on. Technically, brooms that fly would be in violation of that law. Muggles play chess all the time—but they have to move the pieces, they don’t move themselves. Technically all wizarding chess sets would be in violation of the law. Draco Malfoy is currently working on repairing a music box—muggles have music boxes, but they run on gears, not magic. It would be in violation of that law. Gran Longbottom has a teapot that will pour out tea for you. Muggles have tea pots, but you have to make it pour, it doesn’t do it automatically—she’s had it for decades, and it was passed down from her grandmother. It’s in violation of the law…”

“Alright, alright. I see your point. That is a bit dodgy, isn’t it?” Justin agreed.

“Wait, wait…did you say it makes flying on brooms illegal? What about quidditch?” McLagen demanded.

“I suppose it all depends on whether they actually apply the law across the board—in which case, no more quidditch, or if they just pick and choose when it’s applied—which would be just as bad, really. In the hands of someone willing to interpret it for their own ends, it can be used as a tool for harassment—which sort of goes back to our earlier discussion about mob mentality, doesn’t it?”

McLagen and Wodehouse exchanged horrified glances and made a hasty retreat to spread the word among all the quidditch fanatics. There was soon a heated discussion going on over there. Harry had a feeling the Ministry was about to be bombarded by hysterical letters from angry quidditch fans. Well…whatever worked, was how Harry saw it. If it got the Ministry to review the law and tighten it up so that Sirius wouldn’t be forced to give up his motorcycle, or granny Longbottom her tea set, or Ron his chess set, it was all to the good.

“So…what did you all think about the article about the riot with the troll rights people?” Justin wondered.

“I don’t know why the crazy woman who’s their spokeswitch bothers, really. She got knocked out by her own trolls!” Susan Bones exclaimed.

“The thing that struck me most is that there’s apparently an anti-troll-rights group. Why does such a thing even exist?” Harry wondered.

“Well…obviously because they don’t want trolls to get rights.” Susan answered slowly, as though she couldn’t imagine why he’d have to even ask.

“Gaining troll rights would be an uphill battle regardless, why does it require a group whose sole focus is to work against it? Don’t you think it’s weird? More than even the group existing in the first place, there’s also the fact that they’re troublemakers.”

“Troublemakers? How do you figure that?” Cho asked while Susan was spluttering in disbelief.
“The troll-rights group was holding a demonstration when the anti-troll-rights group forced their way into the place and started a riot. The paper says as much, though they try to gloss over that little fact. The trolls fought back. Look over there.”

Harry pointed everyone towards the stuffed troll in the corner.

“They’re big. They carry clubs which they use when they feel threatened. Of course, it’s possible they didn’t have their clubs with them. If that’s the case, the spokeswitch might have gotten knocked out when the riot started, completely by accident. Were the anti-troll people waving fire around? Did one of the trolls start flailing around in fright and just clip the spokeswitch by accident and knock her out? Did one of the anti-troll people actually knock her out and it was blamed on the trolls? I have to wonder. The actual circumstances of her getting knocked out are sort of glossed over, the author of the piece is biased against trolls and doesn’t even try to hide it, and the whole thing is used to say ‘See? Trolls are violent, filthy animals who viciously attack even people trying to help them! Oh, and by the way, Heliotrope Willis is a stupid moron for trying to help them, don’t you agree?’. It all sounds dodgy to me.”

“Oh, Harry, you think everything sounds dodgy.” Susan sighed.

“All it takes for evil to prevail is for good men to do nothing. You have to be willing to ask the hard questions and demand answers. I mean, heck, maybe trolls really are stupid animals that destroy everything in their path, and maybe that Heliotrope Willis is a fool for trying to get them rights—but as I’ve never actually spoken to a troll, I don’t actually know that for a fact. I know they have a language. Barty Crouch Senior could speak troll. It was one of the languages required for his work as part of international relations. That by itself puts them a cut above mere animals. Does that mean they should have rights? I don’t know. Personally I think all living things should have some basic rights…that doesn’t mean I want cats and dogs being able to vote though. That’s another thing…what kind of rights are we talking about? The article doesn’t say, it just says ‘troll rights’. What does that mean? Are they being hunted, and they want the right to not be? Are the anti-troll people hunters, and they’re against them getting rights because it means hunting them would then be illegal? Or is it something else? Do they want to open businesses? Have jobs? Sit on the Wizengamot? It makes a big difference, depending on what it is they’re asking for. In the end, it all comes down to not just taking things at face value. I’ll say this much for Heliotrope Willis—I admire her willingness to take a stand for something she believes in, even should it be proven that she’s misguided. All throughout history there have been people who have been willing to stand up against the crowd and say ‘this isn’t right.’ They’re often vilified in their own time, but eventually are remembered as heroes and heroines who tried to do the right thing, not the easy thing, in spite of great personal cost to themselves. I suppose only time will tell whether or not she’s one of those people.”

Cho smiled at him admiringly, and it was all Harry could do not to grin back like an idiot—though he wasn’t sure he managed to hide the dopey expression completely, as she started giggling and a faint tinge of pink spread across her freckled nose.

Sadly, their moment ended not long afterwards. Cho seemed to be a popular girl, and her group of friends came to fetch her and drag her off to a discussion going on elsewhere. She glanced back over her shoulder at him as she was led away—and there went his stomach doing those odd flips again. When he turned back to what was left of the group, he found Justin and Susan both grinning at him. He felt his face starting to turn red, and fought it down as best he could.

“Oh, shut up.” He muttered.

Susan and Justin just grinned wider.
“Let’s see what else there is to talk about.”

“Fine.” Susan giggled.

“You know, in muggle papers they usually have a large real estate section. I’ve noticed this paper doesn’t, why is that?”

“Oh, um, I don’t know. I know many wizarding homes have been in a single family for generations, so maybe there isn’t any?” Susan offered.

“There was a big war recently.” Harry pointed out “and even before that there must have been new homes available—surely everyone didn’t always live with their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents after they married and had children.”

“Um…maybe a lot of the houses got blown up, like yours did? I don’t know.”

“My house didn’t get blown up. My parents moved out of it and rented a place on the other side of the town. It was that house that blew up. I wouldn’t have even known if my godfather hadn’t of taken me to Godric’s Hollow. It turns out my uncle had been collecting rent on the place all this time and keeping it for himself—probably would have kept doing so if I hadn’t of found out about it.”

“He was stealing from you?” Justin demanded, sounding outraged.

“Quite gleefully, yes. I told him he’s paying me back or I’m bringing charges, so no worries on that front. There were muggles living in the house all this time, but they moved out before the end of summer, so he moved Hermione’s family in.”

“Hermione Granger? She’s living in your house?”

“Only until graduation. I plan on living there myself then, but yeah. They were living closer to London, and with them thinking she was mad for years…” Harry explained.

“Yeah, it’s hard for the muggles isn’t it? My mum is a muggle. It makes things difficult.” Susan agreed.

“I suppose love trumps other considerations, but honestly, I don’t understand why so many people marry muggles, when they know that they can never fully share their lives. It’s even more incomprehensible when you realize that squibs are shunted off to the muggle world for the same reason! Why aren’t people marrying squibs, and leaving the muggles out of things? At least a squib could participate in life in the wizard world to a greater degree than a pure muggle could, and it’s not like a squib would never produce magical children—Griphook the goblin told me muggleborns were descendants of squibs shunted off to the muggle world. There’s no telling how long it took for the magic to come back, but there you are. If a squib can have magical descendants, even after generations of marrying muggles, how much more likely is it if they’re kept in the wizarding world? And why isn’t there a school for them? At least a squib could work with runes as well. It seems unfair that they’re driven away from home and family, and then wizards turn around and marry muggles left and right. It seems the worst sort of hypocrisy to me.”

“Maybe…but there’s a reason for it. Usually, a squib being born is a sign that your line is becoming too inbred. The squib is sent to the muggle world to thin out their blood, and the family marries muggles for a bit to thin out theirs.”

“So, it was known to some people, at some point, that marrying muggleborns was a necessary step
in this ‘no inbreeding process?’ How did they end up becoming specific targets during wartime then? If anything, you’d think they’d be on the ‘no hit’ list!”

“You to be passionate on the subject of squibs.” Justin interjected to change the subject.

“My babysitter was one. She breeds and sells half-kneazle cats. I’ve also had my suspicions about my uncle’s family now and again. My aunt is the sister of a muggleborn witch, and she said her parents were happy to have a witch in the family—that makes me have suspicions about just how long ago it was that there was last magic in my mum’s family, because honestly, I don’t think muggles are usually thrilled about the magic thing, even if they try to be supportive of their children.”

“That’s true. My parents did try to talk me into forgetting about Hogwarts and just going to Eton as planned. I eventually talked mum around to seeing how useful having a wizard in the family could be, but I think she still wishes I could have just followed her plans for my life. Dad too, though he’s never been anything but cheerful and supportive—I know him well enough that I can still tell.”

“Yeah. It’s true for my mum as well. I think sometimes she wishes I didn’t have magic—or that she did. My little brother is showing signs of magic too. The first time it happened, I thought she looked a little disappointed.”

“On some level, she probably was. You and he will both go places she can literally never follow—that has to be a terrible realization for a mother.”

The quidditch fans were working up quite a head of steam by this point—Harry, Susan and Justin all turned to look when one of them yelled that it was an outrage, and he was going to write his grandfather about it. A few others nodded agreement and one went and grabbed some of the odds and ends left out for transfiguration purposes and started making parchment and quills to hand out.

Harry saw Hermione’s attention get drawn to the folks in the corner, and she stood, looking as though she were going to march over there to break things up.

Harry glanced around unobtrusively and saw no one’s eyes were on him, so he discreetly sent a small jinx that tripped her while marching over. Hermione yelped and went sprawling, landing hard on her hands and knees. Lavender rushed over to help her out, and then began exclaiming over the scrapes she’d gotten and pushed her towards the door to go to the medical wing and have them seen too.

Hermione protested, of course, and kept craning her head around to see what the quidditch fans were doing—especially as it seem to be upsetting Ron something fierce. Ron, red-faced and angry looking, snarled at one of the people writing a letter, and marched off. He threw himself down on the loveseat next to Susan, and cast one last dirty look the quidditch fans way.

“Can you believe those bastards? They’re all calling my dad a quidditch-hating miscreant!”

“Hey, Ron? What does your dad do at the Ministry anyway?” Harry asked.

“He’s the Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, why?”

Harry’s eyebrows rose and he glanced at Justin who was also looking a bit taken aback.

“Really? That’s interesting.” Was all Harry said in response.

“What?” Ron demanded.
“Nothing, Ron. Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t even try that! The twins say stuff like that to me all the time, and it never ends well for me! Spit it out.”

“It’s nothing like that Ron, I was just thinking that it’s a rather huge conflict of interest is all.”

“Conflict of…what the hell are you going on about, mate?”

“It’s like…oh, I know. You’ve read Quidditch Through the Ages, right?”

“Yeah…”

“The Ministry stepped in to regulate the size of the goals because of a huge conflict of interest. The team whose pitch it was always had the goal posts they had to score in as big as a barn—while the opposing team’s goals were so small, they were lucky if they could actually fit the quaffle through. It was in the team’s best interest to make it easier for them to score, but it wasn’t exactly a fair game, was it? Your dad is essentially writing his own rules to enforce, which is also a huge conflict of interest. Not only that but…doesn’t your dad have a flying car? A car he made based off the work my godfather did on his motorcycle? A flying car that would be illegal under the law he just wrote? A law that he himself will be enforcing as he sees fit? That’s a massive conflict of interest right there—because obviously, he’s not going to be prosecuting himself…my godfather, however, if he ever pisses him off, might suddenly find himself being prosecuted under that law, for all that he was the one who gave him the know-how to make the car he isn’t prosecuting!”

Ron spluttered in protest. “He wouldn’t do that!”

“What guarantee does Sirius have of that? It’s your dad’s decision, isn’t it? He’s already been shafted by the system once; I’ll be damned if I’m going to stand by and let it happen a second time.”

Ron began to look uneasy. “I need to go write a letter to my mum.” He muttered, before running off.

Susan waited until Ron was gone, and then rose to go join the quidditch fans. “I think I’m going to write to my aunt. I have a feeling she’d be real interested in all this.”

“Do you have some kind of hostility against Ron’s dad?” Justin wondered.

Harry frowned as he got a brief glimpse of a shadowed man backlit by light from a street lamp coming through a window. He rubbed his head, feeling uneasy. He noticed Susan watching him and biting her lip, and his eyes narrowed. “You know something.”

“Um…well…”

“Tell me.”

“I kind of overheard my aunt talking to my dad one day. She said Arthur Weasley obliviated you.”

“He what?” Harry asked quietly. “Why?”

“I don’t really know any details. They stopped talking when they realized I was there and changed the subject. I only heard part of it. When they pulled him in to question him about Peter Pettigrew, he assumed it was about you being obliviated and started babbling. That’s all I know.” She
apologized, before taking her leave.

Harry glanced over at Justin when he felt his eyes on him—he was gaping, with his mouth hanging open. He seemed to realize what he was doing and shut his mouth with a ‘click’.

“This is why you’re so paranoid, isn’t it?”

“I guess…though you know what they say: it’s not paranoia if they really are out to get you.”

Harry replied quietly. “I need to get to the library.”

“I’ll go with you if you like. I’ve noticed Hermione has a thing about you going places by yourself.”

Harry rolled his eyes and sighed. “No kidding. I don’t know what that girl’s problem is. It sounds mean to say it, but I honestly have to wonder if her parents were right and she is actually nuts.”

They started across the room, and Harry suddenly stopped with a frown. Justin stopped as well and looked at Harry with his eyebrow raised. “What is it?”

“When we get to the library, we’re asking Madame Pince where we can find stuff on memory enhancers. We can tell her were worried about our end of year exams.”

“Why?” Justin asked carefully.

“The Ministry knows this was done to me, but they let it stand. They’ve also, it seems, taken precautions to not talk about it around people I might interact with. They might not be too keen on me trying to undo it.”

Justin frowned, and began looking a bit freaked out, but he fell into step with Harry when he started walking again. “I suppose it can’t hurt…and it will be useful in any case.” He agreed.

Harry fished around in his pouch and withdrew a calming draught—which their class had made in potions just last week. The recipe had made quite a lot of the stuff; even after handing in a sample, he had enough to fill eight more vials.

“I’m glad I took to carrying some of the common potions I made” Harry explained, before downing half of it. “Calming draught. Want some?”

Justin looked at the stuff and then nodded, taking it and downing it in one swallow. Harry took back the empty vial, corked it and stowed it away.

They turned the corner and nearly ran into Professor Snape, whose gaze narrowed upon seeing a Gryffindor and a Hufflepuff appearing from within his dungeons.

“What are you doing down here?”

“I don’t know, sir. We were walking up on the second floor and we were suddenly down here. We got lost. I’m not sure how it happened.”

Snape frowned at both of them and then gestured curtly with his head. “Move along.”

“Yes sir!” the boys chorused. They quickened their steps and hurried past him and then up the stairs out of the dungeons to begin the climb to the fourth floor where the library was.

“He believed you! Oh, wait, the troll…”
“Yeah, that’s what gave me the idea, actually.”

“Oh, good show.”

“Thanks. I’m rather proud of it myself. In fact…we should spread the word to everyone. You must admit it makes a good cover story…plus, there probably is actually such a thing around. If Snape goes looking, he may actually find it at some point.”

“Good idea. I don’t mind admitting that man scares me. Anything that will keep him off our backs is a good idea by me.”

“I think he’s more grumpy than scary, honestly, and given how many explosions there are in potions class each time we meet, I think he might have reason to be.”

“Hmm. You might have a point there.”

They made it up to the library and found the place deserted. Harry shrugged, and started towards the card catalog and began searching for memory related books. “Okay, it should be down this way.” He announced after taking a quick look around. They walked down the aisles, scanning the titles on each side, and eventually found themselves in a back corner that was poorly lit and a bit creepy.

“Goodness, I can barely read any of the titles back here.”

“I can, hang on.” Harry murmured—though even for him, reading text in such light was a bit of a strain. “Here we are” he announced when he found the right section. He pulled a couple that looked promising, handing half to Justin, and they headed back to a more well-lit area and found a table to settle at.

“Hermione! What is the rush?” Lavender huffed as she hurried to keep up with the quickly walking girl.

“I want to know what was going on!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Everyone in the one corner was all worked up about something! I was going over to find out what was going on and I fell, like an idiot. Whatever it was, it was big, I just know it. Oh, I hope a brawl hasn’t broken out. You should have let me handle things instead of dragging me off to the hospital wing.”

“Oh listen to you! There are other people there who can break up a brawl—that’s if one even broke out. It’s certainly not up to you to do it. Anyway, you were all scraped and bleeding and limping by the time we got upstairs. Don’t tell me you didn’t need to go to the hospital wing.”

They darted down the hallway in the dungeons and into the melting pot, only to stop short when they realized the place was empty.

“B-but…where has everyone gone!” Hermione wailed.

“I don’t know…” Lavender replied. “I guess we should go look?”
The two girls hurried out of the room and started back towards the great hall and nearly ran into Snape.

“Oh, Professor!” Hermione gasped.

“What are you two little Gryffindors doing down here?” he demanded.

“We’re looking for everyone else. We don’t know where anyone is.”

Snape’s eyes widened just a bit and he muttered a curse under his breath before stalking off deeper into the dungeons, pulling his wand as he did so.

“What was that all about, do you think?”

“Oh! Something must have happened! Oh, I knew something was going on!”

“Let’s go.” Lavender urged, pulling the shorter girl along.

They checked the great hall, and the nearby places people liked to hang out, peered into the courtyards—but there was no one around.

“Um…the common room, do you think?”

“Couldn’t hurt, I suppose.” Lavender agreed. They began the long trek up to Gryffindor tower.

When they reached Gryffindor tower, they both breathed a sigh of relief when they saw the Fat Lady was in her frame.

“Fiddlesticks” Hermione said clearly.

They ducked inside and Lavender ran up to check the girls dorms, Hermione the boys’ when they found the common room empty.

They both returned a few minutes later and looked at each other with some alarm.

“I guess we keep looking?”

Hermione nodded agreement, and they left.

“I don’t understand—where did they all go, and why did everyone just run off like that? It’s kind of creepy—the whole castle feels empty.”

“Looking for someone, dears?” The Fat Lady asked curiously as she and her friend Violet broke off their conversation.

“We’re looking for all the rest of the first and second years. We can’t find anyone at all!”

“Oh…I saw a big group head off towards the owlery earlier, before I came up here. I was just telling everyone about it.”

“The owlery? Why did everyone go there?”

“I don’t know for certain—everyone was angry about someone trying to outlaw quidditch, or something.”

“Outlaw quidditch?” Hermione scoffed. “Oh, I should have known it would be something inane that got everyone riled up earlier.” She added with obvious disdain.
“OUTLAW QUIDDITCH?” Lavender howled in distress at the same time. “WHAT KIND OF SICK BASTARD WOULD DO SUCH A THING?”

Lavender, wild-eyed, grabbed Hermione and drug her down the hall to the nearest approach to the owlery. “Come on, we need to find out what’s going on. NOW.”
Hermione stumbled along behind her. “Lavender! Lavender! Slow down!”

“No! This is important!” Lavender growled, speeding her steps even more. Hermione jogged to keep up.

Down in the dungeons, Snape stalked along, checking for a doorway that led to the second floor. He heard what sounded like a large group of people in the distance. He listened as he headed back, when the sound suddenly cut off as though they’d all suddenly vanished.

He hurried back the way he’d come, but found no sign of any large group of people. He’d already been all over this hallway looking for a hidden passageway, and had found nothing. Muttering under his breath, he began stalking towards the second floor; maybe he’d have more luck from that end.

“I wonder where the heck Lav had gotten to? Surely they must be done by now! Hermione was just a little banged up; it wasn’t anything serious.” Parvati complained. “You don’t think Madame Pomfrey kept Lav there too, do you?”

“I don’t know. Do you want to go check?”

“Yeah, might as well.” Parvati agreed.

“I’ll go with you.” Padma offered.

“I’ll go with you” Pansy told Padma.

“You’re going to look for Hermione? I’ll go too.” Neville offered.

“Eh, I’ll go with you, Nev. Merlin only knows where Harry’s buggered off to.”

“He probably took the chance to escape while Granger was distracted.” Pansy snickered as the five of them started out of the room.

“Just what is that supposed to mean?” Parvati hissed.

Pansy snorted disdainfully. “Oh, sure, it’s mean when I say it. When you say the exact same thing it’s completely different!”

“I never said anything like that!” Parvati growled, narrowing her eyes at Pansy.

“Yes, Parv, you did, and so did Lavender.” Padma interjected quietly.

“You’re taking her side against me?”

“You’re the one starting an argument over it.”

“Padma!”
“Parvati.”
“Merlin, girls are all mental.” Ron muttered.

The girls all turned around and leveled the boys with a frosty glare. Neville held up his hands, shook his head and pointed to Ron. They all sniffed, turned around, and went back to their argument.

“Completely mental”

Snape encountered one of his Slytherins, in company with three Gryffindors and a Ravenclaw, and stared at the odd group rather bemusedly.

“I don’t get it!” Ron Weasley huffed. “How the bloody hell did they end up in the owlery from the hospital wing?”
“I’m sure I don’t know. Watch your language, Weasel.”
“My language is bloody well fine!”
“You cretin!”
“I’d still like to know what happened to Harry. Where the heck did he disappear to?” Neville wondered.

Snape sighed and went back to searching for the elusive hallway. It seemed several students had fallen afoul of the thing—and now it was flinging students not just from the second floor to the dungeons, but from the fourth floor to the owlery? Had it moved its focus? Is that why he couldn’t find anything?
Cursing, he stalked upwards to the fourth floor.

Down in Hogsmeade, in the Hogshead, Oliver Wood glanced up in surprise when and owl landed in front of him.
“Secret admirer?” one of his friends sniggered. They’d all had a couple of firewhiskeys and were beginning to feel the effects.

“No, it’s from my little sister.”

The boys straightened, wondering if something had happened up at the castle.

Oliver unrolled the short message and his brain shorted out after reading it. His body went rigid and he fell sideways, right out of his chair.

“OLIVER!” the other three boys gasped, jumping unsteadily to their feet.
One of the boys pried the note out of his hand, while the other two smacked his face and tried to revive him.

“SWEET MERLIN ON A STICK!”
“What! What is it!”
“It says Arthur Weasley’s Muggle Protection Act, which is going up for ratification into law soon, will make flying brooms illegal! That means no more quidditch!”
“Merlin! No wonder Ollie lost it!”
Oliver suddenly sat up, a crazed gleam in his eye.

“Oll…”
“Oliver, man, you don’t want to do anything crazy now.”
“Just settle down now. We’ll sort this out.”
Oliver jumped to his feet. “WEASLEEEEEEEEEEEEY! I KEEEEEEELL YOU!”
His friends just stared dumbfounded, and then scrambled to their feet to chase down their manic friend.

The crowd at the Three Broomsticks froze when the door was flung open with a bang, to reveal Oliver Wood framed in the opening. His eyes were bugged out, and a frozen, rictus grin was on his face. He looked completely mad. He mechanically scanned the patrons, and the crowd held its breath, wondering what he was going to do next.
Percy Weasley came out of the back, where the bathrooms were, polishing his glasses and blinking around myopically.

“WEASLEY.” Oliver growled, his face contorting as his hands rose in front of him in claws.
Percy froze and hurriedly put his glasses on. “Oliver? Yes?”

“WEASLEEEEY!” he howled as he lunged forward, ready to throttle the other boy. He only got a few steps in the door when his friends caught up and came barreling through the doorway, tackling the boy to the ground.
Percy froze like a deer in the headlights as Oliver tried to claw his way towards him, in spite of the three boys piled on his back.

“OLIVER! STOP! PERCY DIDN’T DO ANYTHING! IT’S HIS FATHER!”

“WEASLEEEEY!”

“OLIVER!” the three boys chorused desperately.

“My word! What is going on here!” Rosmerta, the proprietress of the pub demanded.

“ARTHUR WEASLEY IS TRYING TO PASS A LAW THAT WOULD MAKE QUIDDITCH ILLEGAL!” The boy at the top of the pile said desperately.

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then complete pandemonium broke out.

Rosmerta hurried towards Percy, who was still frozen in shock, and bustled him out the back way. “Go, hon. Grab your brothers and get yourselves up to the castle. It likely won’t be safe here for any of you until everyone calms down.”
Percy nodded mechanically and stumbled off in a daze. After a few steps, he pulled himself together and started hurrying to go find Fred and George before they were torn apart by an enraged mob of quidditch fanatics.
He nearly collapsed in relief when he spotted them just ahead, coming out of Zonko’s. He could hear the crowd spilling into the streets, so he sped his steps.

“Well, if it isn’t perfect pre….URK”

“No time. Run! Run you fools, before they kill us all!” Percy hissed, grabbing each of the twins by their collars and hauling them along by main force.
Fred and George took one look at Percy’s white face and started running alongside him.

“What’s going on?” George demanded. He could see a crazed mob spreading out through the streets behind them.

“The whole town is on the warpath because of dad’s law! Oliver Wood just tried to kill me!” Percy gasped.

Fred and George just looked stunned, and kept running.

“That doesn’t make any sense! Why would Oliver try to kill you because dad wants to protect muggles?!”

“He said dad’s law will outlaw quidditch. Three people jumped on top of him and he just kept coming! How am I supposed to sleep tonight? We share a dorm!”

Those who didn’t spill out into the streets of Hogsmeade to spread the word flooed or apparated off to Diagon Alley, Knockturn Alley and a few went off to friends who worked for, with, or owned quidditch teams to let them know Arthur Weasley was a no-good dirty bastard who wanted to destroy quidditch.

Meanwhile, a few dozen letters were winging their way towards relatives who were on the Wizengamot to demand answers.

As word spread down Diagon and Knockturn Alley, mass hysteria followed in its wake.

Amos Diggory, who had been in Hogsmeade visiting his son, Cedric, and was a near neighbor of the Weasley family, dropped in to give them a heads up after seeing Cedric and his friends safely to the carriages back to Hogwarts—tighten your wards, the wizarding world is out for your blood. Granted, if any of what people were saying was true, he’d be having words with Arthur himself… but the way people were behaving, Molly and little Ginny might be in danger, and he couldn’t live with himself if anything happened to either of them. They were just innocent bystanders, after all.

Angry sports team owners began flooing to the Ministry in droves, as the auror corps were mustered to head out and quell the riots that seemed to have broken out all over before they spilled into the muggle world and endangered secrecy.

“There you both are! We’ve been looking all over for you!”

“Looking for us? We were looking for everyone else!” Lavender protested. “We got back from the medical wing and the room was empty!”

“Where’s Harry?”

“For Merlin’s sake, Granger, give it a rest!” Pansy snarled. “You’re completely mental!”

“Where did everyone go? Violet and the Fat Lady told us everyone was in the owlery when we went and checked Gryffindor, but when we got there it was empty.”

“Everyone was writing to their relatives to let them know Weasley’s father is a no-good dirty bastard, that’s what.”
“YOU TAKE THAT BACK!”
“I WILL NOT! IT’S TRUE!”

“Ron’s dad? What is everyone talking about?” Neville interjected.

“The Muggle Protection Act.” Padma explained.

“I cannot believe all of you! Are all wizards so hateful and bloodthirsty?” Hermione shrieked, offended. “A man wants to protect muggles and you all turn on him? Is that how it goes?”

“Granger, do shut up. It’s obvious you have absolutely no idea what the hell you’re talking about.” Pansy sniped.

“Yes, I don’t appreciate being told I’m a bloodthirsty maniac.” Padma sniffed. “If you had read the article, you’d know there were some troubling implications to the law from what was written there. It’s so broad and loosely worded, it would essentially make anything with a muggle equivalent illegal to enchant—hence, no quidditch, as it’s played on brooms—enchanted brooms. There’s also the fact that Ron’s father wrote the law, and will be the one administrating it, and he has an enchanted car that’s in gross violation of his own law”

“But, as he’s the one who will be overseeing any violations, he—unlike pretty much anyone else in our world—is completely safe from it! In other words, he’s a no-good dirty bastard.” Pansy concluded.

“Exactly.” Padma agreed.

“Oh, that’s completely ridiculous! You obviously misunderstood.” Hermione scoffed.

Padma drew herself up, offended. “Tell me, Miss Granger, which of us is the Ravenclaw—me, or you?”

Hermione spluttered in outraged shock, while Pansy smirked at her. “Ooh hoo! Burn.”

She and Padma then sauntered off with their noses in the air.

“And that right there is why those two always got along so well.” Parvati sighed, rolling her eyes.

“I cannot believe those two!” Hermione seethed. “Arrogant cows!”

“HEY!” Parvati snarled, getting in Hermione’s face and poking her hard in the chest. “You do not call my sister names in front of me! You do it again, I’ll hex your bloody face off!”

Hermione stumbled back in shock as a seething Parvati stalked off. Lavender shook her head at Hermione and hurried after her.

“Has everyone gone insane?!” Hermione shrieked.

“Everyone knows you don’t insult a person’s siblings in front of them. I mean, Merlin, half the time I can’t stand any of mine, but if someone badmouthed them in front of me, I’d hex the hell out of them.” Ron shrugged.

“What about the rest of it?”

“They’re all mental…at least, they’d better be. Outlaw quidditch! The very idea! Why, I’d throttle dad myself.”

“Hey, isn’t that your brothers?” Neville interrupted.
The three of them turned and saw Percy, Fred and George staggering up the road from Hogsmeade.

Behind them, a long row of carriages were strung out down the road. The three brothers glanced back and saw the carriages were gaining on them, and put on a burst of speed. Ron, now worried, took off to try to intercept them.

Neville and Hermione took off after him.

“Ron! No! Go back to the castle, hurry!” Percy gasped as they came closer.

“What? Why?”

“WEASLEYS! YOU CAN RUN BUT YOU CAN’T HIDE!”
“BASTARDS!”
“I KEEEL YOOOOOU!”
“DIE WEASLEYS!”

The younger children gaped as they realized all the death threats were coming from angry students hanging out of the carriage windows.

Percy grabbed Ron and hauled him along back to the castle, while Fred and George each grabbed Hermione and Neville.

“Go! Go! Go! There’s a riot going on in Hogsmeade, and the whole damned school is out for our blood since they can’t get their hands on dad!” Fred gasped.

“If we live through this, I’m going to kill dad myself!” George added.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Treason and insurrection at the Ministry?

After dinner that evening, Harry slipped away to the come and go room—the second floor entrance which was out of sight of any portraits, and pulled the mirror Sirius had given him for Christmas.

“Sirius.”

“Harry?” he heard a voice call from the mirror.

He found his godfather peering out at him. Just behind him he could see part of Barty and Remus’ faces as well.

“Huh, the whole crowd tonight. Please tell me you’re not all so starved for entertainment that talking to me is the highlight of your evening.”

“If you’re going to be like that, we can hang up and go back to the lovely witches waiting for us” Sirius warned.

“Wow. Talking to me really is the highlight of your evening, isn’t it? You sad bastards.” Harry laughed. When the three men glowered at him, he just laughed harder.

“I’ll have you know we all had a very exciting evening. Word probably hasn’t reached Hogwarts yet, but there was a riot on Diagon Alley earlier.”

“Was it about Arthur Weasley’s Muggle Protection Act?”

“Yeah…how did you know that?”

“There was a riot in Hogsmeade as well. If you want to blame someone, blame Annie Wood.”

“Who the hell is Annie Wood?”

“Second year Gryffindor. Her brother is Oliver Wood, keeper and captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team.”

“I think I’m beginning to see where this is going…though I’m at a loss to explain how.” Remus murmured.

Harry related the order of events as best he’d been able to reconstruct them, starting with the discussion about the articles in that day’s Daily Prophet, and ending with the Weasley boys running for their lives from an enraged mob.

“Dumbledore nearly sparked another riot at dinner”
“What?!” the three men chorused.

“Oh, yeah, he was all placating and condescending and told everyone they were silly children who didn’t know what was good for them and he was disappointed in all of us. He also more or less implied that we should stop trying to do our own thinking and let him do it for us. Obviously, he didn’t say it that way, but that was the gist of it. People were still so angry about the whole thing that they actually noticed he was being condescending, and pretty much implied that Arthur’s law was a done deal and they’d just have to live with it, because a muggle possibly being frightened or harmed by an enchanted item was of such earth-shaking importance that we’d have to live with having our lives seriously curtailed just on the off-chance it might happen. Normally, when he makes his pronouncements from on high, he just sits back and lets McGonagall do the bulldog part of things. He forgot that McGonagall is as quidditch mad as Oliver Wood. She flipped out on him and reminded him that, as a lawyer, he should be with them, and incensed at the implications, as he, more than anyone there, must have seen and realized what a bunch of bollocks the whole thing was. Then she threw a roll at him and stormed out of the great hall.”

“What?!?”

“Yeah” Harry laughed, “It was great! Of course, she’s too fair minded to work up the crowd like that and let innocents take the brunt. She stopped halfway out and reminded everyone that the Weasley kids were not their father, and anyone taking their frustrations out on them had to answer to her. Everyone was so terrified of her at that point, the Weasley kids could probably walk across a minefield unscathed, because there’d be people lining up to fling themselves on the mines rather than face McGonagall’s wrath.”

“What did Dumbledore do?”

“He fled while everyone’s eyes were on McGonagall. We think he’s hiding out in his office till everyone cools down.”

“What did the other teachers do?”

“Sprout and Flitwick seemed to have caught the condescension, and didn’t appreciate it. Sinistra, Quirrel, Snape and the others just sat there stunned—though Snape had his hand covering the lower part of his face through most of dinner. I think he was trying not to laugh, honestly.”

The three men, by this point, were laughing so hard tears were forming in their eyes.

When everyone had calmed down somewhat, Remus asked “Did you just call to tell us this, or was there something else?”

“That’s it for the moment. I’ll let you know if there’s anything else of interest.”

Ron was twitchy and paranoid the following morning when he woke up; the memory of the enraged mob chasing he and his brothers into the castle, and then glaring at them all through dinner was still fresh in his mind. In spite of McGonagall’s warning, he didn’t feel particularly safe staying in a castle full of mad quidditch fans.

“I’ll be murdered. I’m surprised I lived through the night, frankly. Poor Percy spent the night on the couch. Oliver Wood was still twitching most of the night, and his hands kept randomly forming claws; Percy didn’t want to take any chances.”
“Ron, really. I’m sure it will be fine.”

“I know! I’ll go visit Hagrid. No one’s going to try murdering me while he’s standing right there. I’m just glad it’s still the weekend. I can hide out there the whole day and be safe.”

“Fine. If we’re going to be spending the day at Hagrid’s, we should take our books with us. We can get started studying for exams, they’re only a few weeks away, you know. You also have that transfiguration essay to finish, and your potions homework. Go get your books, and we’ll head down.”

“Homework! Oh, come on, Hermione!”

“It’s that, or stay in the castle with the enraged quidditch fans.”

“Fine.” Ron grumbled as he went to go gather his books.

“Will the rest of you be coming?”

“Nah. Hagrid always acts weird around me.” Harry replied.

“I’m going to be busy helping Professor Sprout for a bit, and then I promised I’d be there for Susan and Hannah’s presentation. They finished their project, but they’re nervous about speaking in front of the crowd at the Melting Pot. I said I’d sit front and center, so they could pretend they were telling me, not speaking to a crowd.”

“I didn’t realize they were working on anything. I didn’t see their name on the board in project corner” Hermione said with some surprise.

“Oh, no, it’s something they put together themselves. They thought some kid’s baking toy you told them about was a neat idea, so they made one. They’re going to be testing it out and making little cakes for everyone to eat before they do their presentation.”

Hermione blinked. “They made an easy-bake oven?”

“Yeah, that was it!”

“So much that magic can do, and they made an easy-bake oven.” Hermione repeated, a bit scathingly.

“There’s going to be cake?” Ron spoke up as he came down the stairs with his books.

“Yeah, tonight at the Melting Pot. Susan Bones and Hannah Abbot are making them.”

“Tonight, huh? Hmm…maybe everyone’ll have cooled down by then.”

When Ron and Hermione arrived at the Melting Pot that evening, the room smelled like a bakery. Susan and Hannah were handing out little cakes, and directing the students to the icing station they had set up, so they could ice their cakes and decorate them before eating them.

“My word, they must have been making cakes for hours and hours and hours for there to be so many.”

“Hey, Ron, Hermione. You two should go grab a cake before they’re all gone. They’re going like hotcakes…hot cakes, get it?”
“Ha, ha. Seriously though, how did they make so many?”

“Ah, Hermione, your problem is that you have no imagination. When Neville told you about their little project, all you could think is that they were ‘wasting’ their magic. It never occurred to you that, because they were making the thing with magic, they could add stuff to it. They added all sorts of extras. You can bake a whole bunch of little cakes at once, or even a big cake if you want to. You can use it to make toast in bulk too. It’s a very handy little gadget, actually.”

Hermione crossed her arms and glowered a bit, before stalking off.

Ron mostly ignored her, he was too busy inhaling the smell of freshly baked cake. “They do smell good.”

“Yeah, taste good too. Hey, what happened to your hand?”

“Oh, uh, nothing. Just, you know, an accident. I’m, uh, gonna get some cake.”

Harry raised an eyebrow and watched the boy go. His hand looked swollen, and he was pretty sure it had teeth marks. He shook his head, and headed for the ‘icing station’ to decorate his second cake, they really were quite tasty. “I should see if I can give the girls a hand towards getting their oven manufactured; they did say Susan’s aunt arranged for a patent once she heard about what they were doing. Arcturus did complain that, because the Black’s financial holdings were in limbo for so long, they’ve lost the edge they used to have, and haven’t offered new products for a long time now. Yeah, I’ll write to him, and tell him about this. He can worry about the details.”

When they went back to the dorm after Susan and Hannah’s presentation, Harry asked Ron about his hand again. It was looking considerably more swollen than it had even an hour ago. Ron, once again, tried to deflect attention from his hand and refused to answer any questions. Harry was getting aggravated, but he had an idea.

“Candy?”

“Oooh, yum.” Ron smiled brightly as he grabbed a handful and chucked them in his mouth.

“So, Ron, what bit you?”

“Baby dragon. It hurts like a bugger, too.”

The other boys in the dorm, who were all getting ready for bed, froze in mid-motion and gaped at Ron in astonishment.

“Where did you run into a baby dragon?”

“Hagrid’s hut, he’d just hatched it.”

“He hatched it? Where did he get it?”

“He won the egg in a poker game…bloody hell! Why am I telling you all this! You tricked me!”

“Ron, the candy I gave you are the ones we used for the ‘truth or dare’ tournament. You ate them willingly.”

“You still tricked me.”
“Ron, they’re still in the bowl they were in before. It says ‘truth candy’ along the side.”

“It was still a dirty trick.”

“Whatever. Why haven’t you gotten your hand looked at?”

“I don’t want Hagrid to get in trouble.”

“Well, then he’ll just get in trouble, won’t he? You need to have that looked at, and you need to tell someone about the dragon.”

“NO! Look, we promised we wouldn’t, and anyway, it’s all taken care of. Someone is coming to get it and take it to a dragon reserve.”

Ron stood and then climbed in to bed. He was favoring his uninjured hand rather heavily as he drew up his covers and moved to pull his bed hangings shut. “Just drop it, alright? It’s all taken care of, and I gave my word that I wouldn’t say anything.” He shut his hangings with a snap.

The other boys exchanged looks, shrugged and got into bed themselves.

“Oh, Arcturus, Lucius hello. So, what brings all of you here, anyway?” Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic greeted the two men cheerfully.

“Wizengamot session, to deal with that infernal Muggle Protection Act that started all those riots.”

“Lucius, you’re on the Wizengamot?”

“He should be. Strange things keep happening to keep him from claiming his seat. Once can be explained away, twice could be bad luck, three times and something’s afoot.” Arcturus said darkly.

Fudge nodded and then caught sight of someone past Arcturus’ shoulder and he squeaked in fright.

Arcturus and Lucius turned to look and saw Sirius approaching them from behind. Sirius gave the fluttery Minister a filthy look and nodded to his grandfather and cousin-by-marriage.

“I was wondering where you were.”

“Sorry.”

“Where’s Barty?”

“He ran into Nymphadora in the atrium. He should be along.”

Lucius’ nodded thoughtfully. “It’s a good match. Narcissa will be pleased.”

“I like him. Everyone agrees it’s a good match really…well, except Harry, but that’s a whole different story.”

Lucius raised an eyebrow.

“He’s still mad at her about some things that happened over the summer. He thinks Barty’s too good for her.”
Lucius’ other eyebrow rose and he looked gobsmacked.

“I hadn’t realized there was bad blood between him and that part of the family.”

“Just Nymie. Harry adores Andromeda, and he thinks Ted is cool.”

Lucius rolled his eyes, then seemed to realize what he’d done, and put his ‘cool bastard’ mask back on.

“So, you’re all here for the Wizengamot special session?”

“Yes. Barty is here to claim his father’s seat, we’re hoping to get Lucius’ seated and clear up all the nonsense, Sirius is here to take over the Potter proxy, as I’m still holding the Black seat.”

“Oh? Why change it?”

“Because Harry specifically requested it.” Arcturus informed him with a shark-like smile. “Harry wrote to the sitting proxy and requested a detailed accounting of how he’d been using his seat so far. He made the mistake of writing back and telling him he was a foolish child who needed to keep his nose out of things that were none of his business. Harry took exception to such a response, and wrote to me asking that I not only remove the foolish man, but that I make it hurt.”

“Yeah, he can be a vengeful little thing when he gets his back up.” Sirius chuckled, sounding proud. “He did the same thing to the Potter proxy on the Hogwarts Board of Governors. She told him much the same thing, and was as high-handed about it. Augusta Longbottom will be taking that over.”

“Cissy heard through the grapevine that she had the woman in tears by the time she was done with her.” Lucius said casually.

“Did she? Good.” Sirius cackled.

“Did they move the Wizengamot meeting? Good. I’ve always heard that hall was a miserable place to meet. This spot is far more congenial, though I’d think all the traffic could be somewhat distracting.”

“Adeline? My dear girl, it’s lovely to see you.” Lucius greeted the newest arrival warmly. “Oh, Adeline, Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic. Minister, this is Adeline Gardiner.”

“Gardiner? I’m not familiar with the name.”

“Miss, and please, just Adeline. I’ve never been one to stand on formality.”

“My pleasure, Miss Adeline.” Fudge agreed affably as his ears pinked just a bit.

“How do you two know each other?” Sirius asked Lucius, his eyes never leaving Adeline. Arcturus noted with some glee that he hadn’t stopped staring at the woman since she’d arrived.

Lucius noted the same thing and his eyes glinted gleefully as well. He now had two juicy pieces of gossip to tell Narcissa when he got home later.

“Adeline’s mother is Elaine Rosier.”
“As in Aunt Druella’s favorite niece Elaine?”

“The very same.

The sound of a woman giggling drew everyone’s attention, and they saw Barty and Nymphadora strolling along, smiling at each other, seemingly lost in their own little world. Nymphadora glanced up, realized there was a whole group of people staring at them and grinning. She squeaked, then stumbled, as her hair changed color from pink to red.

Barty caught her arm in a move so reflexive it looked like something he must have done fairly often. Quite embarrassed by her awkward entrance, she made her goodbyes to Barty and hurried on her way.

“You must be doing something right. It’s not every man that can make a girl forget the rest of the world exists.” Adeline teased.


“Adeline Gardiner.”

“Elaine Rosier’s daughter.” Lucius explained before he could ask.

“Oh, she married that guy… Talia Flint’s son, right?”

“I remember hearing about that.” Sirius realized. “Talia was supposed to marry Alvin Selwyn, and she ran off and married a muggle instead. I remember mother and Aunt Dru going on and on about Elaine running off to marry Talia’s half-blood son.”

“Yes, the whole affair was quite the scandal in its day, I’ve been told.” Adeline agreed, her voice just a bit frosty.

“Hmm…I seem to remember all of that as well. You told your mother you were going to do Elaine one better and marry a muggle, didn’t you?” Arcturus interjected musingly.

Sirius laughed and scratched his chin as he tried thinking back. “I can’t remember for sure, but I probably did. I did spend a lot of my childhood getting her riled up, didn’t I?”


“We should probably get going.” Arcturus announced. “It wouldn’t do to be late.”

“Tell me something…how the bloody hell did I let myself be talked into this?”

“You followed me when I expressed an interest.” Harry replied.

Earlier the day before, some of the girls had expressed an interest in having dances—with traditional wizarding dances. There was widespread consternation when it was realized that less than one in five of the students gathered in the Melting Pot actually knew any of the traditional wizarding dances.

Draco Malfoy had declared it an outrage, and he’d quickly organized dance lessons for everyone. Harry had offered to find space for everyone to dance in, and had gone in search of Itsy, while Malfoy gathered everyone who knew the traditional dances to organize them to demonstrate and
later teach them to everyone else.

That was how they found themselves where they were—in the large auditorium Itsy had found for their use. It had stadium seating climbing up one side, and a wide stone floor. Someone had acquired a gramophone and some records with traditional tunes. Those who were in the know were gathered on the floor, while the rest of them—those who were interested in learning—were gathered on the seats to watch.

“My dad is going to go spare if he ever finds out about this. My family doesn’t hold with all that pureblood nonsense.”

“Aren’t you mad at your father for nearly getting you and your brothers killed the other day?” Neville whispered.

“Speaking of nearly being killed…when are you going to get that hand checked out? It’s twice as large as it was yesterday, and it’s starting to turn green.”

“Oh, look, they’re getting ready to start.” Ron replied, pretending to be interested in the proceedings.

“I don’t get you! Your hand is swollen and green, and looks like it’s going to fall off if you leave it untreated much longer. You need to go.”

“I already explained all that. I don’t want to get Hagrid in trouble.”

“You said it was all taken care of, right? So you’ve got no excuse. Go to Madame Pomfrey when this is over, or I’m knocking you out and taking you by force. If that gets bad enough, magic or not, Madame Pomfrey might not be able to do anything.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll go. Truthfully, I’m feeling a bit ill, on top of my hand hurting like the dickens. I probably would have gone after anyway.”

“Good.”

“Thank you for coming, everyone! Today will be the first of what is likely to be a series of dance lessons—we were originally going to try to fit them all in today, but as some of them are rather complicated, we thought it best to have everyone master one before moving on. Today we’ll be doing a dance which was usually done as part of the Spring equinox celebrations. Watch closely, as you’ll be expected to try it out afterwards.” Draco announced. He signaled to Ernie MacMillan, who was seated nearest the gramophone, to start the music.

The kids out on the floor all began to move in unison when the music started, and then began doing what was, indeed, a complicated dance; it started out slow, and built in tempo until everyone was whirling around on the floor—and there were a lot of footwork changes and fast turns. The music was rather catchy, and some of them started clapping along to the beat while the group on the floor whirled and leapt.

“Blimey. I’m never going to remember all that.” Ron muttered.

“I hope I don’t end up falling down.” Neville fretted.
“You’ll both be fine. You’ll be learning it a piece at a time and slowly building up till you have to do the whole thing.”

“I should never have come here. What the hell do I need to know how to dance for?”

“People do have balls, the Ministry does as well. I’m sure it will come in handy.”

“I think they used to have big parties at Hogwarts—that one tapestry in the Melting Pot seems to suggest as much. I wonder why they don’t anymore?”

“I don’t know. Before we started the whole Melting Pot thing, there really just wasn’t a lot to do at Hogwarts, was there? Outside of a few clubs, I mean. Mostly, we just sat around in our common rooms, doing homework and playing exploding snap. I like that as much as the next guy, but it does get old after a while, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe we should organize a summer solstice party. We’re here at school for a good week or so after exams end, and there are no classes. We might as well put learning all these traditional dances to use, right?”

“That could be fun!” Lavender squealed from nearby. “We’d have to get permission from the professors though. If we just all stream outside, and start partying without letting them know beforehand, they’re just going to break it up and shoo us back inside.”

“Well, since you’re so enthused, why don’t you try organizing that? Get a couple of folks from the other houses to help as part of the planning committee and all.”

“I will!” she agreed cheerfully.

“Alright, everyone, come down and let’s see if we can get you dancing as well.” Draco called when the song ended.

“Looks like it’s show time.”

“Yeah, yeah. I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“It might be fun. Maybe. Probably.” Neville replied, trying to be brave.

“Geez, you two, lighten up. Just try to have fun with it, and don’t worry about messing up or looking stupid—most of us here are learning this for the first time, so you’ll be in good company.” Harry laughed.

Draco, Harry had to admit, was good at organizing this sort of endeavor. He had everyone put into groups of four—two boys and two girls; three students, one teacher in each group.

The different kids teaching were pretty good as well. When Harry complimented Daphne Greengrass, who was with himself, Neville and Parvati, on this fact, she just shrugged.

“I’m just teaching it the way I learned it: break it down into small pieces, have a couple of dry run throughs, and then put the music on. You’ll be surprised how quickly you pick it up. It’s fun once the music starts, and after a while, you just know what comes next.”

“You just know what comes next?” Parvati asked.

“Oh, sure. These dances, well, they’re like spells really. It’s old magic—stuff our long ago ancestors did. This spring dance was to bless the fields and insure a healthy crop come fall. It was
performed before the spring planting so the fields would be full of magic when the seeds were laid down. The summer dances celebrate the abundance, and the long days of sunlight, fall is all about fruitful harvests, winter, laying the earth to rest and mourning the loss of the sunlight, and calling it back. The spell is in the steps, and with so many generations performing it for so long, it sort of takes on a life of its own once you become part of it. You’ll see; once we run through it a couple of times, you’ll get caught up in it. It doesn’t seize control of you or anything, so stop looking at me like that—you just get a feel for the shape of things and your part in it. It can get pretty intense when you have a really big group.”

“Cool.” Was Harry’s thoughts on the matter. “Let’s get dancing then.”

“What do you mean I can’t claim the Potter proxy? I’m Harry’s guardian, and he specifically requested that the sitting proxy be replaced.”

“I beg to differ, Mr. Black.” Elphias Doge scoffed. “Albus Dumbledore is the boy’s guardian, and only Albus Dumbledore can change anything with little Harry’s estate. I think you have some nerve, coming here and making such outrageous claims.”

“I am the guardian that was appointed by Harry’s parents should anything happen to them. Me—not Dumbledore, not his mother’s muggle relatives. Me.”

“You didn’t do a very good job, did you?”

“I was in prison for a crime I didn’t commit, in case you’ve forgotten!” Sirius growled.

“Why doesn’t everyone just calm down now!” Cornelius Fudge interjected hastily. “I’m sure all this can be easily cleared up. We just need to pull Harry Potter’s record and see what it says.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible. Harry Potter’s records are sealed for security purposes; wouldn’t want the wrong sort getting their hands on information about him.” Doge’s sniff seemed to indicate everyone in the room, other than himself and possibly the Minister—though even that was somewhat in doubt—was likely the wrong sort.

“Nonsense. I’m the Minister. I’ll just override the sealing and we can get things cleared up.”

“I’m sorry Minister, but you need the approval of Albus as the Head of the Wizengamot to override the security. I can tell you right now he will not grant it. He takes his responsibilities towards the child seriously.” His pointed glance towards Sirius left no doubt that he didn’t, so far as he was concerned.

Fudge drew himself up indignantly. “Now see here, my good man, I think you have some nerve. I am the Minister of Magic. Albus Dumbledore does not have the power to veto me in my capacity as Minister, and I’ll thank you to remember that!”

Doge huffed and looked at the Minister with a rather condescending look of pity. “I believe you’ll find you are quite mistaken Fudge. Now, do run along. We should be starting soon.”

“We will not be starting anything until this matter is cleared up, as it has direct bearing on the proceedings today.”

“You don’t have the authority to”

“I bloody well do have the authority to, sir. Now shut your trap before I have you arrested for
insurrection!"

“You can’t…”

“Scrimgeour!”

“Yes, Minister?”

“Have this man detained for questioning for treason, insurrection, and being a general pain in the ass! Also, I need Harry Potter’s file pulled and unsealed to settle some questions of precedence. I want it done yesterday!”

“Yes sir” Scrimgeour agreed peaceably. Doge spluttered indignantly as he was led away.

“Amelia! I want answers!” Fudge called out to the head of law enforcement, as he strode away.

Sirius, Arcturus, Lucius and the others watched him go with their mouths hanging open. They’d never seen him like this.

Lucius suddenly smiled. “You know, I suddenly have the feeling it’s going to be a wonderful day.”

“What on earth is going on?” Griselda Marchbanks demanded as she tottered closer, leaning heavily on her cane. “What’s all the yelling about?”

“We’re hoping to find out. There seems to be some troubling irregularities afoot. Elphias Doge has just been arrested for treason and insurrection.” Arcturus replied.

“Treason? Insurrection? What on earth?”

Arcturus began filling the group that gathered in on all that had happened, while Lucius nudged the rest of them to spread out to inform everyone else—they were going to need a large group on their side to pass any motions to have Dumbledore removed as head of the Wizengamot—even though it would seem it should be easy, in theory at least. The man never came to any of the meetings, always claiming to be far too busy to be bothered. The problem was, and always had been, that there were far too many people who thought the sun rose and set on the man and wouldn’t hear a word against him—quite literally. Many was the time he’d tried to complain to people about him, and they would actually refuse to listen to anything he said. They would just keep repeating that ‘he’s a great man, Albus is’, ‘I won’t hear a word against him’. It was frustrating in the extreme. They had, at this moment, a rare opportunity to loosen his stranglehold on the wizarding world. He was going to milk it for all it was worth.

While they were circulating through the crowd, Bones and Fudge and a few others were consulting the books for evidence that Dumbledore did, indeed, have power to refuse the Minister on the unsealing of records—they were all rather disturbed to find out that he did, indeed have that power. Technically, as head of the Wizengamot, Albus Dumbledore, not Cornelius Fudge, was the head of the wizarding government. The ‘extra powers’ granted to the head of the Wizengamot were holdovers from the days when it was still the Warlocks Council—The Chief Warlock, not the Minister, was the ultimate authority.

“We’ve already been given word by Doge that Dumbledore would not be attending as he was far too busy, and Doge was empowered to act in his stead. Had Doge not been arrested, we would actually not be able to unseal the records, as Doge would have had the authority to refuse as the acting Chief Warlock—something I’ve no doubt comes as a surprise to everyone. However, since Doge is unable to fulfill his duties, there is a loophole that will allow us to dismiss Doge, and by
extension Dumbledore, from his position as Chief Warlock, appoint a new Chief Warlock, unseal the records, and get to the bottom of things.”

“That’s what we’ll do then.” Griselda Marchbanks decided. “So many seats being in dispute is too large a matter to leave hanging until Albus sees fit to join us.”

“We should do things by procedure so there’s no accusations of illegality.” Bones corrected. “Everyone to their seats. As Minister, you are the next highest authority, so you are empowered to enact the removal of the Chief Warlock should he or she become unable to fulfill their duties. You’ll have to open the session.”

“My pleasure.” Cornelius growled as he stalked towards the Chief Warlock’s seat. He was still bristling from Doge’s condescending dismissal. He was going to show the smug bastard that one didn’t treat the Minister of Magic like that and get away with it!

“Ughhhhh!” Ron moaned pitifully from his place on the floor.

The dance lesson had fallen apart halfway through the first dance, when Ron’s partner had to grab his hand for a turn. She had grabbed his hand, his wounded hand, that is, and he’d gone white, then green, then screamed like a little girl, before sinking to the ground to roll back and forth while moaning.

“For Merlin’s sake, Ron, I told you!” Harry sighed. “Come on, up you go. We’re going to Madame Pomfrey right now.”

He and Neville each grabbed Ron under one arm, and hauled him to his feet, before marching him from the room, still whimpering.

“What happened to him?”
“His hand was all swollen and green!”
“I heard he got bit by a poisonous dog that came out of the forest.”
“I’ve heard there are werewolves in the forest.”
“Ron’s a werewolf?”
“Maybe not yet, but I guess he will be by next full moon.”
“Will he get kicked out of school?”
“I don’t know, probably.”
“What! That’s awful! Why kick him out of school, even if he is a werewolf? They’re only dangerous on the full moon. I’m sure something could be arranged to keep him contained.”
“It’ll change him! He’ll begin hungering for the flesh of men, and develop weird extra senses and all. It would be too dangerous.”
“I’m still certain something could be done. It isn’t right to punish someone for being bitten by a dog when they were just innocently walking along.”
“He should be expelled before he changes so he doesn’t try eating the rest of us.”
“We should go tell the professors right now!”

Dean and Seamus listened to everyone’s growing hysteria, and traded a grim look. Seamus shrugged and nodded, so Dean spoke up.

“He wasn’t bitten by a dog, or a werewolf. He was bitten by a baby dragon.”

“A dragon! Here?”

“It’s okay, he said someone was coming to get it. He just didn’t want to get Hagrid in trouble. He
must have found the thing or something, and wanted to keep it. Since it’s illegal to have a dragon, Ron figured he’d get in trouble, so he was keeping his mouth shut until it was gone, but he was bit by the thing and the wound is getting nasty. He’s not a werewolf, so stop freaking out, alright?”

Slowly, the hysteria died down, and the children were left looking at one another uncertainly.

“It’s being taken care of?” Susan finally asked.

“That’s what Ron said.”

“Well, if it’s being taken care of, I guess we should just get back to dancing.”

“Good idea.” Draco was quick to agree. He was still looking a bit pasty at the thought of a dragon, even a baby one, being anywhere nearby, so he seized on the means to take his mind off it. “Since we’re down three people, we’ll move on to the winter solstice dance. It’s a circle dance, so it doesn’t matter if we have uneven numbers. Everyone take your seats, and our demonstrators will show you how it’s done.”

Harry and Neville noticed that the portraits seemed agitated and were all running to and fro. They weren’t far from the hospital wing, so he figured it was safe enough to stop for a second. “What’s going on?”

“Treason and insurrection at the Ministry, that’s what I’ve heard.”

“Treason and insurrection? What? There’s a battle going on?” Neville gasped.

“All any of us know at the moment is what Hagrid told us.”

“Hagrid? The groundskeeper, Hagrid?”

“Yes, him.”

“What, did he hear something in Hogsmeade about it?” Harry wondered.

“No, according to Violet, he got a message from some auror to tell the headmaster that his friend Elphias Doge had been arrested.”

“Why would an auror send a message to Hagrid about that? Why not send it directly to the headmaster?”

“Hogwarts is on its own floo network. You can’t floo Hogwarts without Dumbledore’s permission, so he couldn’t send a message that way. An owl would work, but there’s no telling how long it would actually take to get to him.”

“Why would it take a long time?”

“The headmaster’s mail is sent to a mail drop, and sorted before it gets to him. With it being a weekend, he might not get anything until Monday.”

“I see…so some auror sends a message to Hagrid to get it to Dumbledore sooner. Who was the auror?”
“I’m not sure…did any of you get a name?”

“Yes, Kingsley Shaklebolt. You remember him, don’t you?”

“Oh, him! Hufflepuff, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, that’s the one.”

“So, the headmaster’s friend was arrested—anyone else? An insurrection doesn’t usually consist of just one person, after all.” Harry questioned.

“That’s the problem, we don’t know. The first any of us heard of anything was from Violet after she overheard Hagrid talking to Minnie McGonagall. Everyone’s off looking for those who have frames at the Ministry to try to find out why this was the first any of us heard of anything.”

“Oh? There’s a lot of you with frames at the Ministry, and you can go back and forth between them, can you?”

“Oh, certainly. Why, we here at Hogwarts usually know what’s going on in different departments long before the rest of the Ministry does.” The portrait bragged.

“Is that so? Interesting. I imagine there must be portraits all over the place—I guess you’ve got a handle on what’s going on all over, don’t you?”

“Oh, my, yes! There didn’t used to be so many of us here—but with the war, and so many families dying out, there really wasn’t anywhere to send most of us but here.”

“Well, thank you for the information. Keep me updated, would you?”

“If you’d like. Don’t worry though, lad, you’re safe from any battles here at Hogwarts. It’s the safest place in all of Britain you know, even if Dumbledore is gone from the castle.”

Harry just smiled and nodded noncommittally, before he and the others took their leave. Ron groaned like he was about to be sick.

“Hang on, Ron, we’re almost there.” Neville offered.

As he walked away, a thought hit Harry out of nowhere, like a lightning-bolt: Dumbledore was gone! He was going to try for the stone tonight! In fact... he might be on his way to get it right now! Someone needed to stop him!

His walk faltered for a moment, before he mastered himself enough to keep going.

“Alright there, Harry?”

“Yeah, fine. Let’s keep going. His hand is really starting to look nasty.”

“I’ll say. I hope he didn’t wait too long...though I’m sure Madame Pomfrey could grow him a new hand if she really needs to.”

“Oh, that’s a relief.”

“Dum-bel-dore is gone?” Ron wheezed. “That’s terrible. The stone...he’ll be after it tonight. Someone...needs...protect it.”

Neville stared at Ron blankly, but Harry’s gaze was sharp.
“I was right then, all along. This is some sort of set-up. He wants me to run off to protect it. Why Ron though? Has he been getting ninja training too? What the hell is going on here?”

After dropping Ron off in the hospital wing, they headed back to the dancing lessons that were still going on. They got back in time to learn the autumn equinox reel, though they’d missed the whole of the winter solstice circle dance.

“We’ll have another session next week or something, so don’t worry about it.” Draco assured them both.

It was nearing curfew when they were finished, so all the students began heading for their respective common rooms once the lesson was over. Neville and Harry both noticed that Hermione was rather agitated as they were heading back. She was obviously mulling something over in her head, and came to some sort of decision, because she straightened suddenly, moved to block Harry’s progress, and announced in a hissed whisper “I have to talk to you. It’s important.”

Harry raised an eyebrow and nodded, then followed when she led him to an empty classroom near Gryffindor tower. She turned around once inside, ready to speak, only to close her mouth when she realized Neville had followed them.

“What? Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of Neville.”

Hermione shook herself and continued with what she was going to say.

“Dumbledore has left the castle…you know what that means, don’t you?” she gasped, her eyes wide. When Harry and Neville just continued to stare at her, she huffed impatiently. "Dumbledore is gone! The stone…he’ll be after it tonight! Someone needs to protect it!"

Neville crossed his arms and scowled at her. “What is going on here? Ron said the same thing as we were hauling him off to the hospital wing.”

“Someone is after the stone! They’re obviously going to make their move, because Dumbledore isn’t here to keep it safe!”

“I know how we, and Ron, know about the stone. How do you know?”

“Ron told me. That isn’t important now. What’s important is that we have to stop him!”

“Whoever it is, the other teachers can stop them. A bunch of them were supposed to have contributed to the protections. I’m sure they have an alarm or something, to tell them if anyone has breached the area.”

“I don’t think it’s any ordinary thief. I think it’s…You know who.” Hermione disagreed.

“You know who is dead.” Neville objected.

“No, not according to Professor Dumbledore he’s not. That’s what Hagrid said, anyway. He’s said he’s still out there, biding his time, waiting to come back. Who else could be in such desperate straits that they’d need something like the philosopher’s stone to fix themselves?”

“I doubt You-know-Who is the only person who’s ever been injured. That’s if he is just injured, and not dead like everyone believes. That’s hardly conclusive.” Neville said skeptically.

“There’s also the dead unicorns in the forest.” Hermione retorted quietly. “Hagrid told us something was out there attacking and killing them. I looked up unicorns to see if I could figure out
why. Unicorn’s blood is a superb healing agent…it will heal you if you’re even a breath from
death, but there’s a curse on it. You’re doomed to a cursed half-life for destroying something so
pure and innocent in order to save yourself. Can you think of anyone but You-know-who that
would be as desperate as that?”

While the other two argued, Harry stood back quietly, his mind whirling. He had gotten a prompt,
out of nowhere, telling him he needed to go protect the stone, which was vulnerable now that
Dumbledore had left the castle. It was a thought he knew wasn’t his own; the stone was safe
enough, in his pouch. No one knew he had it, which meant no one was likely to come after him for
it. Ron and Hermione had received similar prompts, and now Hermione was talking about how it
was obviously the former Dark Lord that was after it—a dark lord he was supposed to have
destroyed while he was a baby. What was going on? Was Dumbledore behind his ninja training
after all, and had been gearing up to send him off to face his nemesis once more? Were the two
situations unrelated? Had Ron and Hermione received similar training if Dumbledore was behind
it? Was it really You Know Who that was going after the stone, or was that just what they were
being told? Was this a training exercise, or an actual threat? Every question seemed to bring more
questions and no answers. He wasn’t sure what the best course was—stay or go?

If Dumbledore knew about his training, he would be expecting him to perform as such. If he didn’t,
chances are he’d be frightened and appalled to find out he was actually capable of taking down a
grown wizard—he’d already been accused of attacking an older student. That brought up another
concern—what if this was actually a setup? Maybe he was trying to get rid of him and the thief
both? The thief dies, and he’s the last person seen with him. Ron and Hermione would become
witnesses against him once they realized their choices were to play ball or go down with him. He
gets accused of murder a second time, but this time there’s a dead body. All the work he’d done the
last few months to shore up his reputation would crumble to dust overnight.

“We’re just students” Harry said out loud.

“But Harry! What if it is You-know-who?”

“All the more reason we shouldn’t be involved…unless you think that a small group of first year
students is more skilled and powerful than Dumbledore and all the teachers he had put up
protections?”

“Well no, of course not!” Hermione sputtered in reply.

“So then obviously, there’s no call for us to be going anywhere near the stone, right? In fact…what
if it’s actually the thief that prompted us?”

“What? That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Sure it does. He wants to get done before Dumbledore gets back…what better way to do so then
to have a bunch of stupid first years run the traps and set them off so he can just breeze through
behind us? We might actually make it so he succeeds if we go running off. You should tell a
teacher, Hermione.”

“Me? Don’t you mean all of us?”

“No, you. The teachers like you. If you present the facts in a clear, calm, logical manner they’re
likely to listen to you. You might want to get on it though…curfew starts soon.”
Hermione wrung her hands for a moment, before nodding, straightening her spine, and marching off.

Harry and Neville headed back to the common room.

“That was weird, huh? Do you really think it was the thief?”

“I’m not sure what to think. Let the teachers worry about it. I know, remember we were talking about making a game show type game to help us study for exams? We can get working on that. We’ll need question and answer cards for the announcer, and they’re not going to make themselves. You want to get started on herbology, and I’ll start DADA?”

“Sure, we can see if some of the others want to take the other subjects.”

“Alright, you ask Seamus and Dean, I’ll take Lavender and Parvati.”

“Okay.”

The others were willing to help out, as they all agreed studying via ‘game show’ would be much more fun than sitting in the library staring at books for hours. They each went and grabbed their text book for their chosen subject and gathered with the rest at the table in front of the fire to get started.

Hermione came back after about twenty minutes and nodded to Harry and Neville to tell them she’d spoken to their head of house. She inquired as to what they were all doing, and then went and grabbed her transfiguration textbook to help out.

They had only just gotten started, when the portrait flew open to show a wild-eyed seventh year framed within. “The whole bloody lawn is on fire! We need to stop it before it spreads any further!”

Everyone sat stunned for a moment, before they all began jumping to their feet one after another and charging through the portrait hole.

“What started the fire?”

“I don’t know…Hagrid seems to be battling a couple of guys out there, I think they were aurors. That doesn’t make any sense though, why would he be?”

“He’s battling aurors?”

“Yeah. His hut is on fire, and there’s trails of fire leading from it and spreading out, and things in the hut keep exploding…there’s some little thing running around out there setting more!”

“Question…do you have to deal with dragon fire differently than you do regular fire?” Harry asked loudly.

“Sure you do! Why?”

“The little thing running around out there is probably the baby dragon Hagrid just hatched.”

“I thought Ron said it was taken care of!”

“Not soon enough, obviously.”
They ran into a bunch of Ravenclaws heading downstairs when they reached the fifth floor, where the entrance to their tower was located. They had been able to see the fire from their windows up there, and were racing to help contain it.

They streamed out into the night, and found a veritable inferno awaiting them. Hufflepuff house, which was located on the ground floor, and was therefore closest to the fire, was already out there in force when the rest of them arrived. Most of the Hufflepuff quidditch team was trying to stun the baby dragon from the air so it would stop panicking and spreading the fires further, while the rest were trying to put out fires that were spreading towards the forest.

There were no teachers in sight, just Hagrid and what looked to be a couple of aurors who were battling it out in front of his burning hut.

The kids all gaped for a moment in horror, before steeling themselves to charge out into the burning grounds and help contain the fires.

It was rather like being trapped in hell, Harry thought. The air was thick with smoke, and the smell of burning alcohol. Hagrid’s hut was completely ablaze, the grass was smouldering in places, and had been reduced to greasy soot elsewhere. Muffled explosions were coming from within the forest edge, and the trees there were blazing like torches.

Groups of upperclassmen were directing the students to different areas, and making sure they were dealing with the fires correctly, while others were making sure everyone knew how to cast a bubble-head charm, after several of the students began choking on all the smoke they were inhaling, while still others were hosing down students to keep them cool, and from catching on fire themselves (loose robes weren’t exactly ideal for fighting a fire in).

Everyone fell into a rhythm, and were soon moving on autopilot as the continuous casting began to catch up to them. A rescue brigade had to be set up to start hauling off students as they exhausted themselves. After what seemed like hours, Harry blinked, and realized they had actually done it. The fires were gone.

Just like that, the night seemed to catch up to him. He’d never felt more tired in his life. The air stunk from all the burnt foliage, and the students were so covered in soot they looked like they’d been sleeping in a fireplace for a week.

Harry looked around and realized he didn’t see any of his friends anywhere; in fact, there were no other first, second, third, or fourth years anywhere in sight. He began looking around worriedly, wondering where they’d all gone.

“Potter?! You’re still out here?” Angelina Johnson exclaimed. “All the rest of the firsties started dropping like flies after the first hour!”

Harry just blinked at her, and stood swaying on his feet.

“For Merlin’s sake, come on. You should have gone in with the others when you started getting tired.”

“I wasn’t really tired until now.”

“Let’s get you to Madame Pomfrey.”

“Why? I’m fine.”

“Magical exhaustion is nothing to play with at your age.” Angelina scolded, before hauling him towards the castle.

The remaining students staggered back to the castle alongside them, and Harry was the recipient of much scolding all around for staying out there so long. It was rather irritating.

They found Madame Pomfrey bustling around the entryway, doling out burn cream and pepper-up
potion, while shooing students off to bed. Mr. Filch, the caretaker, was weeping in the corner, as he saw the copious amounts of mud and soot that were being tracked in all over his nice, clean floors.

Angelina marched Harry over to the mediwitch, who gasped and began scolding him as well. He was scanned, prodded, given some pepper-up and sent to bed post-haste.

As he and the rest of the Gryffindors were heading up to bed, they stumbled upon a rather odd parade. The teachers, many of whom looked a bit worse for wear, came marching out of the forbidden third-floor corridor, levitating Professor Quirrel, who looked to be unconscious, and rather ill, if his grey complexion was any indication.

The teachers, upon spotting a large group of students, covered in soot, out of bounds so late in the evening, stopped dead and gaped.

“What on earth!” McGonagall demanded.

“The lawn was on fire. Forest too. Hagrid’s hut burned down. Madame Pomfrey is in the entryway tending the rest of the students.”

“The rest of…my word! How many of you silly geese were running around?”

“Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. Naturally the slimy snakes were nowhere to be found.” One of the sixth years snarled rather aggressively.

“You do realize they don’t have any windows, and they’re under the lake, right? They didn’t have any way to see the fire like the rest of us did.” Harry retorted.

“What? How would you know? You’re a first year…and a Gryffindor!”

“I talk to people, duh. Psh. And you call yourself a Ravenclaw.” Harry snarked, before continuing on his way. He really was tired, and he desperately wanted a shower. He smelled like burning.

He heard everything get quiet behind him and turned to look. The loud-mouthed Ravenclaw was looking a bit woebegone. Professor Snape was apparently standing behind the other teachers, and from the look on his face, he hadn’t appreciated the crack about his Slytherins.

“Twenty points from Ravenclaw.” He drawled, smiling widely when the kid slumped in place and all his friends glared at him.

“Oh, Severus, really.” Flitwick muttered resentfully.

“To bed, all of you. Run along now.” Sprout intervened before Snape and Flitwick came to blows. Once the kids were out of sight, they hurried down to see the damage, and place Quirrel in a secure location until he could be questioned.

Harry stumbled into his dorm room, and found all his roommates out cold already. He gathered his pajamas, took a quick shower to get rid of the smell of smoke and crawled into bed. He was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

End of the year. Two fires, some collective action, and a party

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning’s breakfast was a rather subdued affair. Three quarters of the school seemed tired and out of sorts, and sat slumped over their breakfasts. The Slytherins were bewildered by the stronger than usual hostility being aimed their way. A faint smell of burning still lingered in the air, and could be smelt even over the savory smell of breakfast.

When breakfast was nearly over, Dumbledore stood and made a couple of shocking announcements.

Hagrid was dead.
Professor Quirrel was dead.
Classes were cancelled for the day while the staff was busy sorting things out.

The first and second years escaped to the Melting Pot as soon as breakfast was over—except for Harry, who was detained by McGonagall as the students were leaving, and told the aurors wanted to speak to him.

Harry saw the looks of shock and suspicion on the faces of many of the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor third and fourth years, who were close enough to overhear, and really wanted to hit something. He swore sometimes that the staff were going out of their way to make him look like a criminal.

McGonagall marched him out to the entryway, where he was introduced to Rufus Scrimgeour and Kingsley Shaklebolt, and escorted into a side room. Headmaster Dumbledore joined them a moment later.

“So what’s this about anyway?” Harry demanded as soon as everyone was seated.

“Harry, my boy, where are your manners?” Dumbledore chided.

“They left when I was conspicuously escorted out of breakfast after it was announced to all within earshot that aurors wanted to talk to me.”

“You arrogant little brat.” Shaklebolt huffed.

“Excuse me? I don’t think I like your attitude.”

“Enough.” Scrimgeour interjected, giving Shaklebolt a look. “I do apologize, Mr. Potter, if the timing of this interview causes you any difficulty. We only wanted to ask you a few questions, that’s all.”
“Shoot.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It means go ahead.”

“Ah. We understand you were prompted to go seeking a stone last night?”

“Yeah. I didn’t go, obviously. Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley were prompted as well, but Ron was on his way to the hospital wing because of his infected dragon bite.”

“One of the students was bitten by the dragon? I was under the impression you were prompted before the fire.”

“He’s probably just confused.” Dumbledore interjected mildly. He then began telling a meandering story about a friend of his who had gotten a couple of events mixed up, to comical results.

Harry sat patiently until the old man stopped talking, and then continued as though he hadn’t interrupted.

“Very amusing, but I’m not confused. Ron was bitten several days ago. He didn’t go to the hospital wing because he didn’t want to get Hagrid in trouble for having an illegal dragon. He said someone was coming to get it, but he didn’t want to draw attention to it in the meantime. The thing is, his hand was turning green and he was getting sick, so he finally agreed to go. Me and Neville were taking Ron to the hospital wing when we, that is Ron and I, suddenly got prompted to go protect the stone. Ron was in no condition to, and I had no intention to. Hermione cornered me about going off to protect the stone when we were on our way back to the common room later. I found that rather odd, myself. The suggestion was obviously implanted before it was triggered, and not right at that moment—otherwise, it should have been me, Ron and Neville—Hermione was nowhere around.” Scrimgeour made a couple of notes on the pad in front of him.

“Anyway, she cornered me, and I pointed out that she was being rather arrogant in assuming she was more qualified than the entire teaching staff put together, and convinced her to go tell Professor McGonagall. She did, and then one of the seventh years came in yelling about how the grounds and the forest were on fire. We all ran down to help put it out. We ran into Ravenclaw on the way, and found Hufflepuff already out there. It took forever too—all Hagrid’s alcohol kept blowing up and spreading the fires further, and the little dragon was running around in a panic making it worse. He was a fast little bugger; the Hufflepuff quidditch team was chasing him forever before they finally managed to subdue it. It’s a shame the little guy died. He was only a baby, and scared. It wasn’t his fault.”

“A touching sentiment, I’m sure.” Scrimgeour replied, his voice dry.

“Yes…poor Hagrid, he always did have a big heart, but not the sense to go with it.” Dumbledore sighed mournfully. “If we’re done here, I really do need to get arranging the poor boy’s funeral. We’ll be burying him on the grounds. Hogwarts has been his home for most of his life. I think he’d like that.”

“Excuse me, but are you insane? I’m speaking here as someone who was moderately fond of Hagrid. Anyone who’s less forgiving of his foibles is probably going to be rather offended with him being laid to rest at Hogwarts after he nearly burned it to the ground. Besides, that’s what you do to pets, not people, just plop them down any old place. That’s what graveyards are for, you know, to keep all the dead folks together and out of the way. The world is for the living.”
“I hardly think it’s too much to ask to be laid to rest at Hogwarts after years and years of dedicated service.” Dumbledore retorted. He was as smiley and twinkly as ever, but Harry nonetheless detected a note of real fury in his genial voice.

“The only people who can realistically be said to have a right to be buried at Hogwarts are the Founders, and you’ll notice they’re not buried here either. This school is a thousand years old. If everyone who’d ever given years and years of dedicated service was buried here, you wouldn’t be able to walk the grounds for tripping over all the grave markers! No, that’s completely ridiculous, and I’m sure if you ask anyone else they’ll agree. This is a school, not a home, and certainly not a graveyard.” Harry scoffed. “Bury him in Godric’s Hallow with your relatives. I’ll visit his grave the next time I go visit my parents…you know, now that I know where they’re buried and all.” He added snidely. “Are we done now?”

“Yes, that should be all. Thank you for your time.”

“You’re quite welcome.” Harry replied graciously, before turning to go. He had gotten most of the way to the door, when he suddenly halted and turned back. “I just realized…Hagrid’s dead.”

“I thought we had established that.”

“No that’s…what I meant was, who’s going to be taking care of all his pets?”

“You needn’t worry yourself” Dumbledore began.

“Pets?” Scrimgeour prompted.

“Well, the twenty-foot-tall three-headed dog that’s lodged in the castle somewhere for one…he also said something about a colony of acromantula, a manticore, a firecrab. He pretty much told us it was easier to ask what wasn’t in the forest than what was. I know Ron’s terrified of spiders. If giant ones start climbing the castle looking for kids to eat, he’ll probably have a stroke. Someone should probably look into that.”

Scrimgeour gave Dumbledore a hard look and made another note in his pad. Shaklebolt left off glowering at Harry, and gave Dumbledore a look as well. Harry headed off to the Melting Pot to see how bad a hit his reputation had taken due to this latest idiocy.

Neville was speaking to the group when Harry finally arrived, and seemed to be explaining what he knew of events. Millicent Bulstrode noticed Harry’s arrival first.

“Hey, Harry, what did the aurors want?”

“They wanted to ask me about me, Ron and Hermione being prompted to head off and ‘protect the stone’ last night.” Harry answered easily as he made his way through the room to his not-a-throne, which had been left conspicuously empty.

“See? I told you.” Neville harrumphed.

“Just checking.”

“Did they say anything else?” Hermione wondered.

“No, that’s all they wanted to ask about. I told them about Hagrid’s pets while I was there. I just realized that could end up being a big mess if no one knows they’re out there and not getting taken
Seamus paled, as did Neville.

“Good call, mate.” Seamus said fervently. “That’s all we’d need is for some of those things to come out of the forest looking for food.”

“Why? What’s out there?” Mandy Brocklehurst, a Ravenclaw, wondered.

Neville, Dean and Seamus began listing off Hagrid’s pets, eliciting gasps of fright as the list got longer.

“They’re going to do something, right?” Draco asked nervously.

“That guy Scrimgeour made a note about it; he didn’t seem too happy.” Harry assured him.

“Scrimgeour? He’s head of the auror department. That’s a relief. I’m sure he’ll see something’s done.” Susan said.

“Why was the head of the auror department out here?” Theo Nott wondered.

“I overheard some of the portraits talking on my way over. Apparently Professor Quirrel was the one trying to steal the stone last night. The thing is, he was found dead in a locked room an hour later. They said he was all shriveled up, and looked like he was beginning to decompose, and he had a belly full of unicorn blood. Hermione mentioned something Hagrid told her, about something killing unicorns in the forest. Maybe that’s why—there’s unicorn deaths, a rampaging baby dragon, a huge fire, an attempted theft and a mysterious death. The teachers just stunned Quirrel, took his wand and locked him up to await questioning. When they went back, he was dead, and they don’t know why. A lot happened last night; maybe he just wanted to be sure they got everything.”

Lavender spoke up.

“There was also that insurrection at the Ministry last night, you know, where Dumbledore’s friend was arrested. That’s why he left in the first place.” Ron reminded everyone.

“That’s right. See? Lots going on.” Neville nodded.

“Anything else going on?” Pansy wondered.

“Oh, get this. Dumbledore wanted to bury Hagrid on the grounds.”

“After he nearly burned down the mountain and killed us all!” Draco squawked indignantly.

“That’s pretty much what I said. I liked Hagrid well enough, I suppose. He meant well, usually, but really! That whole huge fire last night was completely his fault.”

Hannah nodded reluctant agreement. “I heard someone tried rallying Hogsmeade when Hagrid’s hut went up, but they all shrugged and went back to what they were doing, because apparently it used to happen so often they didn’t bother worrying about it anymore!”

“That’s crazy!” Dean said with disbelief.

“I told Dumbledore people would probably be a bit outraged at him trying to bury Hagrid here. I also reminded him this is a school. Hagrid might have lived on the grounds for most of his life, but it’s still a school. Personally I think Dumbledore was planning on having himself buried here as well. It’s a bit presumptuous, if you ask me. He acts like he owns the place. As headmaster, he’s
“an employee of the school, not the owner of the castle. He’s been here so long I think he needs to be reminded of that.”

“I’m going to write my father about this. You’re right, it’s completely beyond the pale, that’s what it is.” Draco declared.

“You should write your gran too.” Harry told Neville.

“Gran? Why?”

“Didn’t I tell you? I asked her to be the new Potter proxy on the Board of Governors.”

“Gran’s on the board?”

“Yeah. The person who was handling it was rather rude to me when I wrote to her. I’m not having that, so I fired her. I thought your gran was perfect as a replacement.”

“Wow. She didn’t say.”

“Well, the board usually meets during the summer, so she probably hasn’t done much yet. Maybe she was just waiting till then to tell you…either that, or she figured I had, I forgot though.”

“Well, I know now, no worries.”

“Someone should tell Cedric Diggory to write his dad. He works in Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. He should be told that there’s a whole bunch that might need to be contained or moved; it’s his department that will be handling it.” Hannah realized.

A number of kids around the room started writing letters, telling whoever about everything that had happened in just the last few days. A couple of Hufflepuffs offered to transport all the letters to the owlery, so there wasn’t a big crowd milling around in there. It really wasn’t a place you wanted a jostling crowd; the floor was filthy, and there were hundreds of birds perched overhead, pooping and shedding feathers. One even offered to swing by and get Cedric to write a letter while they were at it. Hufflepuffs were good folks to have around when it came to collective action.

Since the Gryffindors and Slytherins were all writing letters, and the Hufflepuffs were transporting them and garnering more letters and support along the way, the Ravenclaws decided to troop off to the library to start researching Hogwarts. They were curious what sort of charter or bylaws governed its existence, and whether it was actually permissible for a headmaster to just bury people on the grounds or not.

While all that was going on, Dean mentioned the idea they’d had for a game show type quiz to study for exams, and a group got started making question and answer cards so they could get started. In other words, it was just another day at the Melting Pot.

The following day, it was back to business as usual, with a few changes: while searching for a new game keeper, the NEWT level care of magical creatures students would be taking over Hagrid’s duties with regards to the animals, and the NEWT level herbology students would be taking care of the grounds. Hearing this, the students assumed the NEWT level defense against the dark arts students would be helping oversee Quirrel’s classes until a new teacher could be found. Much to the shock of the first years, they discovered there actually were no NEWT DADA students.
“I know cousin Nymphadora said she was the only new auror candidate for the last couple of years, but I had no idea it was because no one is taking the NEWT classes in DADA anymore. What the hell? It’s an important class!”

“They say the position is cursed; there’s been a new teacher every year for the last forty years or so. It makes for rather haphazard instruction. It’s difficult to get an OWL in the subject under such circumstances, never mind the NEWT.” Percy explained.

“There’s a curse on the position? Why hasn’t anyone done anything about it?”

“Well…you’d need a NEWT in DADA to even know where to begin, wouldn’t you?”

The first years gasped. “That’s…diabolical!”

“What about curse breakers? Doesn’t Gringott’s train up their own to go breaking into tombs and stuff? Why don’t they bring in some of them?” Seamus wondered.

“The curse has to be anchored to an object somewhere. The thing is, no one has any idea where it is, or what it is, for that matter. It might not be at Hogwarts at all. It might be a rock at the bottom of the lake.”

“So why don’t they change the name of the class then?” Harry asked.

“…”

“What? It makes sense to me.”

“I’m going to assume that wouldn’t work, or I’m sure someone would have done it already.”

“You never know; it might be a conspiracy to make everyone frightened and helpless.”

“Oh, Harry, you think everything is a conspiracy.” Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Oh, don’t give me that! Forty years, people! Do you mean to tell me that in forty years, no one has been able to think of a solution, or even begin a serious investigation? It’s a ‘rumor’ that the position is cursed. It’s a conspiracy, I tell you!”

“I think Harry’s on to something.” Dean opined.

“Well, even if it wasn’t a conspiracy per se, one does have to wonder how different the war might have turned out if everyone had been properly trained to defend themselves.” Percy mused. He bustled off then, like a man on a mission. Harry wondered if he was going to take it upon himself to try investigating the DADA curse. He wished him good luck if he was.

“If there aren’t any NEWT students, who’s going to be covering DADA? Will the headmaster?” Lavender wondered.

“Not if there’s a curse on the position, he isn’t.” Ron snorted.

“I heard the Fat Friar was going to oversee the classes.” Hannah spoke up from the Hufflepuff table.

“Oversee but not teach, right?” Neville asked.

“Even if he did teach, well, he’s a ghost, isn’t he? What could the curse really do to him?” Ron wondered.
Harry and his friends had DADA class the following day. They had discussed how best to utilize the class, which would be essentially a quiet study hall for the remainder of the year if they let it, when Hannah suggested it would be a good place to unveil their game show, DADA edition, if the Fat Friar would allow it. Since it was Hannah’s idea, she was given the job of asking the Friar about it. She returned with good news.

“He thinks it’s a great idea, in fact, he gave all the houses ten points for the idea, and for ‘working together in a spirit of brotherhood’.”

“Cool. Are the questions ready?” Harry wondered.

“Yeah, we got done the last of them last night.” Susan agreed.

“How about the buzzers?” Dean asked.

“Yep, them too. We asked the charms club to help us with them.” Parvati offered.

“How about the board?” Ron asked.

“That’s actually done too. Professor Flitwick helped with that. He’s thinking of using our idea for review classes in charms. He really liked it. He gave all the houses ten points for being good students and putting our schoolwork to practical uses.”

“Excellent.”

“So, tomorrow in DADA class we unveil it?”

“Nah, we’ll do a test run here so everyone can try it out before unveiling it in the classroom; we want to make sure all the kinks are worked out, after all.” Harry decided.

“Alright…so, we’re playing then?” Ron asked.

“We have four buzzers, how do we decide who goes first?” Hermione wondered.

“How about…we all put our names in a bowl. The first four names drawn are team captains. Each of the four draws out names one at a time, until all the names are drawn. That will be the four teams. Each team forms a line behind the buzzer, and the emcee asks the first question. Whoever buzzes in first gets to answer. If they’re wrong, they move to the back of the line, and the other three get another chance, otherwise they just move to the back of the line, and so on, that way everyone gets at least one chance.” Ernie suggested.

“Alright, sounds good. Let’s do it.” Hannah nodded.

Their first run, with everyone involved, while fun, ended up being a bit unwieldy. For the second run they just chose four names at random from the bowl. Those four people went head to head for a round of twenty-eight questions (four from each subject), while the rest watched, cheered and jeered. It ended up being a very exciting game, once everyone got into it.

Harry watched the proceedings and smiled, feeling quite pleased with how everything was working out. This was studying done right. Not only was it fun, but because everyone’s competitive spirit had been roused, and of course, no one wanted to look like a dunderhead in front of their peers—
especially with them loudly jeering and catcalling each time a question was missed—Harry noted that people were remembering things from previous question rounds and getting the answers right the next time the question came up. With such preparation, he wouldn’t be at all surprised if his year were to have a record number of high scores come exam time.

They spent the next couple of DADA classes playing their game in class; they’d gone through the stack of questions so many times by this point that no one was missing questions anymore. A few enterprising Ravenclaws, who were always keen to learn, started making up question cards from books they read and from the second year textbook just to make things interesting again. Naturally, this in turn led to record numbers of first years hanging out in the library, skimming through books and borrowing textbook from their second year housemates in order to stay competitive. Professor Flitwick used the game as well for his review sessions at the end of term—and again, they’d played so many times in the Melting Pot, they had the basic stack of questions aced already. Once again, some enterprising Ravenclaws made up a ‘challenge round’ of questions from second year and other sources to keep things interesting.

Flitwick was rather astounded by the breadth of knowledge his first years were displaying, and couldn’t be more pleased. Professor Snapes and McGonagall flatly refused to have the ‘noisy contraption’ or the related ‘high-spirited shenanigans’ in their classrooms, and Sprout thought it would be bad for some of the plants in the greenhouses which tended to be somewhat finicky. Since they used questions from all the classes in the Melting Pot, this wasn’t actually a problem; they still got their studying in. If anything, Professor Snape seemed rather peeved when he would try surprising people with questions and they were almost always able to answer them.

While all this was going on, Lavender and some of the others were trying to get a Solstice celebration organized. One evening at dinner she, Parvati, and Hermione were discussing the matter with some of their Hufflepuff compatriots at the next table, and were overheard by the Fat Friar, who thought it a wonderful idea, and confided that he didn’t know why Hogwarts no longer seemed to have such events.

According to him, and Sir Nick when he got involved in the discussion, all the traditional wizarding holidays used to be celebrated to a greater or lesser extent during the school year. Now, the only holidays that were marked were Halloween, and to a lesser extent Christmas, though in both cases the muggle traditions, not the wizarding ones, were observed. Both of them were rather horrified when the children admitted that they didn’t really know anything about any of the traditions wizards followed, as the mugglefied holidays were all they’d ever known. Sir Nick and the Fat Friar bestirred themselves enough to fetch their counterparts in Ravenclaw and Slytherin—The Grey Lady and the Bloody Baron, respectively—and headed off for a conference about the shameful state of affairs.

Over the next week, the students were treated to the sight of the house ghosts drifting down the halls and through the great hall, arguing with one another. Oddly, for once the Grey Lady and the Bloody Baron seemed to be on the same side. One of the students, curious, finally asked them what the problem was. It seemed that none of them could agree on what constituted ‘proper wizarding traditions’ for a solstice celebration, as they’d all come from different time periods.

The Grey Lady and the Baron, both alive when Hogwarts was still newly built, grew up in the age of Vikings, and so their experience of wizarding tradition was very much influenced by the period they lived in. The Fat Friar, he grew up in the middle ages, post Norman invasion. His view of things was very much colored by the French aristocracy that had taken over during the days he lived. Sir Nick, he was a child of the Renaissance era, when the Italian city states were the big
power in the area. His idea of what constituted proper tradition was colored by that.

Things in the wizarding world changed very slowly, but they did change.

The ghosts did eventually reach a compromise; there were some things that had stayed the same through their different periods—bonfires, dancing, fireworks, brightly colored clothing, a feast, and gathering mid-summer plants for potions, as they were especially potent if gathered on that day. Having decided that they’d narrowed things down to the essentials, Sir Nick instructed the house elves to gather certain woods and lay them aside for the bonfires. The Fat Friar gave the house elves the menu they had decided for the feast that night—a combination of their favorite solstice fare from their own times and the more modern fare the children would be familiar with. The Bloody Baron and the Grey Lady spread the word that they would be overseeing dance lessons for any of the students interested in learning the traditional dances, which oddly, had remained mostly unchanged over the course of Hogwarts’ history.

The staff had seen the ghosts wandering about arguing, and heard they were planning some sort of celebration, but as they assumed it was a ghost celebration, they mostly ignored it, focusing instead on the quickly approaching exams.

Dumbledore was busy answering questions about the wards of Hogwarts, the creatures in the forest, the inadvisability of bringing a coveted magical object into a school full of children when it was known someone was after it…

Dumbledore wasn’t having a good week, and spent most of his time in his office anyway, so the arrangements for the solstice party slipped his notice as well. Lavender and her planning committee spread the word that there was going to be a dance on the lawn, and a feast, and busied themselves making dozens upon dozens of flower crowns for the girls, and leaf crowns for the boys, as well as small baskets to gather mid-summer plants in.

The last weeks of the term began to fly by; reviews, last minute homework and studying took up everyone’s free time, until, suddenly, exam time was there.

The teachers were all a bit bemused at the first and second years. Usually there were at least a few cases of nerves, a couple of terrified faces, a few sleepy faces from studying late into the night. None of that seemed to hold true for the youngest students this year. They all seemed well-rested, confident and rather chipper, truth be told.

Naturally, being teachers, their first thought was that the students had stumbled upon some new, ‘sure fire’ way to cheat. They handed out the ‘no-cheat’ quills that were standard fare for any wizarding exam, and spent the rest of the class walking among the desks, and scrutinizing the students closely, looking for wandering eyes, invisible answer sheets, and surreptitious magic. They were all rather stumped when they found nothing of the sort; just diligent students earnestly writing away.

The only class exam that generated the usual amount of anxiety was Potions. The written half of the exam was, if not a breeze, then at least less stressful than it might have been in times past. Unfortunately, memorizing the textbook didn’t help all that much when it came to actually brewing. The only good thing that could be said was that there were no explosions. Sadly, there were still a number of off-color potions, and ones that were the wrong consistency.
Many of the children were a little discouraged upon leaving the classroom—they’d all studied really hard, but it had been for naught. They would have been less distraught had they actually studied Snape’s face while handing in their samples. While it was true there were a number of potions that weren’t quite up to snuff, those potions had actually fallen within ‘almost useable’, rather than ‘danger to life and limb’. It was something of a record for Snape’s tenure as potions professor.

Ron stretched and let out a gusty sigh. “Well, that was the last of them. Thank Merlin. I think I injured my brain, trying to stuff so much into it.”

“Ron!”

“Oh, lay off, Hermione. We’re all feeling a bit overfull in the noggin. Happily, now that exams are over, we can let all that stuffing leak back out and give our poor, abused brains a rest.”

“Seamus!”

“Stop arguing, guys. Come on, we’ve got a ‘hot-diggity, exams are over’ party to get to in the Melting Pot.” Neville reminded them.

“Good thing our last class was in the dungeons, huh?” Ron agreed, rubbing his hands together.

“Less talking, people, more partying!”

“WooHoo!”

The Gryffindors stared after their Slytherin classmates in astonishment as they hurried past them to get to the party first.

“Aren’t we supposed to be the party animals?” Seamus said in affront.

“Yes. They’re stealing our rep, man.” Dean nodded.

“We’d best do something about that.” Seamus replied.

Dean and Seamus’ suggestion for reclaiming their spot as party animals involved putting their ties around their heads and loosening their top buttons, spiking the party punch with butterbeer (the only alcohol any of them were able to get their hands on), and challenging the rest of the partygoers to a ‘self-levitated chair race’, which, as the name implied, involved sitting in a chair, casting a levitation spell, and racing around the room…trying to, anyway.

“Solstice today.” Lavender said cheerfully to the boys as they came down for breakfast.

“Yeah, we know.” Ron agreed with a yawn.

“Here, take your leaf crowns” Hermione ordered.

“We’re wearing them to breakfast?” Neville asked, putting his on with a shrug.

“Sure, why not? It took us long enough to make all of them; we might as well get as much use out
of them as possible.” Parvati agreed.

“Ron, you’re not wearing that to a party are you?” Hermione griped.

Ron looked down at the bright orange t-shirt he was wearing, which was emblazoned across the front with the logo of Ron’s favorite quidditch team.

“What? The ghosts said colorful.”

“The Chudley Cannons though…it’s not very festive.”

“Oi, don’t be knocking the Cannons!”

“We didn’t exactly bring party duds with us. None of us had a lot to choose from.” Dean interjected before Ron and Hermione erupted into another of their infamous arguments.

Seamus had on a red t-shirt that said ‘Gryffindor’, Neville had dug out one of his few shirts that wasn’t brown, white or tan—a long-sleeved t-shirt in yellow. Harry was wearing a similar t-shirt in blue, while Dean was in green. None of them looked particularly fancy, but they were indeed quite colorful.

The girls, by contrast, all had pretty summer dresses on; Parvati in pink, Lavender in light purple, Hermione in pale blue. They were already wearing their flower crowns—which they’d managed to color-coordinate with their outfits.

Hermione handed out the stack of leaf crowns she had to the boys, while Parvati and Lavender handed out others to the students of Gryffindor as they left the tower, while reminding them that there was going to be a dance out on the lawn later, and a feast.

As they headed down towards the great hall, they passed windows looking out over the grounds. They could see three massive piles of wood stacked up for the bonfires. The grounds had been fixed up, and all evidence of the fire that had raged across the lawn a few weeks ago had been removed.

“I’m glad they cleaned up; it wouldn’t have been much fun to dance around in the ashes, would it?”

“I should say not.”

They arrived at the great hall and halted for a moment to take in the spectacle.

Normally, the great hall was a sea of black, with small hints of color here and there wherever house colors showed. The teachers, with the notable exception of Dumbledore, tended to wear dark colors as well. Usually, one’s eyes couldn’t help but focus on Dumbledore, as he was the only real spot of color in the hall: him, the ceiling and the banners, anyway. Today, all the student tables were awash in colors, and the flower and leaf crowns added in made the students look like some sort of exotic rainbow garden. The ceiling of the great hall showed a searingly blue sky, and the sun merrily beaming down on them all. Here and there along the tables, unusual dishes—the ghosts suggestions, had been added to the usual morning fare, lending exotic scents to the already unusually colorful hall.

The house ghosts stood off to the side, lined up in a row, and beamed approvingly at the students.

“Is it just me, or do the teachers look a mite confused?” Dean asked.
“Huh, it’s not just you. They do look confused, don’t they?” Neville agreed.

“Did anyone actually tell the teachers we were going to have a party today?” Harry wondered.

“Um…well, after the ghosts took over, we just sort of assumed they did. We’ve been busy making wreaths for everyone to wear. Even with magic, do you know how long it takes to make a thousand wreaths, when you only have a bit of time after classes and in between studying for exams?”

“Wait… professor Flitwick should know. I heard he was out charming up the bonfire wood so it would burn all night and not be a fire hazard. I think Professor Sprout should know too, I think she offered to lead those gathering mid-summer plants through the greenhouses and supervise the gathering. It’s only the rest of them that are clueless.” Parvati suddenly spoke up.

“Oh, okay. They can explain things to the rest of them. Let’s eat. Breakfast is getting cold.”

Breakfast that morning was a rather light-hearted affair; between the relief at the end of exams and the term, and the prospect of an all-day party, spirits were high.

“Look at how cheerful everyone is. I just don’t understand why they ever stopped doing this.”

“Me either. According to gran, they used to do all sorts of things they don’t anymore. They used to have a choir that would perform throughout the year, and a drama club that used to put on plays. There used to be a dueling club and a fencing club too.”

“And then we know that there used to be wizarding celebrations on top of that. It really doesn’t make any sense. Maybe Hermione can get by with just classes and homework to keep her occupied, but the rest of us can’t!” Lavender complained.

“I know; until we started the Melting Pot there really wasn’t much to do around here.” Parvati agreed.

“Maybe we should make that our goal for next year.” Lavender mused.

“Make what our goal?” Harry asked curiously.

“Bringing back culture to Hogwarts. Think about it—plays, choir performances, duels and fencing, with seasonal parties sprinkled throughout for flavor. If the teachers are too busy to take on the task of overseeing clubs like that, I suppose we could ask the ghosts to be the faculty liaison. Sir Nick wears a rapier; he could probably teach fencing. I bet we could find ones qualified to oversee the others as well.”

The kids all agreed it was certainly something to strive for, so they shook on it. The Hufflepuff first and second years at the next table overheard, and spread the word across the great hall to the others. Within fifteen minutes, word traveled back across the tables that everyone thought it was a good idea, and what’s more, Lucius Malfoy, Draco’s father, who was on the board of governors, was qualified to teach fencing. Draco was certain his father would agree to stop by every so often to oversee a fencing club. Sally-Anne Perks from Hufflepuff offered up her mother as a possible choir director. Her mother was muggleborn and had actually been a part of her local church choir for a number of years. The students of Ravenclaw reminded everyone that their own Professor Flitwick had been a dueling champion in his youth, so they had that covered as well. The only thing they needed was someone to oversee a drama club.

“Well, that’s certainly helpful. Bringing back culture to Hogwarts is going to be a lot easier than any of us realized.” Ron said cheerfully.
After breakfast was over, the eager students spilled out onto the lawn. The weather was perfect: warm, but not overly so, with clear blue skies and a gentle breeze.

One of the ghosts had gotten the house elves to prop the gramophone’s horn near an open window overlooking the grounds, so there was music to be had. Some of the upper year Hufflepuffs, getting into the spirit of things, started cajoling their fellows to get some games going. The youngest students spread out across the grounds and began a game of their own, which seemed to consist mostly of them chasing one another and shrieking a lot, as best any of the older kids could figure.

Others among the upper years started dancing, and still others snuck off to find an out of the way corner for some ‘alone time’. Elsewhere, Professor Sprout had a group of kids with baskets following her through the greenhouses while she directed them towards those plants that would be best harvested that day.

The kids understood what the Slytherins who had been demonstrating for the dancing classes meant about ‘old magic’ after everything was over, in a way that just couldn’t be conveyed by words alone. They could actually feel the magic rising as they danced through the forms that had remained unchanged through all of Hogwarts history. There was more to it than just entreating the ground to be fruitful though; it was also a community building magic. They could feel the magic binding them together as a group, to one another, to the castle and to the land.

That wasn’t the only surprise either. The magic called out to the fairies of summer as well. They arrived singly and in small groups; small ones, big ones, many of which they had no name for. They were lovely, whatever they were. There were fairies that looked like flowers, or like bundles of twigs with leaves in place of hair. There were others with wings that glittered in the sunlight, and still more that were in a variety of summer colors.

They drifted out of the forest, and over the moors, and some came right out of the ground. A trio of fauns arrived when the dancing was at its peak, and added the sound of their pipes and drums to the music drifting out of the castle.

There were mixed reactions to the arrival of the fairies; some of the students were horrified and wanted to drive them off. Others were enchanted and wanted to study them up close. The majority just shrugged and kept dancing; so long as they weren’t bothering anyone, they figured they had as much right to dance as the rest of them did.

The bonfires burned long into the night; the students had to be chivvied back towards their dorms after the feast, as most seemed inclined to head back outside to keep dancing, as the fairies that had joined them still were.

In the morning, Harry slipped off early for his usual exercise. He thought he’d probably gone as far as he could practicing alone. He was hoping Sirius would let him take karate lessons or something over the summer so he could get some actual fighting experience, but he’d have to wait and see.

He’d finally mastered hitting targets while in motion, and he’d gotten pretty good with a sword, if he did say so himself—the training dummy had been invaluable.

As he cooled down from his workout that morning, it occurred to him that his skills were probably going to become quite rusty over the summer, without the training dummy to battle against.

“Hey, room? Would you let me borrow the dummy and the training sword I’ve been using for the
summer? I’ll bring them back, I promise.”

The room, predictably, didn’t answer, so Harry shrugged and decided to come back later with his trunk to see if he could take the dummy out of the room.

He didn’t get a chance to test his idea until the following morning. With no classes to keep everyone occupied, he was surrounded from breakfast until curfew. He brought his trunk with him, shrunk down to small size. When his workout was over, he enlarged it and opened it up to the second compartment, a small room. His school trunk wasn’t anywhere near as elaborate as the seven lock trunk his parents had left for him, but then, he hadn’t realized he might need to be moving anything large while at school. He’d actually thought he was being a bit extravagant in getting the two compartment trunk!

He levitated the dummy and the rack of practice swords down into the compartment, and was about to close the lid, when it occurred to him that he was maybe being too hasty. The come and go room was positively stuffed with things that no one wanted anymore.

He hesitated only a moment, and asked for the ‘room of broken things’. It was a (very tiny) bit emptier than it had been at the beginning of the year. Harry had been making regular forays into it to retrieve decorations for the Melting Pot, broken items for project corner, and trash for transfigurations.

The room of broken things was filled with long shelves that reached the ceiling, which seemed to go back for miles. The whole place was simply stuffed with junk. He didn’t realize how long he’d spent sorting through junk and picking through it for stuff that he either liked or thought would be useful, until he rejoined his classmates in time for lunch.

“HARRY POTTER! WHERE HAVE YOU”
“Quietus.”
“....”

“Hello everyone, how are things?”
“Um, Harry? What’d you do to Hermione?”

“The counter to the sonorous charm. Normally, it makes your much louder than normal voice back to normal. It seemed appropriate. Apparently if used on someone without a magically amplified voice it just works as a silencing spell. Good to know.”

Hermione slammed her hand on the table to get Harry’s attention and pointed imperiously to her throat.

“Nope. I’ve been telling you all year that you’re not my mother. I’ve been telling you, repeatedly, ad nauseum, that if I decide to go wandering, it’s not your business and furthermore, not being my mother, it is not your place to scream at me about it. You are not the boss of me. I do not report to you. I do not have to tell you where I’ve been and what I was doing every moment of every day. I’ve gotten tired of telling you. From now on, if you act up, I’m going to hex you. It’s that simple. You either learn to behave yourself when it comes to me, or I hex you.”

Having said his piece, Harry gave a sharp nod, and proceeded to wolf down lunch. Hermione, outraged, flounced away from the table to go tell Professor McGonagall what he’d done.
The last few days of term passed swiftly, and soon it was time to board the Hogwarts Express and head for home.

“You should come over, I’m sure mum will invite you. I doubt you want to stay with those muggles of yours for very long. I’m sure Dumbledore will allow it if she writes to him.” Ron offered.

“Excuse me? Dumbledore is the bloody headmaster. He has no say in anything I do, so sod all this asking him for permission tripe.” Harry growled back irritably. “I’ll see what sort plans there are for summer and I’ll get back to you.”

“What sort of things are you going to be doing this summer, Neville? I’ll be going on vacation with my parents to France.” Hermione asked.

“I’ll be studying, mostly.”

“Good idea. You need all the help you can get.” Hermione replied. Neville sputtered indignantly, but she was already pinning Ron with a gimlet eye. “You should take a page out of Neville’s book and follow suit. I’d better not hear you’ve waited till last minute to start on your summer homework.”

“Lay off! Blimey, we’ve only just left sight of the school, and you’re already complaining about homework? You’re completely mental!”

Harry tuned out the resulting argument. Hermione had been rather pointedly ignoring him since he’d silenced her. She seemed to be waiting for an apology. Harry rolled his eyes internally at the thought that he’d ever apologize for that; she’d be waiting a long damned time if she really thought he was going to, or that it was even deserved. He had no intentions of spending another school year with her scrutinizing his every move, making him into a spectacle every time he tried to leave the room, or spent any time by himself. He also didn’t want or need her to berate him constantly about his schoolwork; his aunt and uncle had never cared whether he was doing his homework, which meant he’d had to learn to be responsible about such things on his own at a young age. What’s more, now that he was no longer in classes with Dudley, he wasn’t required to have a poor academic performance. He’d actually been trying to do well, and it showed. He had beaten Hermione’s scores in DADA. He’d matched her in Transfiguration, and History, and only scored a bit lower than her in all the rest.

That was another reason she was ignoring him, he thought; in fact it was probably a more potent reason than him silencing her. She’d been quite bent out of shape when she realized he’d actually beaten her in something; outscoring him in almost everything else didn’t seem to make her feel any better about that one grade…and, now that he thought of it, she didn’t seem too pleased with him matching her scores in the other classes either. In fact…Neville had outscored her in Herbology. She’d been making snipes about his academic performance ever since.

“Geez, what a brat.”

All too quickly it seemed, the train was pulling in to King’s Cross station.

“Hey, Harry…isn’t that your godfather?” Neville asked.
“Huh? Where?”

Neville pointed out the window, and sure enough, there was Sirius, looking much healthier than he had the last time he’d seen him, waiting on the platform with the parents for the train to come in. Ron’s mother and sister were standing right nearby. From the look of things they weren’t getting on too well.

“What’s he doing here? Surely he doesn’t think you’re going home with him, does he?”

Harry slanted a look at Ron and wondered. This was the second time he’d made mention of him staying with the Dursleys. He’d never told Ron definitively one way or another what his summer plans were, but he would think he’d have assumed he was going to live with Sirius, as Sirius was his guardian so far as the wizarding world was concerned.

Percy, and the twins were already out there with their parents when the rest of them got off the train. Neville spotted his gran, said his goodbyes to everyone, and hurried off. The rest of them started towards the Weasleys and Sirius. Harry noted Ron’s sister started jumping up and down excitedly and chanting ‘I see him! I see him!’

“How sweet, your little sister missed you.” Hermione cooed.

“Harry Potter! Oh, mum, do you see him?”

“Or not…” Hermione added, sounding embarrassed.

Mrs. Weasley pounced on Ron and began fussing over him loudly. Harry tried to slip around them so he could meet up with Sirius, but then she turned to him and pounced on him as well.

“Oh, Harry dear, so nice to meet you properly. Ron has told us all so much about you!”

“Can’t…breathe!”

“Uh, mum? I think you’re killing him.” Ron snorted, while giving Harry a playful whack on the back. It really didn’t help the situation.

“Uh, Molly? Think you can let my godson go? I think you have enough of your own already.”

Sirius huffed. He grabbed Harry by the arm and heaved. Harry stumbled away, red-faced, breathless and a bit wobbly.

“Muuuuuuum!” Ginny moaned under her breath. Harry, still a bit shaken, glanced her way. She promptly turned bright red and made a weird face, squeaked and hid behind the twins.

Harry grimaced, then turned appealing eyes on Sirius. “Can we leave? Please.”

“Sure thing, kiddo, come on.” Sirius snorted. He kept a hand on his shoulder and steered him towards the gateway.

“Where are we going anyway?”

“I told your relatives I’d pick you up, since I was right here in London. I figured we’d get something to eat and catch up before I take you there.”

“Sounds good. What’re we eating?”

“I thought tacos. I finally got a chance to read that book you kids wrote; I’ve had a yen for tacos
ever since. It was pretty good, actually. Grandpa loved it. He bought out the remainder of your contract with Xenophilius. We own a publishing house; he’s going to have it published under us. It should do better—although 800 copies from an ad in a fringe newspaper isn’t bad, really. We can do more mainstream advertising, and also send it to the overseas affiliates to be translated into other languages. We even have some ideas for merchandising, and since we own most of the manufacturing concerns in these parts, we can actually do it.”

“Wow. That’s cool.”

“Yeah, isn’t it?”

They stepped out through the gateway, and spotted the Grangers waiting just beyond it, along with the Fitch-Fletchleys and Mrs. Thomas. They said hello, and assured them their children should be along shortly, before exiting the building and hopping on Sirius’ motorcycle.

“I know a place not too far from here.”

“Sounds good. I’ve never actually had tacos before.”

“Well then, it’ll be a treat for both of us.”

As they were pulling out from the curb, they spotted the Grangers, surrounded by a gaggle of Weasleys, all of whom were talking at once and in constant motion. Mr. and Mrs. Granger looked a bit overwhelmed by them all, though they seemed to be doing their best to be friendly.

“Oh, those poor saps. Arthur’ll be talking their ears off, mark my words. He thinks muggles are interesting. He’ll be asking them all sorts of inane questions about muggle stuff. They’re going to have a hard time getting away.”

“Oh well. It’s their problem, not ours.”

The Mexican place Sirius took them to was actually a Taco Bell. Harry pointed out that he’d heard of the place, and it was an American fast food place, not really Mexican.

“They have tacos though; that’s all that’s important.”

“I guess.”

They each ordered a couple of tacos—hard shelled, soft shelled and supreme, just so they could say they were experts in the whole taco business, and found their seats. The seats were orange plastic benches that were screwed into the floor. Sirius spent a lot of time staring at the décor, and trying to move the table, which was also bolted into place, before settling down for his meal.

“They must get a lot of criminals, I guess, if they’re so worried about the furniture disappearing.”

“I don’t think that’s why they do that. I think it’s so they don’t have to keep coming out to put everything back into place all day.”

“You have your theory, I have mine.”

Harry laughed and unwrapped his taco. It seemed an odd food to him, but it tasted good.
“I think we should have gotten more surpremes. The white stuff is good on them.”

“I think it’s sour cream. It’s neat, isn’t it? The sauce is a bit much.”

“If you don’t like spicy, maybe you shouldn’t have gotten fire sauce. I think the name is supposed to be descriptive.”

“I wanted the authentic taco experience!”

“Well, later tonight you’ll be getting an authentic bathroom experience too. It has to come back out eventually.”

Sirius made a face, and mimed the torture he’d be going through later, which set Harry to giggling—partially in embarrassment, as the place was packed and people were staring at Sirius’ performance.

They were on their second taco when the noise level suddenly went up.

“What the hell are the Weasleys doing here?”

“It looks like the Grangers managed to get away.”

“Sirius! Harry! Fancy meeting you here. This is a marvelous little place isn’t it? How curious! They’ve bolted all the furniture to the floor…ah! Muggles! They really are quite peculiar, aren’t they?” Arthur said very loudly while smiling at the other diners. He began wandering around, peering at them as though he was visiting a zoo.

Molly, meanwhile, was shrieking at the twins, who were trying to slip a prank item into someone’s taco while they weren’t looking.

Ron had just nodded a distracted hello and headed straight for the counter to look at the menu. “En-chee-reeto? I dunno, sounds barmy. I’ll take two of them. Nachos supreme…well, if it’s supreme, it’s prolly pretty good, huh? I’ll have one of them. Oi! Is that the size of the portions? I’m hungry though…better make it three en-chee-reetos and two nacho supremes…tacos too. They’re small…give me ten of those. Oh, what’s a burrito? That thing there? I dunno…looks weird. Give me two of them.”

“RONALD WEASLEY! STOP ORDERING EVERYTHING ON THE MENU! YOU’RE GOING TO EAT US OUT OF HOUSE AND HOME ONE OF THESE DAYS! WE HAVE TO BE ABLE TO HAVE ENOUGH FOR EVERYONE!”

“Aw mum would you relax. Dad said muggle money goes further than galleons!”

“DON’T TALK ABOUT GALLEONS! THINK OF SECRECY! YOU CHILDREN, NO SENSE, TALKING ABOUT THINGS YOU SHOULDN’T TALK ABOUT WHERE ANYONE CAN OVERHEAR!”

The manager came out of the back in response to the shouting.

“Excuse me, madame. Do you mind? You’re not only blocking the line, but you’re disturbing the other customers. If you cannot control yourself, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”
“EXCUSE ME? HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO ME IN THAT TONE OF VOICE! I’M IN PERFECT CONTROL OF MYSELF YOUNG MAN. I WON’T STAND FOR BEING CONDESCENDED TO BY A CHILD YOUR AGE. DIDN’T YOUR MOTHER TEACH YOU ANY MANNERS?”

“Child? I’m forty three, madame, and I’ll thank you to leave my mother out of this. My mother is a fine woman, and I won’t have some back woods harridan imply otherwise.”

Molly reared back as though she’d been struck, and her face began to suffuse with a dangerous, angry red. Worse than that, was that all the Weasleys faces began to glow red.

Ginny, who up until this point had been staring fixedly at Harry and twirling a lock of hair around her finger, broke off staring to march up next to her mother.

“You shut up you jerk! You don’t talk to my mum like that!”

Percy, having spotted the danger signs in Ginny from where he was standing (while pretending not to know the rest of them), hurried forward to grab her and keep her from pulling her wand and throwing any hexes, while Arthur began wrestling Molly down to keep her from doing the same.

The twins did what they always did when things got tense—they started cracking jokes and tossing fireworks every which way.

Harry and Sirius were already throwing their remaining tacos in the bag and grabbing their sodas, hoping to get away.

People began screaming when the fireworks went off, and started stampeding for the door. One of the cooks in the back was so startled by all the commotion, he stumbled backwards into a towering pile of pans and knocked them to the floor. This in turn startled another worker coming out of the freezer, who stumbled and dropped the stack of trays filled with taco shells, one of which fell into the fryer, and splashed oil everywhere—including the stove right nearby, on which a pressure cooker filled with pinto beans was boiling away. The oil ignited and began to spread, which caused more pandemonium.

The remaining workers began screaming, slipping in the oil, and stumbling over the pans and taco shells. The drive-thru worker came running upon hearing all the noise and tried grabbing the nearest fire extinguisher. The manager, seeing the spreading fire, the mess, and the panicked customers trampling one another in their eagerness to get out, turned and began screaming at Molly in earnest, in between shouting for someone to call the police to have the whole loony lot of them arrested.

Sirius, upon nearly losing Harry in the panicked crowd, threw him over his shoulder, bulled his way out the door, and dropped Harry in the sidecar before hopping on the motorcycle himself. They roared out of the parking lot, and left the Weasleys to clean up their own mess.

They drove for a bit and stopped at a park along the way, and finished their dinner in peace, before heading towards Surrey and Privet Drive.

Chapter End Notes

And so ends part I.
Those who have stuck with me this far, I should be posting parts of Book 2 starting tomorrow.

My thanks to all who left comments and kudos.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!