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Summary

In a life where being smart means not being beaten or starved, Harry Potter turns out to be someone who should never be underestimated - someone who would go to the very edges of morality to preserve his life and to enact a vengeance on those who deserve it.

This work aims to massively expand the canon as it is given in the books, as well as slightly tweaking many canon facts/implications. It is, in essence, a complete re-write of the books, starting with the 2 months leading up to Book 1. It's gonna be an extremely slow burn, both in plot as in eventual relationships. All relationships tagged will be those that are central to the actions of certain characters (such as Lucius who would die to protect Narcissa and their son, or Xenophilius who loved his wife so dearly that even after death he makes decisions in her memory).
Chapter I

Chapter Summary

And so began the preparations for Harry Potter's First Year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry had always known he was different, ever since he could remember. The Dursleys, evidently, knew so to, as he could judge from the stark differences between how they treated Dudley and how they treated him. So he began anticipating and planning as best he could, as soon he could. By age eight, he knew the Dursleys better than they knew themselves. He knew how to push Aunt Petunia to her limits, to that point where she could be forgiving and where she stopped caring at all. For her it was when her eyes became a bit tighter and her lips became a thin line – that was the moment he would always back down and placate her best he could, to prevent tipping her over the edge and moving her into punishing him for his so-called “insolence”. Her other limit, when Harry could move her into treating him better than she otherwise would, where those days that her gardening – or rather, Harry's gardening considering he did all the work, would earn her that ever-so-covetted neighbourhood Garden Gnome prize. A hideous little thing, vaguely shaped like an ordinary garden gnome painted gold – given to the winner to be held privately for six months, before moving to its next winner. Aunt Petunia, ever since Harry had figured her private pride for possessing the odious thing, had held it in a single streak for the past five years. So, whenever the new year’s judgement came up and she began focussing Harry’s chores on the garden, he would follow her orders, go beyond her expectations and sire her the prize, year and year again. And whenever she became somewhat petulant and began pressuring him on subject of his chores, he simply reminded her of the prize, vaguely threaten a less than perfect job and cower her into a more complacent mood. Afterwards, however, he would always exceed her expectations again and earn himself a thin smile and the reward of some treats – but always behind Uncle Vernon’s back and out of Dudley’s sight. She loathed the idea that either might know he could hold influence over her and that was what kept her obviously present revenge from showing outwardly.

Uncle Vernon was both more difficult and more easy to cower and placate. He was more easily angered, something Harry suspected had more to do with Vernon’s own personal shortcomings in life rather than Harry's perceived shortcoming. Whenever Vernon received negative comment or remarks from his boss at his job, he would fester in quiet rage, waiting for Harry to commit a mistake and invite Vernon’s rage upon him. But Harry had learned to recognize the signs of Vernon’s internal anger and so he almost always managed to broker a peace. He would remember the days that Uncle Vernon's boss did the monthly check-ups, weary to always placate Aunt Petunia in buying more bacon the day before. Combined with Uncle Vernon’s favourite hearty meal and Harry's utter silence and seeming absence after dinner, Harry almost always made Uncle Vernon less agitated and a lot calmer by the time Vernon would be able to actually focus on Harry and not his diner. Both some days, even that wasn't enough – and those were the days that Harry found himself forced to confront Vernon with his less-than-socially acceptable behaviours. Such as, for instance, Vernon's monthly bets that were placed the day he would get his pay-check. And since Vernon somehow always managed to bet on the wrong teams, it meant that, sometimes, his pay-check was less than ideal if Aunt Petunia's attention were to be aimed towards it. Or so Harry
told Vernon – and when Vernon would than stand there in barely controlled rage, with a face as red as a tomato, Harry would also remind him about the single time he had found Uncle Vernon with his pants down and the next-door neighbour's wife's lips around his embarrassingly small prick. That, Harry remarked to himself, always shut the fat walrus of a man up. And Vernon would stew in quiet anger, barely able to look Harry in the eyes and suddenly more focussed on buying Aunt Petunia a nice bouquet. There were also days that Harry knew Uncle Vernon was quite content and those were the moments that he would go beyond his usual placations, making sure Uncle Vernon received a hearty dinner, a good pint of lager and find himself in an extremely tidy house. Those were the days that Harry managed to save up some money, when Vernon, reluctantly but voluntarily, would shove some small change – and very rarely even a bill, into Harry's hands, urging the boy to be extremely wise in spending it and to keep his silence regarding unnamed and personal matters.

Dudley, annoyingly enough, was the most difficult of them all to cower into submission – at least in the beginning. Since he had no real secrets or shames, safe for the usual childhood fears of silly things, such as spiders or clowns and such, Dudley rarely deigned to listen to Harry's veiled threats – that or he simply failed to recognize them for what they were. So Harry had had to resort to more extreme and stealthy methods. So, whenever Dudley had wronged Harry, by calling him names or actually hitting him, he would find himself, by next morning, in a bed soaked to the springs with piss. Of course, Harry always managed to make himself scarce during those times and nobody ever found out his involvement, not really – but it was always too easy to sneak in Dudley's room past midnight and soak the fat pubescent teen's fingers in a nice glass of water, till Harry heard the telltale trickle of piss soaking through the matrass, by which time Harry would remove his traces, sneak back into his cupboard and close it from inside using his trusty coathanger. Of course, Harry didn't do this every time – he kept the pattern somewhat irregular and thereby more difficult to figure out. Sometimes he would make certain things go missing, making sure they ended up being found a few days later, hidden in some nook or cranny of the household. Other times, something creepy, like a newt or a spider, would find its way in Dudley's closet or bed – but always on rainy days, such as when creepy things were want to crawl into warmer places and dry houses. Of course, then there were also the times that Dudley did stuff which even his parents would find disappointing - though they came as doding as they could when it concerned their son. And those things were, after a few years, what kept Dudley firmly - and very easily, in line. After all, considering the Dursley's pride on being a perfectly normal and prize-winning sub-urban family, how ever would they react to the fact that their son, their pride and joy, had frequently visited a very infamous cruising-site notorious for being a breeding ground of buggery and debauchery? Of course, Harry didn't begrudge Dudley for that, especially not considering he had his own personal sense of appreciation for both the male and female forms, young though as he was – he knew beauty when he saw it. But using it as leverage did keep Dudley out of Harry's way – and in return Harry turned a blind eye when Dudley was buggering and Aunt Petunia was inquiring after Dudley's absence. And if Harry sometimes bought condoms and slipped them into Dudley's nightstand, ready for Dudley to find them if he ever needed them, that was that. Harry might not like Dudley, but he still didn't wish him to contract any sort of communicable diseases. Harry just wanted to be left in peace, no matter the means to that end – but he did have his limits, and giving way to others sometimes necessitated that.

In school, Harry paid heed to every lesson he could learn, whenever he could. He learned his textbooks inside-out, able to recite them from memory and able to deduce from those lessons other answers to untold questions. He never spoke up during classes, happy to stay unnoticed, but always ready to answer when questioned and eager to outperform the tasks set to him, be it by homework or group-assignments. His teachers adored him, even if most of them found him to be too quiet for his age and lacking in friends. It wasn't like Harry didn't try making friends – he honestly did try, but for some reason they all found him “detached and cold”, which he never really understood. By
the time he got into fifth year, base school, his favourite teacher scheduled him to be tested for his IQ. Harry thought it a minor bother, and the Dursleys only allowed it after they found out it wouldn't cost them a thing. So Harry got tested, five tests over the course of a week, and by the end the one testing him had become quite silent. They took him and the Dursleys aside, matter of factly stating Harry was an extremely intelligent child, well above an IQ of a hundred and thirty, and thus was eligible for higher standards of education – but since that meant an extra expenditure of funds already unlikely to be spend on Harry, if ever, the Dursleys had declined that opportunity, if rather politely. Harry found he didn't care, not really – he had been able to homeschool himself beyond his peers' study-levels for years by that point and he didn't see how he couldn't continue doing so. Sure, the teachers were let down by his agreement with the Dursleys, but they knew he'd be alright – or so he hoped. All in all, by his eleventh birthday, he had managed to make his life quite endurable – even if he did have freak accidents once so every few months. Living with the Dursleys was harder after these incidents, but he had learned well and such tempers from their side never lasted long when he focussed on placating them.

There had been the incident at school, which he had come to call the 'Transference Incident', when he had been chased by a few bullies and he had somehow, inexplicably, ended up on the roof of the school building. He had managed to find his way down easily enough and nobody had noticed, outside of the bullies wondering where he had gone all of a sudden. Later, he learned what teleportation was – and since a black-out didn't correspond with the facts of the matter, he accepted that. Somehow, he had teleported. Or transferred, as he preferred to call it – teleportation, being as it was still very much only science-fiction at that time, sounded too unbelievable. Transference was a much neater and cleaner word for the act that had happened. Then there had been the 'Serpentile Communication Incident', whereby he had somehow managed to converse, sort of, with a snake. It was a small corn-snake, and it had simply said a nice polite 'thank you' when he had left a dead mouse near it, but it had exhilarated him beyond words. Once he had gotten used to that, he found he could actually converse with nigh any snake – which made spending time in the garden much more interesting. Once the snakes found they could talk with him, they somehow sort of accepted him as one of their own. So when he had said, one day, that near the potter's field where a lot more mice than in the suburbs, they had gone, gorged themselves till bursting and returned a week later to express their eternal gratitude. After that, he had sent them coralling mice and rats to some of Aunt Petunia's gardening-opponents, to increase her chances of winning the Gardening Gnome. He had done barely any work, and with the usual pests almost completely absent, Aunt Petunia's roses had won her the meritorious Rose Ribbon, an award of the national gardening club rewarded only once a decade. Aunt Petunia had given him twenty quid that day, and Harry had thanked the snakes tremendously, promising they could ask anything if they ever wanted anything.

There had been a few 'Telekinetic Accidents', whereby things had broken themselves during those rare moments when he ever really lost control over his emotions. A plate, a few glasses, one time an unfortunately expensive piece of crockery from some vaguely illustrious great-aunt on Petunia's side, they had all been broken in exactly the same way – as if the things had been made that way on purpose. One memorable time had been when he had been searching for one of Aunt Petunia's fashion magazines. He had been looking for it almost a whole day and he had been fed up, fervently wishing it was somewhere obvious. He had suddenly heard a shocked cry from Dudley's locked room, which was ever only locked whenever Dudley did 'shamefull things' as Petunia called them – and suddenly the magazine had found itself on the table near him, if slightly crinkled. A closer look, however, had convinced Harry it more appropriate to simply throw the thing away – he sincerely doubted, after what Dudley had done around it, if Aunt Petunia would've ever touched it again. But aside those incidents, accidents and strange occasional going-ons, Harry had found life
extremely bearable, predictable and all-around easy to navigate – at which point the blasted letters had begun to find their way to him, thereby upending his whole routine and all his future plans. At that time, when the real implications hadn't yet sunk in, Harry had vaguely entertained the idea of suing for harassment and breach of privacy. Then again, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, at that point, had merely been a faceless letter-sender disrupting his private life – and Harry could never have imagined the sheer depth of the changes that were about to happen around him.

And so began the preparations for Harry Potter's First Year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Chapter End Notes

Relative ages of the characters (due to a slight oversight on my end to mention them explicitly in the chapter)
Vernon and Petunia are respectively as old as they were in the books (the 40's to 50's range).
Dudley is 3-4 years older than Harry (who is slightly younger than 11).

Someone mentioned how it is disturbing that a 10-year old is buying condoms for a 13-14-year old. As is, yes, this is disturbing. This is not meant to be a happy story - but things like this will eventually be explained...
Chapter II

Chapter Summary

The day of the First Letter

The day that the first letter had arrived, Harry had managed to placate the whole Dursley clan in a very enjoyable mood – which meant that they'd not bother him and rather focus on their respective hobbies after a very fulfilling breakfast. The letter came in at 9 am sharp, on the 24th of July 1991, right before Harry's feet as he awaited the mail-man's punctual delivery. It was the standard-batch off letters, ranging from dull adds to the usual bills – except there now was also a letter addressed to him. It was a velum envelope, which immediately struck him as odd – because who the heck still uses vellum in the age of bleached glue-pressed paper? Then the odd colour of the ink, the curious weapon shield-logo, the outré name, … If Harry's interest hadn't been piqued by then, it was certainly roused from deep slumber by a rooster with a megaphone. Unfortunately, so had Dudley's – before Harry knew he was there, the fat little shit had snatched the letter from Harry's fingers and run screaming from the top of his lungs! “Harry's got a letter! Harry's got a letter, dad!” Uncle Vernon's brows, struggling to be noticed from the avalanche of wrinkles that immediately smothered them as they formed at hearing Dudley's screaming, slowly and inexorably heaved their way up to perform the best possible attempt of Uncle Vernon frowning in surprise – though Harry had supposed this action to be well-known to such expertly trained brows, great actors as they always were in stead of Vernon's taut and nigh unpliable face. After all, something has to convey some emotion, hasn't it?

“A letter, boy? Who on Earth in their right mind would want to send you a letter? Must be some pyramid-scheme from some automatic posting-centre, trying to use you as a wrench in befuddling our hard-earned money!” Uncle Vernon's detrite mind was already turning its cranky wheels to some old avenues of money-piquers and tax-rats, with Harry at the pivotal centre of the schemes they could befall – before Vernon finally read the sender of the letter, turned pale as a ghost and started trembling his large meaty hands towards Aunt Petunia as he tried to stutter some words through his abject horror. Petunia, immediately weary at Vernon's behaviour, took the letter as if it were some corroded bomb, ready to set off at the slightest touch of her slender emaciated fingers – before she too read the sender, at which point her fingers immediately remembered their usual strength and proceeded to tear up the paper 'efore throwing the snatches of paper into the fireplace. Harry, knowing he should not betray his abject outrage at their tearing up his letter, kept his composure, mentally noting to berieve the couple for their defiance of their barely-kept pact of non-aggression towards one another. “Go to your room, Potter! Not a word about this to anyone, you hear me?” Petunia's shrieking voice, though just barely below the hearing range of their neighbours, was enough to solidify Harry's plans for the next day, as he obediently strutted up the stairs and locked the door of his room behind him.

Harry remained very silent for the remainder of the day, which kept Vernon and Petunia more alert than any objections ever would have had. The next day, Harry made them the same breakfast as he had yesterday, sidling them an enormous quantity of bacon, beans and spam – before obediently standing by the door, awaiting the mail. This time, however, the mail-man also received a letter – from Harry, addressed to Vernon's regional boss, inside of which letter there were a few photographs and several directions to very suspicious odds in the company ledgers. And, again, Harry received his letter – a perfect copy of the previous one, but this time of vellum a fair bit
thicker and less easy to tear apart. Pocketing it away, anxious to keep Dudley out of the know as opposed to the day before, Harry delivered the mail dutifully to Uncle Vernon. “Any letter for you today, boy?” Vernon asked, with a slight tremor in his voice that was barely ever present safe in instances where his carefully crafted reputation were at stake. “No, Uncle Vernon – you must've been right. Wrong address I guess – or some pyramid-scheme. Guess I'm old and stupid enough to fall for them now.” On any other day, this cheeky comment would've earned Harry some reprisals, but Vernon was obviously all too glad to hear about the absence of a follow-up letter, which made quite a bit dimmer than usual. “Good, good. Now go do the dishes – and the garden needs some work today. Some bloody birds have been nesting in the trees, it seems – branches and poop everywhere. Damn pigeons...” Vernon's voice slowly diminished to an annoyed yet content rumble as he settled down in his couch and began reading the newspaper. Petunia settled herself down in a chair outside, her knitting with her, as she was quite intent to keep an eye on Harry until this whole stupid letter-thing had gone from her mind completely – which would take a day or two at most, Harry reasoned as he began shovelling the branches and poop from the lawn.

That evening, Harry finally got around to reading the letter by the light of a dim candle. The hand-writing was quite neat indeed, Harry remarked as he slowly ready the contents of the first page of the letters inside the envelope.

“Dear Mr Harry Potter. We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment. Term begins on 1 September. We await your owl by no later than 31 July. Yours sincerely, Minerva McGonagall - Deputy Headmistress.”

Harry didn't quite know what to make of this, before he began reading the second letter – which was quite a list of apparent school supplies as desired for the offered curriculum this school seemed to advance upon its pupils. Robes, dragon-hide gloves, cauldrons? Harry was smart enough to make the connotation with the traditional notions of witchcraft and magic, but whatever school would portray itself as a school of magic? It sounded incredibly daft and aloof – until he started thinking about it more empirically. The reaction of Vernon and Petunia seemed to hint prescience of the letter's arrival – or at least of knowledge of the sender, which implied it was somehow authentic in a way. Had they seen similar letters before then? Surely not for Dudley – the oaf wouldn't ever shut up about such a memorable hoax, if hoax it were. That implied that either they had once, either or both, gotten one – or someone they knew. Then there was the magic education thing – which struck a chord with Harry's various Accidents, which all seemed very much like magic or something supernatural. Another hour of thinking through all the options and Harry became convinced – the letter was real, and therefore too was the school, the curriculum, the existence of magic and his own innate ability of using magic. Which then meant Vernon and Petunia had known somehow – which explain their eternal scorn of his presence, hatred for his inexplicable Accidents and general distrusts towards any kindness he performed towards them. And thus he began his reply to the letter, not caring how he'd ever sent it off afterwards.

The next morning, before Harry fully woke up, a tapping resounded against his window – where a grand barmy owl stood perched, evidently waiting for Harry to wake up and open the bloody window already. Groggily rising and almost by automatic response opening the surface from which the knocking resounded, Harry was suddenly beset by enormous wings of feather and down. Finally waking up entirely, Harry just managed to suppress a scream as the owl fluttered past him, scooped up the letter and set off through the window again. Barely a second passed and as Harry watched the owl fly off into the distance, somehow he had an inkling he'd better prepare a suitcase that very day. Vernon and Petunia, luckily, were none the wiser, as he prepared breakfast as usual, fetched the mail as usual and remained silent as usual... Until dinner, which had gone as usual – before some calamitous force suddenly launched the front door of its hinges, through the kitchen door and against the cabinets opposite that. As Vernon and Petunia screamed in
horror alike pigs in some slaughterhouse and Dudley ran out of the kitchen, into the garden and through the hedge, Harry remained exactly where he stood. As some massive lumbering figure slowly clambered through the front entrance and passed the cloud of debris and dust, a deep voice sounded.

“Sorry ’bout that!” As the figure entered the kitchen, picked up the front door and placed it back, Uncle Vernon finally seemed to regain his coherence and voice. “I demand that you leave at once, Sir! You are breaking and entering!” Vernon quickly jumped to his feet, before pushed back into his seat by the lumbering giant. “Dry up, Dursley! You great prune!”

And thus Harry met Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts...
Chapter III

Chapter Summary

Hagrid hears Harry out and takes him along to Diagon Alley.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If meeting Rubeus Hagrid was impressive, getting to see the giant of a man deal with Harry's guardians was ever more so. Afore Vernon could've even begun to continue gibber furious nonsense at this perceived intruder of the peace, Hagrid had barreled his way past the walrus of an uncle, picked up the blasted door as if it were but a piece of tissue paper and put it back into its rightfull position. The giant stopped moving for a second, during which Harry swore he could've seen him point a tattered, old, hot-pink umbrella at the doors hinges and mutter something, after which the door looked brand new and not like a victim of brute force. Petunia, all the while, merely stood still where she stood when the door flew past her into the kitchen, her eyes darting, alternating between a horrostruck and speechless Vernon and the giant Hagrid, who now moved to take a seat in the largest sofa of the living room.

“'Scuse the rude entr'nce – I was told 'twas an urgent matter indeed.” Hagrid's hand disappeared in the voluminous folds of his handmade fur coat, pulling out several pieces of written parchment and a handful of small parcels, which became more than an armfull when they were deposited unto Harry himself. “Dar's been talk of Hogwarts letters not gett'n where they oughta be – and somethin' about Harry not bein' told who his mum an' dad were and nonsuch nonsense. I wou'n't believe it, I said to Dumbledore when he told me – I wou'n't believe Lilly's sister would keep that from Harry and such. But Dumbledore, he said, that he would – an' so 'ere I am.” At this point, before Hagrid could continue any further, Vernon at last seemed to finally gather his wits and broke through his mute stuttering at last. “Now, wait right there! I don't know who you are or why you would ever deign yourself allowed to breaking and entering, but I will not have this magic nonsense talked about in my house!”

At this, Hagrid promptly stood up again to his full height, towering over Harry's rotund uncle, while bellowing his protest. “Young Harry deserved to know all, Dursley! He oughta know why his parents died an' why You-Know-Who kill'd them! You agreed to such terms when ya officially adopted Harry on Dumbledore's request a decade ago! Don't you go forgettin' why ya agreed, you old prune.” Vernon now cowering through instinct of self-preservation shut his mouth, his face slowly growing redder and more puffy, while Petunia had become almost pale as a corpse at the mention of Dumbledore. Hagrid, once again seated, took the first parchment of the small pile he had extracted from his coat and began reading in his booming voice.

“Dear Mr Potter, as stated in our previous communique, we are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry by virtue of your birth-registration at the Ministry of Magic and your coming-of-age during the next semester. However, taking in regard all matters discussed within your reply to the first official acceptance letter, the Ministry of Magic has ordained, on request of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, current Headmaster of Hogwarts, Supreme Mugwump in the International Confederation of Wizards and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and in close association with Muggle authorities of childcare
and safety, to temporarily relieve you from the guardianship of your closest living relatives, Vernon Dursley and Petunia Dursley née Evans, as long as investigation is pending concerning the charges of child neglect, child abuse, child labour and a list of similar demeanours regarding sensory deprivation, food deprivation, etecetera - as enclosed in page four. Untill such time as these charges are determined true or false and an official verdict has been reached by Muggle authorities towards your personal safety and well-being, you are hereby placed in temporary custody of Severus Snape, current Potion Master at Hogwarts, by request of Headmaster Dumbledore. Though this custody is temporary and has been voluntarily accepted by Severus Snape, a Ministry official will contact you at the end of each trimester to determine your general wellbeing and psychological welfare. If at any point you wish to report any problems with this custody regulation, please send an owl towards the adress specified on page five.”

“Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment on page two and three – if at any point you are uncertain as to where to procure these necessary purchases, please seek aid with the liaison assigned to you until your arrival at Hogwarts, this being Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts, as assigned by Headmaster Dumbledore. Term begins on 1 September. We await your safe arrival.”

Then Hagrid fell silent, putting down the parchment, riffling through the stack and drawing out another which he handed over to Vernon and Petunia. “None ain't happy with what ya did, Dursley – and we all 'xpected better off you, Petunia. This gonna be hard for all of you – and if they finds out 'tis all true, ya'll probably lose custody of yer own boy too. None's gonna let him be with ya if 'tis all true.” Hagrid rose, picking up the stack of parchments which he put back in his coat, drawing out instead a small purse which he gave to Harry. “Ye can put all yer stuff in that – tis larger within, ya reckon. It can hold a mighty large amount of stuff, but tisn't infinitely big so be conserv'tive.” Harry took the small purse, which opened as far as he could try it, before looking up to the giant with a small smile and leaving to gather his small suitcase of personal belongings. The moment Harry left through the door and shut it behind him, Hagrid drew out his umbrella and pointed it towards Vernon and Petunia. “If I had know ye would dare stoop as low a'this, I woulda never giv'n the boy to you lot. Petunia, you know why Lilly died – why You-Know-Who did it, and you went and confirm'd the lies he told about all Muggles. If I weren't here now on offic'l Hogwarst business, I'd curse ye ears of ye heads and make them bite yer toes.” He waved the pink umbrella before their noses, putting it away as he heard the door open again. Turning to Harry, he saw the young boy dressed in a coat three sizes too large with shoes more like boots than anything else when fitted on him.”Wha's this, Harry? You ain't got somethin' bett'r fittin'?”

“No, sorry – this is all I have.” Harry replied in a small voice, causing Hagrid to turn sideways and put an enormous stink-eye on the Dursleys before he simply nodded and left for the door. “Com' on, Harry, say yer goodbye's so we can leave to buy your school supplies.” Harry turned to Vernon and Petunia, giving only a small wave, before he too turned to the door and left through it as Hagrid opened it for him. Parked on the drive-way was an enormous motorbike, with a sidespan which could fit a grown man easily with room to spare. “Dunt worry, Harry, tis safe enough – and it'll be short trip once we're airborn. The Muggles, the non-magic'l folk, won't see us and it'll spare us almost three hours on the trip to Lond'n. That's where we gonna buy yer supplies, so jus' hop on in and let's get going.”

The trip was, at the very least, memorable and Harry would cherish those memories for all the years to come. The feeling of the wind in his face, to see the world below from a bird's eye's view, travelling so fast that entire villages sped into view and back out of view with minutes, it was a feeling of absolute freedom, which would later on only be comparable to flying on a broom or Quidditch. By the time they arrived just outside of London, harry's delight was endless and a smile was fixed on his face all the way through the subsequent metro-ride and long walk through London centre itself. Finally, they arrived outside a small pub, seemingly unnoticed by the
Muggles about them, which a sign declared it to be the Leaky Cauldron. On the outside, it looked
dank and dark, with the wood almost black with centuries of soot adhered to it and the soot having
obscured the window panes almost into opaqueness. The inside, while less neglected, did not offer
a brighter environment. Sunlight barely breached through the windows and a multitude of candles,
alongside a large roaring open fireplace, served to illuminate the main space of the pub. Harry had
expected it to be cramped and suffocating, but found it to be surprisingly open and spacious, with
the ceiling almost three stories above them and a bar covering the longest wall from end to end
nearly ten meters. About thirty tables and four times as many chairs populated the space, though a
large area was left open in front of the fireplace and another directly in the centre of the large
room. A dozen or so figures were seated all across the room and Hagrid was already moving past
the bar towards a door in the back.

"Afternoon, Hagrid. Here for a drink today? Or are you looking for some exotic pet again?" The
bartender behind the bar spoke to Hagrid, halting the giant for a moment. "Not today, Tom – I's on
Hogwarts business, Keeper of Keys an' such. I'm here to get young Harry his school supplies – the
little tike is starting his first year next month." Tom's brows shot up towards the heaven at the
mention of Harry's name, as he silently gasped in wonder. "By Merlin's crooked teeth, it can't be. Is
it the Harry, Hagrid? Is it Harry Potter?" The muttering and rumour instantly fell away throughout
the pub, as all figures present turned their heads towards Harry and Hagrid. Hagrid took Harry
gently by the shoulders and quickly ushered him ahead, towards the back door. "No, he ain't – and
if he were, I wouldn't tell ya. See ya, Tom." A lone figure by the door shot out a hand, letting it fall
on Hagrid's arm as he spoke. "G-g-goodness me, H-h-h-hagrid, s-s-surpris-s-s-sed to see you here.
H-how are you?" Hagrid instantly softened as he recognizes the voice. "Ah, it's you, professor.
Harry, this is professor Quirell. He'll be your Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher this year – he
arrived from Romania last week, where he's been studyin' vampires, weren't ya, professor?" Quirell
merely nodded as he inspected Harry and spoke in a soft tone. "The famous H-h-h-Harry Pot-t-t-ter.
How delighted-d-d to me-e-e-et you at las-s-s-t. I won't-t keep you any long-g-er. I'll s-s-see you at
Hog-g-g-warts soon."

As Quirell watched them pass by out the back door, Hagrid kept his hands firmly on Harry's
shoulder until they were alone in the small court outside of the door. "He's a fine fellow, that
Quirell – just a little nerve-racked, is all. That's why he's got the stutter – Dumbledore reckons it
been the vampires' doing, a practical joke of sorts. A bit odd sometimes, but generally nice. Now,
just wait a sec while I get us in." Taking out the small umbrella, Hagrid ticked it against several
bricks in a simple rhythm, while muttering something under his breath. As the last brick was hit,
there began a crescendo of clay dancing to some rhythmic pulse, as the bricks began moving and
turning, slowly revealing an arched gateway.

And thus Harry saw, for the first time, the fabulous Diagon Alley.

Chapter End Notes

Admentem = to memorize a book exactly for a definite period which shortens the
more often you use the spell within a certain timeframe. Ex. When used for just one
book, you can perfectly memorize said book for up to two weeks, giving you time to
digest it properly – however, when using it on two books, you can only remember it
faultlessly for up to eight day. Three books reduces this to five days and any more
practically removes the effect instantly after you cast the spell a fifth time in
succession within 24 hours.
Mensanem = to diagnose the physical health of a patient, showing most non-genetic forms of disease or ailments. Ex. When used, you can identify hairline bonefractures with ease – however, the spell has greater difficulty properly detecting tumours and similar diseases. Used usually in conjunction with simple Healing Spells, such as Episkey or others – let it be noted, however, that advanced Healing should be left to well-trained professionals.
Chapter IV

Chapter Summary

And thus began Harry's knowledge on the power of blood and of old money.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There had been times when teachers told the Dursleys that Harry was, more often than not, an unimaginative child. That his sense of logic “smothered” his sense of wonder. Harry had always scoffed at that. Of course his sense of logic was more developed than his sense of wonder – living with neglectful and simply abusive guardians tends to dull your sense of awe and wonder. There is nothing awesome or wonderful of being locked up in a broom-closet you were forced to call your bedroom. The only thing that had kept him safe in all those years was his logical thinking, of recognizing what triggered bad mood swings in the Dursleys and what placated them when. Not much room left to wonder at life in such circumstanced. But Harry did wonder sometimes. He had wondered what life would be with loving parents, enviously recalling stories told by the children at his school. Stories of mom's driving them to acrobatic classes, of dads cooking delicious pancakes for birthdays celebrated together – simple things really. And sometimes, sometimes, he also wondered about the world at large. He had read most of all the geography books in the school library, about places like the Amazon and the Great Barrier Reef. Places where life was undisturbed by human presences and where nature could be wild and free, where he could be wild and free and happy. He often fantasized about being happy.

Thus, when he first laid his eyes on Diagon Alley proper, he saw before him all the wonder and awe that he never had the time to fantasize about. A broad, seemingly endless street, that curved to and fro, almost as if it was pushing back against the crooked houses and shops that leaned over it. Banners and streamers hung over the whole Alley, in a thousand thousand colours, seemingly shifting between hues at an erratic pace and without seeming rhythm. It was a kaleidoscope of colours, noises, scents – the throng and rhythm of life untethered by the normal constraint of reality and life. He saw shops whose interior when so far back and was so broad that, by all means, the shops against it should be closets – yet each shops was enormous, spacious, broad. The Owl Emporium displayed nigh every species of owl Harry had ever read about – and some of the specimens he did not recognize had such large eyes of swivelled their heads in such odd angles that he could guess they were not entirely “normal”. And, really, the Pottage's Cauldrons Shop really shouldn't be able to display so many different sizes of cauldrons in so many different materials without needing a display window at least twenty meters across. Yet, somehow, each shop managed to do what it did, without impeding or obstructing the daily life and flow of business of their neighbouring shops. As Harry stared at each new revelation, he admired, above all, the sheer efficiency that magic could lend to life by horrendously altering reality.

Merely following Hagrid, Harry soon noticed they were bypassing all the shops and heading straight towards a massive crossroads to the back of the Alley. As they neared it, he saw it was being dominated by an enormous building, white as snow, build from beautifully veined marble. A set of stairs led up to a pair of enormous doors, seemingly made from bronze, flanked by a pair of strange creatures at either side. The size of a child, but with exaggerated facial features such as an enormous nose, and hair as wild as a forest's thicket, Harry could only guess at what they were.
“Goblins.” Murmured Hagrid, with a softness barely audible above the crowd's roaring passage.

“Me thinks ya could call 'm 'uman en'ugh, but ain't ya ever call 'm that — they'd skinn ya alive. They
is 'mongst the most powerfull mag'cal creatures, they is, but tha wizard'n world 'ave never
recognized them as much. Caused a big ruckus way back when, almost b'came a revolt, it did. So
best to keep 'm on yer good graces — they likes wizards that pay proper respects...”  As they
climbed the stairs, the pair of goblins gave a curt and barely noticeable nod to Hagrid. The doors
swung gently open, a pair of wizards in robes exiting as Harry and Hagrid entered it.

“This be Gringott's, tha only wizardin' bank in England. Here ye can change muggle money into
galleons, sick'l's an' nutts. Dun worry, I'll explain later how ya use them an' what they is worth each.
Now, all great wizardin' famil's 'ave got a vault here, as Gringott's is tha safest place in tha world
to store yer stuff. They only lets you in if ye got yer key, which we do-”  At this, Hagrid pulled out a
small yet ornate key from a pocket inside his coat and gingerly handed it over to Harry. “Now,
always rememb'r to keep yer key safe. Yer mom an' dad had a vault here as well, since yer dad's
dad got good money frem sellin' hair potions an' all. Plus yer family is an old one, if not one of tha
oldest there is, Harry. If ya got any questions, you can always ask one of ther goblins and theys can
help ya.”  Harry stopped walking at that, staring at the key in his hands. “Hagrid, can we do that
now?” Hagrid came to a halt, looking at Harry with something of pity in his great gentle eyes.
“Well, if ye wanna, sure. A mean, considerin' the Dursleys never told ya, I'm sure ya got a lot of
questions.”  Harry merely nodded and Hagrid gently placed a hand at his back, guiding him towards
a goblin near the back of the enormous hall they'd been crossing.

The goblin gave a curt nod when they reached him, to which Hagrid answered with a bow of his,
Harry following suit not wishing to be seen as rude. “Good morning, gentlemen, how can I be of
service?”  The goblin spoke in a rasping yet cultured voice, its eyes locking unto Harry's but not
before he had noticed the scar on his forehead. “Well, 'tis for young Harry here, who wishes to
learn more 'bout 'is family.”  The goblin simply turned to face Harry fully. “And has mister Potter
his key?” Harry was about to ask how he knew who Harry was, but remembering the obvious scar
on his forehead, he merely answered politely. “Yes, sir. Here it is.”  Handing over the small key to
the goblin, who was now veritably smiling at Harry's polite deference, the small creature took it in
hand and opened the door, motioning them inside. Being led within a room, smaller than the hall
yet still enormous to Harry's limited world of experience, the goblin began to talk. “I am Gnalte,
Head Genealogist here at Gringott's. I could tell you much about your family, Mr. Potter, right
from the top of my head, but it wouldn't do for a professional such as me. Instead, I beg you bear
patience as we go through the official channels and ways of determining your magical bloodlines
and heritage.”  As Gnalte spoke, they wandered through the room, which was filled with ledgers
and books of all shapes and sizes, stacked from floor to roof. Looking up and squinting at faint
movement near the top of the room, Harry swore he saw flashes of blue flitting about – which
Gnalte noticed. “Ah, yes, don't mind them. A variety of Pixie, definitely Egyptian of origin,
perhaps even Alexandrian. These have a great fondness of books, scrolls and the like. They always
seem busy arranging them in alphabetical order or such. We utilize them to order the paperwork or
find it.”  Crossing the room, Gnalte opened a small side-door. “This way please.”

It was a small room, much more what Harry knew the right size of a room to be. To the back, a
practical yet beautiful desk stood, with a pair of chairs before it. A few leather seats stood in a
corner to the left, with a small salon table between them. To the right, an enormous bookcase filled
the wall-space. Gnalte seated himself behind the desk, pulling a leather-bound triangular book, a
raven-feather quill and a pair of scales out of a drawer and putting the objects upon the desk.

“Please, Mr. Potter, Mr. Rubeus, be seated. Do you wish something to drink? Water, malt,
butterbeer?” Hagrid politely refused, with Harry opting for a glass of water. Pulling out a small
crystal glass, the goblin placed it before Harry. Waving his hand in the air, Gnalte muttered a faint
“Aguamenti” and the glass slowly filled up with crystal-clear water. “I do hope you won't mind it
not being cold. Temperature is not something the spell can easily change. Now, as I said before, we shall do this officially, thus I require your key, a proof of identification and a single drop of blood. We have the key. Your identity is a moot point, as none can mistake that scar upon your forehead or not know which Curse caused it – and since no amount of Polyjuice Potion can withstand the dozens of incantations woven throughout the chamber we just came from, I can be assured you are you, Mr. Potter. Now, as for the drop of blood, that is where these objects come into play. If you'd please extend your hand, Mr. Potter?"

Harry slowly raised his hand towards Gnalte, who took the raven-feather quill and swiftly pricked a finger with it, carefully dipping the quill in the welling blood. "Ieraimas." Gnalte muttered as he waved his hand once more. Subtly, the drop of blood ascended from upon the quill. Splitting into two, one half fell upon the key Harry had given Gnalte, as the other half fell upon a blank page in the open triangular book. As Gnalte placed the key and raven-feather quill upon the pair of scales separately, the page of the book began to fill out with an enormous amount of writing and family trees. Content upon seeing the quill and key in perfect balance, Gnalte quickly gave the key back to Harry before putting away the scales. Closing the drawer once more, finally the goblin put his attention upon the page of the book, which was now completely filled out. “Well, Mr. Potter, seems you have quite a heritage, multiple pages indeed. This should prove interesting. Let us begin at the beginning, shall we? It seems your earliest veritable ancestor is none other than Ignotus Peverell, one of the famed brothers rumoured to have furnished the Deathly Hallows. A thing more bound to be a curious fact to share with friends, to be honest, but interesting none the less. After ser Ignotus, we pass through a few names of relatively low notoriety, tho his daughter seems to be responsible for your familial name, Mr. Potter. She married Hardwin Potter, whose father was responsible for the creation of Skele-Grog. You will note, Mr. Potter, that your family seems to have a knack for the creation of practical potions indeed. Seems we pass a few relatively unknown personages again, before we come to Henry Potter, who was a rather well-known politician. I believe he even sat in the Wizengammot – which means, Mr. Potter, that you still hold rights to that seat too. Let us continue.”

“Ah, an interesting complication. Seems one of your ancestors married Dorea Black, the great-aunt of Sirius Black – who had been named as your godfather by your parents, Mr Potter. By rights of your status as godchild, shared heritage and Mr Black's current imprisonment, you could claim right to the Black family vault indeed. Curiouser and curiouser. You would have to battle two other possible claimants, of course, but there is legal precedent in your favour, Mr Potter. Ah, next we finally reach your late grandfather, Mr Potter. Fleamont Potter, famous inventor of the Sleakeazy's Hair Potion. Believe me, Mr Potter, when I say that a fair share of the gold in your Vault comes from a few vain clients and employees to this fine institution. After that, we round up to your late parents and finally you, Mr Potter. You have connections to a fair few of the Old Houses, Mr Potter, something that might come in handy if you’d choose to pursue a career in politics. Now, since we know a lot more of your heritage now, I must inform my superiors. A few things must be righted. Please, remain seated. If you want something to eat, please ring the bell and relay your cravings to whomsoever answers. I shall return in half an hour.”

And thus began Harry's knowledge on the power of blood and of old money.

Chapter End Notes

Ieraimas = Sacred Blood, Greek. Spell that is part of a ritual to determine one's blood heritage. No longer favoured by the Old Houses due to its incorrigible truthfulness, in which cases it often showed embarrassing pollutions of the bloodline through
marriages with Muggle or Muggle-Born. Only used regularly in institutions where truthfulness about heritage is key to security or life (Such as Gringott's and Saint Mungo's).
Chapter V

Chapter Summary

And thus Harry understood, just a little bit more, about the depths of love and honour.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Gnalte left, Harry immediately turned to Hagrid, barraging the gentle giant with a flood of questions. The giant patiently waited for Harry to run out of steam, before he began with the most apparent ones. "'Yer parents were murder'd, Harry, by a terrible dark Wizard call'd Voldemort. He w's one of them types that believ'd Muggles is oppressin' wizards an' witches, 'cuz of the Statute of Secrecy an' such. A few years 'fore you was born, he had started attractin' a large mass of people who was believin' his ideas themself's. So they'd started attackin' Muggles, publicly defyin' the Ministry. After a few years, not even wizards an' witches were safe from 'm anymore. Yer parents, bless them, was part of a group of people that openly opposed Him an' his. And somewhere along da line, they gots in his sight an' become a target. You was just a wee babe, shy a year old, Harry, when they was done in by 'im. Twas terrible, not right – they was good people. But done in they was anyways. But you, you survived, Harry, an' is none really sure how ya did. Dumbledore thinks he knows, I am sure, but not many others, nah."

"Somehow, ya survived an' Vold'mort didn't. There's many what says he died, but I won't b'lieve it, not once. And neither does Dumbledore, does he. He's convinc'd that Voldemort's just lying low somewhere far outta sight of ever'one. That's why you's recognized by them people at the Drum, Harry, cuz' you is the Boy-What-Lived. They thinks you somehow killed Him, nubbed Vold'mort and done away with 'im. I dunno know what I believes, but I know you's just a kid, Harry. You're right smart and clever, seein' how ya survived them Dursleys, but you's just still a kid. An' thas why I wanted to wait with this. I wanted ya to feel normal, just remain a kid, ya know. But when you're out in tha open, with all these people around, you's always just the Boy-what-Lived. I'm sorry, Harry, but best ya know an' can prepare." Harry mulled this over as Hagrid fell silent, twirling his thumbs as he thought. "Thank you, Hagrid. And don't worry, you're right – I'm clever and I'll cope." He gave the gentle giant a playfull wink.

The door opened as another goblin entered, pushing a small cart with drinks and biscuits. "Gentlemen, something to drink as we wait on my colleague. He'll be with you again shortly. If there's anything you wish to drink that is not on the tray, merely ring the bell and we'll help you. And may I say, Mr. Potter, that it is good to see you alive and healthy." The goblin gave a small bow before exiting the room. "Hagrid, why are they all so polite to us? You said they usually are a bit curt." Hagrid gave a small chuckle. "That's cuz' you's been polite. Goblins be the kind of peoples who are all about eye for an eye. You be polite to them, they show you tha courtecy back at ya. An' all around too. Here's a lesson for ya, Harry, never piss of a goblin. Ya might never see yer money again – for more reasons than one."

"Now, as for why ya ended up with tha Dursleys, that was Dumbledore. He thought ya'd be safest with yer mother's sister – right mistake that was, I knows. I think he hoped that she was a decent person, ya know, who had sorta love f'r her sister an' yer nephew. Who knows, she mighta had once, but 'twas might'ly absent when I came to fetch ya. I's just sorry yer had to live like that for so
long, 'Arry, truly. Tis not right at all...” A few thick tears fell down on Hagrid's bushy beard as he pulled out a dirty handkerchief from his pocket, the size of a small tablecloth, and began blowing his nose. As he dabbed away the salty tears, the door opened again. “Well, Hagrid, is there a reason why I was not notified of my legal charge coming down to Gringotts for something as invasive as a blood-spell being performed for genealogical research?” A cold voice trembled through the office as Harry turned to see who it was.

Standing in the open doorway stood a wizard in jet-black robes, whose height would not let him pale in comparison against Hagrid indeed, with a rather small face, a large and hooked (yet somehow delicate) nose, but it were the eyes that captivated Harry. They were impossibly dark and deep, as if they were not eyes but rather a tunnel through which some sad creature stared out at a grey world around him. Long hair framed the face, equally dark as the robes and sleek, with a sheen that minded greasiness though Harry very much doubted it'd be. As the man spoke, the teeth showed themselves uneven and more yellow than white, yet not displeasing. In the whole, together with a controlled posture, evidently evidence of enormous self-control, the man made for an amazingly authoritative figure.

“Ah, pr'f'sor Snape, sorry, sir. I was just plannin' to show young Harry 'ere his Vault, but he wanted ta know more 'bout his parents, ya know. Couldn't say no, considerin' circumstances.” Snape entered the room fully, softly closing the door behind him. “Yes, I have been notified, Hagrid, else I would not be here. As you know, Dumbledore arranged me to be young Mr. Potter's legal guardian for the time being, until certain investigations are done and dealt with.” Snape locked eyes with Harry as he spoke. “Good day, Harry, I am Severus Snape, currently Potions Master at Hogwarts. I knew your mother – we grew up together in the village where we lived. As I said, I shall be your legal guardian until this whole situation is... resolved.”

The way Snape drawled the final word called to mind in Harry that, were his uncle and aunt not currently in protective custody till their sentencing, they'd be found to be punished either way. And with that thought, even as Snape's gaze also held a lingering of hatred or loathing, Harry knew that this man could be trusted – for now, or until no longer useful. “Thank you, Hagrid, but I will take over in my role as guardian now, if you don't mind. Maybe it is best if you go to the respective stores to order Harry's required materials to begin his first year soon. Just tell the shopkeepers to collect the materials under Potter's name and we will be collecting them tomorrow.”

“Of course, pr'fess'r, right on it. See ya later, Harry, probably on Hogwarts. Good luck.” With a last firm handshake, Hagrid left Harry in Snape's care. As Snape watched Hagrid leave, gripping the chair with a strong grip, he sighed. “Mr. Potter, I shall be brutally honest with you before we discuss anything else. I may have grown up with your mother, but this does not mean I shall like you or tolerate any idiotic behaviour. Truthfully, my encounters with your late father never left any positive impressions and, though he fought against Voldemort and even gave his life in that fight, I can not in good conscience recall the man fondly. I do not care if this offends you, but considering how little you were told, I believe you have no definite image of him formed yet.”

“James Potter may have been a good man when he died, but he certainly was not a good person when he was younger. Up until his fourth year in Hogwarts, one would have never expected anything good to come from him. His focus, beyond pestering children and bullying those weaker than him, up until that point, had never lain anywhere but in Quidditch and acting as if he was king of the castle.” Harry merely nodded as Snape kept his eyes on the younger boy, the loathing and hatred previously almost absent now flaring unconcealed. “However, your mother, in some stroke of luck or stubbornness, gods know there is plenty of that streak in the Evans bloodline, managed to turn your father in a decent person. And, in time, a good father. If that is how you wish to see him, you may, but know that never will his name hold a good reputation for me.”
“However, knowing how we all make mistakes in life, I shall try my best not to hold such preconceptions unto you, Mr. Potter. Still, do not expect me to handle your upbringing gently. I shall ever consider your unfortunate situation during your youth, but I shall always expect a measure of proper decorum from you. During the months you will spend in Hogwarts, and afterwards in my private care, I will expect you to be ever attentive to your lessons and take your education seriously. If I ever hear of you denigrating those below you out of some misplaced sense of superiority, know I shall punish you accordingly. Never as horridly as those damn Muggles did, but I shall punish you nonetheless. Are we clear on this, Mr. Potter?” Harry merely nodded.

As Snape seated himself beside the boy, Harry dragged away his gaze and started twirling his thumbs again. He dared not speak, afraid he might somehow act wrongly. After five minutes, during which Snape merely gazed toward the wall opposite of him without looking away from it, the man finally spoke up. “For Merlin’s sake, Potter, I’m not gonna bite you. If you wish to speak, speak.” This almost caused Harry to jump out of his skin. “Y-yes, sir.” Snape almost rolled his eyes at this. “I’m only sir when in my official capacity as professor in Hogwarts, Potter. I don’t care how you’ll address me outside of that circumstance, as long as it is not that or something as emotional as father.” Harry swallowed roughly, undecided on what to call this man. “I – I think I prefer sir, sir. Just, for now...” Snape sneered mildly, before sighing a half-mumbled “Very well.”.

“Is there anything else you want to know, Potter? I heard Hagrid explaining before I entered, so... If not now, you can always ask away later.” Harry pondered in silence for a while, as he kept twirling his thumbs. “Why did he do it?” Snape’s gaze became somewhat deeper, as he sought for the words to explain Voldemort’s reasoning to the boy. “The Dark Lord was always obsessed with power, Mr. Potter. It was there when he entered Hogwarts as an orphan, and it was still there when he graduated with honours and a few student-medals. Not only that, but through those years, as he learned to manipulate people, that obsession for power grew. This is not something easily explained, Potter, but it must be experienced to a degree to fully comprehend. Have you ever wanted to be... more? To be stronger or faster?”

Harry immediately nodded at this, which merely earned him a thin smile from Snape. “Then you know how you feel at that moment. Now imagine if that is how you feel every waking moment. I think you’d agree that such a circumstance can easily derail a person’s sanity. And that is how it was for the Dark Lord. Maybe, if someone had been there for him when he was young, it might have been different, but that was not the case. No. Instead, he always surrounded himself with the brightest and strongest people he could control. After he left Hogwarts, those ideas grew gradually worse. And, though I am not proud of this, I fell for his reasoning...” Snape fell silent, eyes still locked defiantly upon the wall opposite. Harry waited with baited breath, not daring to interrupt. “But I never forgot your mother.”

“So, when she became a target for him, I decided I could not in good conscience continue to condone his ideology. What I did, and how I did it, who helped me, all that – is a tale for later, much later. But in the end, I failed... I did my part, but your mother still died. Died, protecting you. And that I would not never forget, Mr. Potter. She died for you, and I vowed I would be there if you ever needed me. You are her progeny, Harry, so I will protect you.” Snape's eyes were almost glistening as softly spoke, though those eyes spoke even more than Harry could rightly understand. He was no fool, could merely nodding and whispered. “Thank you, sir.” A small genuine smile graced Snape’s features then, before a stoic facade buried it once more.

And thus Harry understood, just a little bit more, about the depths of love and honour.
Please, feel free to leave a comment if you have any criticisms. I have gotten a few that helped me make for smoother reading of this story on mobile and for a few "plotholes" I had completely looked over. Remember, I am not having this beta'd, relying on my own experiences in writing in trying to make this as comfortable a read as possible.
Chapter VI

Chapter Summary

Not all wealth is inherited, Harry is told.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There they remained seated for the better part of an hour, partaking in small talk while occasionally sipping the drinks offered to them. Harry was cautious about the polite man beside him, his fears somewhat eased by the apparent fondness Snape held for Harry's dearly-departed mother.

They had been friends, Snape said, and had things gone just a trifle more positive during their turbulent teenage years at Hogwarts, they would've become more, Harry felt. But Snape had been waylaid by the discriminatory stereotypical preconceptions drilled into his psyche by his “pure-blood” family – while Lilly had been unknowingly ignorant about wizarding customs due to her Muggle-born status and her all too direct, and forthright, way of interacting with anyone and everyone she met.

Snape told Harry that she had been a veritable beacon of friendship and camaraderie across all the student-Houses and -years. She had made friends in each House, though Voldemort's Pure-blood-supremacy beliefs had already thoroughly addled and corrupted the thinking, and behaviour, of most students in Slytherin House. And yet, she still managed to make a few friends there – though those kind souls were inevitably ostracised by their House-peers and the so-called “Dark” families which opposed any camaraderie with Muggle-born of half-blood children.

Their friendship took a painful decline when, in a fit of mindless rage due to a thoughtless prank perpetrated by the Marauders - a club of prankster- and trickster-friends led by James Potter, Snape horribly insulted Lilly's Muggle-born heritage when she dared come to his aid. Thoroughly shamed by Potter and pushed to the bounds of his patience thereby, his unconscious latched unto Lilly's “corrupted” blood – and the damage was done before his mindless rage had a chance to subside and allow his rational mind to accept Lilly's help. Lilly broke off their friendship, hurt as she was beyond compare by hearing such words from a close friend.

Mudblood. The desecration of the holy blood of Pure wizarding-families by worthless Muggles trying to destroy the Wizarding world – or, at least, so decried the supremacist beliefs that Voldemort was actively propagating throughout the Pure-blood family-circles by that point. Snape told how the Dark Lord had such a way with words and double ententes that, whenever confronted on a legal basis, he could claim innocence and an erring interpretation on the side of those who accused him of such discriminatory deceit. At least, that is how it was in the first five years. But then things changed, Snape told Harry cautiously.

Voldemort became exceedingly more daring, less cautious. And another year later, the Dark Lord had abandoned any and all deceit of caution - and became erringly bold. Attacks in broad daylight became an almost daily occurrence, as at the same time their enmity with the Order of the Phoenix – to which Harry's parents both belonged, became a public secret. And then, Voldemort made his last and worst mistake – he started targetting the Potters personally, not long before Harry was born. And less than one year later it all come to a head. Voldemort left, without warning or word to
his followers and enemies alike. Then silence. A day passed. And then came the news – Voldemort was gone, defeated by a child barely a year old. That day, Harry Potter became the Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry had become quite speechless, his thoughts whirring through his mind at break-neck speed. After that came simply small-talk, things such as Snape desiring to know what Harry's interests were and what the young boy expected from the coming school-year. Once Harry told of his delight that could be found in cooking intricate and simple meals alike, together with his curiosity about his family's history with potions of every kind, Snape tentatively raised a promising option.

“Perhaps, Mr Potter, I can persuade you in taking an introductory course of Potion-making. Considering your youth and the lack of magical education in any form, I imagine you ill-prepared for diving head first into the Potion-making curriculum I teach at Hogwarts. The course would exist foremost of teaching you the very basics of Potion-making, such as knowing how to properly prepare your workspace, cleaning your cauldron after every brewing-session and how to prepare the ingredients you will be using.”

Harry certainly found it an interesting possibility, promising to at least consider it and decide within the next week whether he would take such a course. Snape merely nodded to this response, just as the door to the office opened and Gnalte rejoined their company. “Well, Mr Potter, Master Snape, it seems things shall be a bit more complicated than any of us would have anticipated.” Snape merely raised a single brow in curiosity as Gnalte sat down into his seat before the goblin spoke again. “Though the blood-spell in remarkably accurate in determining one's genealogical history, it utterly fails to consider the Right by Conquest.” Snape quickly spoke with an icy tone in response. “Though I dare not wish to seem rude, surely the management of Gringotts cannot be considering that-”

“That Mr Potter, by defeating the most powerful Dark Lord of the past century in his infancy, thus also inherited whatever claims said Dark Lord had upon any earthly possessions within his care? Yes, we do, Master Snape – with good reason...” Gnalte snapped his fingers, in response to which the doors of the office opened and a small swarm of Pixies flew into the office, clutching a sizeable stack of parchment and scrolls. Unceremoniously dumping these upon the cleared side of the desk, they swiftly flew out again and the doors closed shut behind them.

“These documents,” Gnalte began, as he drew out a single scroll from the heap, “are all the properties, artefacts, shares, stakes and all such other effects, … that the Dark Lord Voldemort, née Tom Marvollo Riddle, heir extant to Clan Gaunt, second-to-last heir to the Most Ancient and Noble House of Slytherin, managed to accrue by Right of Conquest, or Right through Subjugation, in the final decades of his public life.” Gnalte opened the scroll, revealing to the pair before him an elaborate crest with elegant writing beneath it.

“This, for example, is a Statement and Will, drafted and signed by the heir extant of the Most Ancient and Noble House of L'Estrange. Drafted by heir extant Rodolphus L'Estrange, witnessed and testified by Rastaban L'Estrange and Bellatrix L'Estrange née Black. In it are bequeathed all property, funds and artefacts belonging to their House unto the Dark Lord Voldemort, née Tom Marvollo Riddle. There are dozens of such documents here, pertaining to a multitude of families, including some very prominent ones that have become extinct due to casualties suffered in the War.”

“As these documents also regale all property gained through Right by Conquest, you owe a sizeable portion of the Wizarding world's realty and artefacts. Were you to claim your rights upon all this, Mr Potter, you would become, overnight, the most wealthy individual in the magical community of Europe total.” Gnalte spoke softly, as he handed a few more scrolls and parchment
to Harry and Snape.

“No, of course, Gringotts is usually not pleased with the concept of any wizarding family owing enough wealth to buy out any or all of their adversaries, economical or political, but we are, of course, not adverse to being appointed to watch over and safeguard such phenomenal wealth. There is, of course, still the option to simply return the relative properties and artefacts back to the families to which they belonged before they'd been bested by Voldemort, if they are still extant, obviously.”

Snape held up a hand as he politely interrupted the goblin. “That is very considerate, sir, but I have a few questions. First of all, I see a few names absent – names which I know should be here, if the laws of Right by Conquest are to upheld. Names, such as the Longbottoms. After all, they were “bested” by the L'Estrangess after the Dark Lord's defeat. As such, their properties should have been granted to Harry by conquest through the L'Estranges and thus Voldemort. How is this not so?”

Gnalte steepled his hands before his face, as he pondered the answer to Snape's question. “Well, one would indeed presume this to be the case, had the Longbottoms couple been the heirs extant at that moment – but they were not. We must not forget that they had borne a son less than a year before, like the Potters. As such, the son, Neville Longbottom, would have been heir extant at the moment that the Longbottoms were defeated. And therefore, all property had been previously transferred into his name.” Snape mulled this over as he nodded in agreement. Harry had started fidgeting in his seat during all these.

“Can't I give it all back then? I don't want the stuff that was practically stolen by Voldemort, certainly not if there are still people my age would should own it by now.” Harry blurted out, twiddling his thumbs anxiously. Gnalte nodded. “We certainly can, Mr Potter, though certain families no longer have any living heirs any more. Families such as the Fairwaters, whose last surviving male descendant was killed by Bellatrix L'Estrange – or the Merryweathers, whose surviving heir had subjugated their property to the Dark Lord upon their deathbed. Of course, sorting through all the Testaments and Wills, of which this pile is less than a tenth, will take quite some time.”

“If you so wish, we can start upon this task sometime this week and keep you updated throughout the coming school-year, after which, during the summer holidays, we can finalize the paperwork and give back that which was taken to the rightful owners. Keep in mind, however, that Gringotts claims a ten percent fee to all effects handled in such extensive cases – usually in the form of goblin-made artefacts found in the handled property. Is this amenable to you, Mr Potter?”

Harry quietly nodded, as Snape started speaking in turn. “That would be the best decision, for now. We can discuss this, between Harry and I, during the course of the year. After that, we will discuss the final decision with you, sir. As such, perhaps it is time we conclude this conversation. We would be most obliged if you manage to divest us with several lists outlining the documents. For extinct families, extant families, families that could claim ownership by proxy via intermarriage, and so forth. This would be an excellent start to begin basing a decision on this matter.”

“Of course, Master Snape.” Gnalte conceded as he stood up. “I shall return you to the Hall, for now, as I am sure you’re bound to make a withdrawal for young Mr Potter. Education, after all, has never been cheap. We shall write you soon, and include the demanded lists as soon as possible. It may take a month or more, however, considering the sheer volume of paperwork we shall have to sort through;”

Snape and Harry rose, following Gnalte out of the office and into the room full of stacks and
mountains of paper. “Of course, sir, thank you. May your gold ever flow.” Snape concluded with a polite nod to the goblin, before they entered the Hall. “And may your enemies’ blood colour your path, Master Snape, Mr Potter.” Gnalte responded in kind, before closing the door behind them.

“Well, Mr Potter, that certainly was a productive meeting, wouldn’t you say?” Snape drawled somewhat sarcastically, glaring down upon Harry with a single raised brow. Harry merely nodded silently as they made their way to the largest clerk-bureau at the end of the Hall. As they approached it, they saw Hagrid exit from a pair of doors all the way to the back of the Hall, which Harry suspected were probably leading to the Vaults. “Seems Hagrid had another assignment given by Dumbledore, considering he has never had a Vault here. Well, no matter – I'm sure the subject will be broached during the pre-school-year teacher's gathering when we discuss the upcoming curricula.”

As the giant of a man spotted them and started making his way towards them, the goblin at the head of the Hall gave a silent nod as a greeting. “Good morning, again, Mr Potter. Are you ready to make the expected withdrawal from your personal Vault?” The small humanoid drawled, with a semi-sarcastic sneer gracing his ancient-looking face. “Yes, sir, if you don't mind.” The goblin gave a small chuckle, dryly responding to Harry's apology. “No, Mr Potter, we certainly don't mind, especially considering your current commission with us. Please, follow me.”

“Hullo, pr'fessor, how was da meeting?” Hagrid almost bellowed as he had reached their small group. “Adequate, Rubeus, as I'm sure you'd have expected. I gather you have concluded the business you were sent here to do in Albus' stead?” Hagrid almost spluttered in denial as he vehemently tried to steer away from that topic. “What 'ssignment? Dunno 'bout any 'ssignment, pr'fessor? A gotta go now, still gotta do youn' Harry's shoppin'. See ya later, Harry.” With that, Hagrid quickly sped away – disappearing from Harry's sight as he and Snape were lead through the doors in the back by the goblin who'd introduced himself as Griphook.

Going down into the Vaults was an adventure all on its own – after passing several ornamental archways, which apparently scanned for things such Invisibility Cloaks (something that sounded extremely useful to Harry, considering), Disillusionment Charms (which apparently made one difficult, but not impossible, to detect against certain background – though flickering light often betrayed the presence of the Charm on a person) or Polyjuice Potion (which apparently enabled someone to be a completely accurate copy of someone else, granted that you could also perfectly imitate that person's personality). All these things, Snape patiently explained to an excited-to-learn Harry.

Then followed an exhilarating ride in some sort of enchanted vehicles which Harry could only compare to mine carts. Going around on a system of rails, sometimes easily reaching a speed of a hundred kilometres an hour, it gave Harry an insane rush – though a part of him constantly stood on edge in fear of the vehicle experiencing a malfunction and sending them off into a death-spin down the abyss that was the enormous and expansive cave-system underneath Diagon Alley. Apparently, as Griphook explained later on, the caves had been partly natural and partly goblin-made. They extended as far down as three kilometres, where lay the most heavily-secured Vaults under Gringott's direct supervision. The only Vaults even more secure than those, apparently, were those supervised by the Department of Mysteries underneath the Ministry of Magic.

Eventually they reached the Potter Vault - Vault 687. Griphook exited the vehicle, stepped up to the Vault door and politely requested the Vault Key from Harry. Inserting the Key, Griphook slid his finger across the width of the Door thrice, after which a loud series of clanking gears could be heard. Finally, the Vault door opened, the rusty hinges grinding against the stone floor – revealing a wealth of metal coins inside. Heaps upon heaps of coins were stacked neatly throughout the Vault, seemingly ordered in some unguessed system.
“This is the first room of your family Vault, Mr Potter. If you desire to visit further down into the Vault, you need to either come of age on your seventeenth birthday, or fulfil the requirements as determined by the creator of the family Vault through which you can prove yourself the Potter Heir. As of this date, the requirements are simple and few. They are engraved thusly here, on the back of your Vault door. Do read through them on your own pace, Mr Potter.” Griphook calmly explained all this, as he waved a clawed hand about the room – after which he set himself standing at the door to wait for Harry until he was finished.

Harry turned to the door, reading the engraved inscription – or at least trying to read. The engraving was not written in the Latin alphabet, but in some form of runes – and that about concluded all Harry could figure out. Turning to Snape with a curious expression, hoping the man would help, he merely received a cold stare. “Do not believe that I am here to help you with that, Potter – this is a task designed for Potter heirs, not for their guardians. If you want to know what is written there, make a copy of the engraving and spent your free time in the next year to translate it. I am sure you that Hogwart's extensive library has the solution to translating this – in fact, I promise just that.” Snape drawled as he joined Griphook in waiting by the door.

“Uhm, sir, can you help me with the money? Hagrid talked about Galleons, Sickles and Knutts, but I don't know which is which.” Harry turned to Snape again, who merely sighed as he pointed to several of the piles. “Golden Galleon, Silver Sickle, Copper Knutt – though Knutt's are bronze, but that would hinder you being able to easily remember the mnemonic and differentiate them. As for how much they are worth comparatively, 29 Knutts to a Sickle, 17 Sickles to a Galleon – so 493 Knutts to a Galleon. And as to how much they are worth compared to Muggle money, a Galleon is about 25 British Pound or 28 Euro. I am sure you can figure the Muggle money equivalent for Knutts and Sickles on your own, Potter.”

As he tried to mentally calculate the value of a Knutt and Sickle, Harry quickly grabbed a dozen Galleons and a few handfuls of Sickles – stuffing them into his Extended pouch, he figured he could simply collect the change from his purchases in Knutts instead of taking them from the Vault. As he closed his pouch, he turned to exit the Vault but not before turning to Snape. “1.45 Pound roughly for a Sickle, and 0.05 Pound roughly for a Knutt, right?” Snape merely raised a brow and nodded, though Harry could swear he heard the man almost soundlessly mutter under his breath. “Clever brat.”

Chapter End Notes

I have decided to go with 1 Galleon = 25 GBP, because the “official” exchange-rate of 1G=5GBP doesn't translate into price-values that are believable in the modern economy (it would mean that a 500ML Butterbeer would cost less than 60 pence, which is ridiculously low - with my exchange, it would become about 3GBP which is what a 500ML soda costs about nowadays).
As soon as they were back in the Hall above, the door to the caverns below closing behind them, Snape and Harry made their way across the marbled floor. As they were about to exit Gringotts, they almost ran into a pair of people. As Harry swerved out of the way in order to avoid a collision, Snape merely froze to a graceful stop behind him. “Well, well, Severus, I wouldn't have expected to find you here.” Snape merely nodded in polite greeting, before answering. “Good afternoon, Lucius – I am merely here in order to help my charge get ready for the coming school-year at Hogwarts.”

Lucius turned to face Harry, who now had a moment to review the older gentleman before him. Standing almost as tall as Snape, with platinum-blond hair that hung past the shoulders, dressed immaculately in expensive robes that seemed made from silk or velvet, the man wore an expression of cold indifference tinged with mild curiosity. “Your charge, Severus? Why, you didn’t inform me that you had been appointed as guardian – should I feel slighted?” The man drawled, with just a hint of sarcasm behind those measured words.

Snape drew Harry a bit closer, a hand on his shoulder as he somewhat obscured him from view with his billowing cloak. “No, Lucius, it was a very recent development indeed – had I had the time, surely I would have informed you. Now, please, the child is quite inexperienced to our world. His previous guardians were less than... cordial with him. Extremely secluded – he knows nigh naught about our customs. Hence I deemed it expedient to do the shopping for school-supplies today, in order to keep the next weeks available to teach him proper social decorum and our traditions.”

Lucius, now seemingly intrigued, bowed to get a closer look at Harry, who merely ducked his head and decided to act the part Snape painted for him. “Secluded, Severus? Why, surely the child is a Pureblood? We can't have you smuggling some filthy half-blood into our community, can we?” The words that Lucius drawled were coated with a potent venom indeed, as the man almost hissed them out in nigh unconcealed hatred. Snape merely shook his head. “No, Lucius, I can assure you that young Evans is almost as much a Pureblood as you are. He simply lacks knowledge, yet his heritage is a vast one, I can assure you.”

This seemed to placate Lucius somewhat, who drew back to his full height with a satisfied smirk on his face. “Very good, Severus. I am sure, if anyone, you can certainly manage to instil a sense of tradition and decorum into this young man. I am sure Draco will be pleased to make your acquaintance in the coming school-year, young master Evans. We will talk about this later, Severus – you simply must come to visit Draco again and take some tea with Narcissa and I.”

Nodding in agreement, Snape stepped aside to let Lucius pass. “I certainly will, Lucius. I shall send you an owl as to arrange when I will come to visit.” Lucius bowed lightly in response. “Later then, Severus. Good day, master Evans.” Lucius drawled as he turned on his heels and left the pair.
alone, gliding across the marble floor alike a bat in flight. Severus stood silent a moment, before softly whispering to Harry. “Unless I say otherwise, as long as we're in public, you'll be Harrison Evans, understood? Your fame would be a major headache to deal with, especially around people like Lucius...”

Harry simply nodded, as Snape withdrew his hand and let Harry step out from underneath the cloak. “People like Lucius adhered reverently to the Dark Lord's beliefs – were he to know who you were, he'd assuredly try to do something as to eliminate you. Many of the Dark Lord's followers were arrested and tried when He fell, but not all. People like Lucius managed to wield their fame and fortune to escape imprisonment in Azkaban, the wizarding world's harshest and most secure prison.”

Harry turned to Snape, ruffling his hair as to hide the scar on his forehead. “If I have to pretend to be someone else, how can I disguise the scar? I have a feeling something like the... Disillusionment Charm? It wouldn't work, would it?” Snape merely looked at Harry in response, before slowly answering. “No. No, it wouldn't. And how did you determine that?” Harry shrugged his shoulders. “Voldemort doesn't sound like the type that would stoop to use non-magical weapons. And since you mentioned charms, there must also be curses. If there are curses, I don't think you'd be able to easily hide scars made by those, right?”

Snape nodded. “Quite right, Evans. Though I believe that the Muggles have a solution for this, called make-up. Easily applicable, but also easy to remove by merely smudging it. But we'll overcome that hurdle when we arrive at it. But for now, a simple Notice-Me-Not Charm should suffice to keep you out of trouble.” Snape waved a wand quickly over Harry's head, who merely felt like someone cracked an egg over his head. “Stick close to me – I'll still be able to notice you, considering I cast the spell, but you could easily get lost here. Diagon Alley is quite substantial, after all. For now, let us retire for the night - we shall do your shopping tomorrow morning.” Snape drawled, as they made their way to the Leaky Cauldron.

And so, come the next morning around 9 AM, the pair travelled through the meandering streets and alleys of Diagon Alley, though Snape was adamant not to enter several byways, such as Knockturn Alley and Diurn Alley. “The former is notorious for Dark wizards setting up shop and the latter is a series of shops and establishments geared towards Magical Beings, such as Vampires and Werewolves. I am sorry to inform you, Evans, that our world very much discriminates as vehemently against those who are different as does the Muggle world. I'll explain later.” That was all the explanation Snape gave to Harry, when Harry had asked about those byways.

At Eeylops Owl Emporium, which initially appeared more cramped than Harry expected, Snape had struck up a conversation with the owner once they'd walked inside – but not before Snape has subtly ended the Notice-Me-Not Charm. “Yes, Eeylops, we're looking for something more unique for my new charge. He's fairly new to our community and needs a carrier fowl that can make sure he's never targeted unduly via owl mail. I am sure you can help us out – after all, all kinds of strange creatures make their home in the Dark, do they not?” Harry was sure they were speaking with code-words and -phrases - even more so after the manager of the shop, who Snape had addressed as the titular Eeylops, merely winked at Snape and led both of them to the back.

There stood a massive wall-encompassing cabinet filled to the brim with hundreds of jars, each containing myriads of feathers, owl-balls, claws, beaks, … With a swish of his wand, Eeylops muttered a near-soundless incantation – after which the cabinet seemed to fold outwards and unveiled a simple door between several shelves. Opening the door and hurrying them inside, Eeylops let them into a wide-open space decorated with hundreds of perches. “Count yerself lucky, lad – not many costumers get to see our owlery, 'Tis here we breed and care fer our beasties – and 'tis here we keep our more rare breeds as well.” Eeylops chattered, winking to Harry as he took
them to the back of the space.

“Here we are – our rarest breed, Mr Potter. Oh, yes, I know why y’are. Can none mistake that scar on yer head, indeed.” Eeylops drawled, words dripping with honey as he tried to sucker up to Harry. “But not te worry, we never taddle on our costumers. ‘Specially if they're loyal costumers what come back always for their owl's needs.” He opened a cast-iron cage, which was easily 10 by 10 feet deep and wide, which connected floor to roof. Stepping inside, he withdrew a single owl from within, holding her high above his shoulders as he exited once more.

She was beautiful, white as snow but her feathers were flecked with small bits of amber-gold and star-silver. Her eyes, easily twice as large as those of any other owl inside the Owlery, were a deep emerald green – and focussed singularly on Harry. A soft breeze stirred inside the space then, rattling a few of the half-closed windows set in the ceiling high above – to which Eeylops cackled softly.

“Ay, she's taken a likin' to ya, lad. A Star-Skeever, she is. You could easily mistake her for a white barn-owl, true enough, if ya's daft and blind. A rare breed, not completely un-Magical, but also not singularly magical in nature. A bit of both and more than either separately. She'll never lose her way to whoever she needs to find, she can sense when a letter is cursed or poisoned – tears 'em up right then, I'll tell ya. And when she flies at night, no thing can find or spot her, magical or otherwise. I reckon she'll be right perfect fer you, Mr Potter.”

He handed the large owl to Harry, who raised his arm and let her sidle up to it as she leaped off Eeylop's hands. Shuffling her way up his arm, Harry was surprised to find her even lighter than he’d expected. She weighted almost nothing at all. Setting herself up on Harry's left shoulders, she took a few strands of his hair in her beak and began rubbing her tongue against them, cheerily clicking her beak as she did so. “She's beautiful, Mr Eeylops – how much is she?” Eeylops chuckled as he guided the trio back towards the entrance. “Fer you, Mr Potter, just 10 Galleons, provided you'll allow me to use yer purchase in my advertisings and you make certain everyone knows yer bought her here. No better advertising than the Boy-Who-Lived himself approving of my goods in a public setting where all can hear.”

Harry merely nodded, entranced by the magnificent creature perched on his shoulder, as he and Snape exited the shop after paying the manager for the owl and a cage. As they travelled down the street, they stopped by several small stops for the better part of three hours, before stopping to take a quick meal at a pleasant café midway down the Alley.

At last, by two o'clock, they made their way towards a fashion boutique whose sign proclaimed it to be “Madam Malkin's Robes for all Occasions”. Harry had never liked shopping for clothes, but regarding Snape's words about him needing to present an impeccable image as to survive in this community, he thought it might be best to allow for such a minor inconvenience.

As they entered the store, after Snape had placed Hedwig – which was the name Harry had given the Star-Skeever, in her cage, an elderly squat woman approached them at the entrance. She looked somewhat stern, her eyes framed by horribly purple-tinted glasses, as she was dressed in a gaudy mauve shirt-waist dress. “Good afternoon, gentlemen, a set of the standard Hogwarts dress-code, I assume?” Snape nodded at her question, drawing forth the paper with the list of supplies Harry needed for the school-year.

“Indeed, Madam. As you guessed, we need three sets of plain robes, one hat, two sets of heavy-duty protective gloves – as I intend to teach Mr Evans how to brew potions quite decently. Also, a standard Spellable winter-cloak and a separate summer-cloak, seven simple under-shirts, a dozen sets of standard lingerie-wear, five pairs of sturdy socks, seven clean-cut pairs of trousers, and four
pairs of shoes – one pair for summer-wear, one pair for winter-wear, one pair heavy-duty made from dragon-hide for Potion-making and one pair made watertight and Self-Fastening for Quidditch performances.” Snape handed over the list to an attentive Madam Malkin, who quickly read it over personally – as Snape then drew forth another paper from his cloak. “And each item must be embroidered with this Family Crest, together with the standard Hogwarts Crest, all under the name of Harold Jameson Philemon Peverell-Potter – though you may simplify this to Harry Potter, should the fabric prove unable to yield enough space for his proper full title to be displayed.”

This made Madam Malkin merely gaze at both Snape and Harry, with her mouth slightly gaping open. However, after a second or two, she seemed to fully compose herself again as she accepted the paper and nodded. “Yes, Master Snape, of course. And Mr Potter, may I express how good it is to see you alive and well. You have certainly kept our tongues wagging about your absence after you defeated You-Know-Who ten years ago, indeed!” She gave a curt nod, before she ushered Harry to the back of the shop, forcing him to stand on a pedestal as she began taking his measurements.

The tape-measure she used deftly crawled across his arms, chest and waist, neatly locking into place for Madam Malkin to write down the measurement – before unlocking and crawling to take down the next measurement. All in all, measuring Harry’s sizes was done in less than two minutes, after which she began rummaging through some racks in search of a appropriate base-pattern. “Ah, but what colour to use for your everyday non-school wear, Mr Potter? One would dare say green, but green merely to accentuate those lovely eyes is hypocrisy, truly. No, no – more something like a tinted grey perhaps, with several scarlet accents? Yes, to make those eyes stand out even more beautifully. Yes, let us see.” She expertly picked out half a dozen different clothes from the immaculately ordered racks.

“A primary shamrock base perhaps, dyed heavy grey with scarlet or ruby accents? Yes, yes, that’d fit perfectly. But what textile? No ordinary heavy-weave cotton for you, Mr Potter. No, no – I’m thinking a heavy-weave velvet with a low-weave silk threaded through. Ah, but that’d be more refined for chilly winter weather, yes – it would not do for summer-wear. No, summer is definitely medium-weave silk with low-weave cotton inner-lining – a fabric that breathes easily yet absorbs the sweat, but doesn't stain. We'll make you a wardrobe fit for your status, Mr Potter. Or my name is not Maryam Rosanna Malkin, mark my words!”

She made him try out various textiles and robes for the better part of an hour, even going as far as asking if “you prefer thigh underwear or loose-fitting?”. He was more than glad when they finally left, with Madam Malkin promising to deliver all the desired things within a fortnight - payment of 100 Galleons that day and 25 Galleons upon picking up the delivery. By now, the clocks of Gringotts struck 5 o’clock, to which Snape responded with a small sigh. “Let us quickly buy you your wand, Evans, before we will go for supper at the Leaky Cauldron. We shall finish the rest of your shopping tomorrow – by then, Hagrid's going-around earlier should have all sellers making sure your supplies are standing by. It'd make the rest of our buying spree much quicker. Those of today, however, could not be rushed or demanded before hand – as you might well guess...”

They made their way to Ollivander's, though halfway there, Snape suddenly halted. He looked thoughtful for a while, before turning to Harry. “Evans, traditionally Ollivander's is thé place to buy your own personal wand – however, it would also place you in the spotlight because several influential people always keep an eye on any and all wand purchases enacted within Ollivander's, usually outside of Ollivander's direct wishes. Instead, I offer you a choice. In Knockturn Alley, there is also a traditional Wandmaker, though he is usually regarded as a Dark – or at best, as Grey Wizard. Which would you prefer?” Snape asked, a half-closed fist raised partway to his chin, as he
stood staring down on Harry.

Harry thought about it for a while, finally deciding in favour of anonymity. “Knockturn Alley, sir. I'd rather keep as low a profile as possible. But we could also buy a wand at Ollivander's later on to thrown any potential onlookers of our scent.” Snape nodded, a small smile gracing his lips as if in approval. “Very well, Harry. Keep close now.” They turned around and made their way back towards Gringotts, eventually straying to the left of the street and slipping into the dark overhanging entrance, into Knockturn Alley. There, quickly after entering the Alley, they stopped in front of a barely noticeable shop – which Snape identified as “Msaw Aetere”, translated into English as “Aether's Delight”.

Chapter End Notes

Star-Skeever = A magical owl-hybrid species, bred for stealth and loyalty. Able to find anyone anywhere in the world, and able to disappear so completely into the night's heavens that Magic has a hard time finding them. In appearance, almost identical to a snowy barn-owl - though both sexes look exactly alike. Only in the details, such as their eyes and the exact patterning of their flightfeathers, are they obviously different from the barn owl. Extremely intelligent, though not at the same level as Magical Beings (such as Centaurs or Merpeople), they are hard to deceive. Once bonded to their owner, they are loath to leave their service - lest their needs and wants are ignored and neglected. A neglected Star-Skeever will simply not return from its next trip to deliver mail - they will return to their place of birth (which makes them a sound investment for the shady owl-bredder that makes sure Star-Skeevers are born in their own personal owlery). Notoriously difficult to breed, a Star-Skeever female only lays an egg during a full-moon lunar-eclipse. Their nests are often lined with white pebbles and they use their outgrown feathers to make a soft bower for the egg they lay. If not killed by disease or predator, Star-Skeevers can easily outlive a regular Muggle to the respectable age of 113 years average. They have only a few natural predators, such as Lethifolds, and subsist on small non-magical prey (such as mice and squirrels).

Harold is the traditional name, from which Harry is a shortened version/nickname. As such, Harold is usually used when in formal company and Harry is used by friends, family and in informal circumstances.

Jameson is a patronymic middle-name based on James (lit. James-Son, Son of James), as is Philemon (though Philemon follows a more loose tradition as it holds no compound that denotes direct lineage, except for those who know it is an ancestor of Harry).

Edit (15/01/20); Slightly restructured the chapter. In the original, Harry and Snape would've gone shopping at 10.30 PM(!), way too late for a child. In the restructuring, they start shopping early the next day. I also inserted a small section between Eeylops & Malkin's, so that they didn't somehow spend +7 hours choosing clothes.
Chapter VIII

Chapter Summary

Where they meet a Fool fit for a King...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They had barely entered past the grime-stained glass door that was the entrance to the small shop, when a loud bark rooted them to the spot. “Welcome! Welcome! You need wares, yes? Wand, cauldron, shrunken head? I have something of everything!” The speaker was an extremely ancient and seemingly decrepit figure of a man, hair long and matted halfway past his back. He raised a gaunt right-hand towards the pair that had entered his shop, his one good eye – though clouded with age and almost white, fixed to young Harry. As that singular eye fixed on him and Snape, Harry found himself quite unable – or rather, unwilling, to move from the spot he stood on. That eye was unbelievably hypnotic and Harry truly did not wish to look away from it, for whatever reason.

A soft breeze seemed to brush against his face, though he did not feel it as much as sense it with his very being. A large hand touched his shoulder cautiously, and instantly the spell seemed broken – after which Harry made a point not to look the figure directly in the eye again. A sharp half-torn-off nail winked at the boy, as the aged hermit spoke in softer dulcimer tones.

“Ah, Mr Potter – or rather, Master Peverell? I wondered when I’d see you. But not only Potter-Peverell - Evans too, I see. Yet so many other names too, which are yours – or will be yours, yet have been yours. I have waited for you, this past decade – but I was not waiting idly, no, sir! For you, I was collecting – seeking things that would be of use, to you, to me. Now, what is it you need today, young Master?” The diminutive figure spoke from its well-worn velvet-lined chair, his restive left hand idly tapping away at the wood of the battered desk in a rhythm barely present.

Snape sneered, but held his tongue – those in the know knew better than to insult the proprietor of this particular shop. There was no shop older or shop-owner more resourceful in the whole of Diagon Alley – or the greater magical community of Britain, for that matter. So Snape courteously bowed, deeply, forcing Harry to do likewise with a hand on the boy's back. Harry only mildly resisted being forced to bow, before he acquiesced and bend his figure curtly.

“Well met, Harrow, honoured and consulted. My young charge and I are looking for a wand to buy. He is soon to begin his formal education proper, at Hogwarts – for lack of a more esteemed institute in our part of this globe.” Snape drawled, each word measured and stoic to ultimate intention. Harrow, in response, simply cackled, his lofty right-hand turning to stroke his terrible beard as his Odin's Eye regarded the visitors. “A wand, eh? Oh, I think I could help with that. But you, Master Peverell, you don't need a new wand. No.”

Harrow rose, his diminutive crouch transforming into a towering stature that leered over Harry. He took a few paces - his lanky legs hidden underneath terribly stained trousers, quickly bearing him to the young charge and his guardian. Slowly bending over, his opalisc eye peering into Harry's own Avada-green peepers, Harrow harshly muttered. “No, Master Peverell, you need something with history, with experience! To guide you in a world not your own. To guide you to the top. Yes.
You need something... extraordinary.”

At this, Harrow instantly turned, scouring over the myriad shelves and cabinets that suffocated the un-Extended space of the shop, opening drawers at random and turning over boxes chaotically. Still stuck at their spot, from which they hadn't moved, Harry and Snape silently gazed upon the whirling man. “Uhm, Professor, are you sure this guy can help us?” Harry whispered to Snape. Snape put a hand on Harry's shoulder, drawing the boy a bit closer. “Yes, Evans – he is a tad eccentric, true, but you'll find he knows and own things you never heard of. And he never tells what he sells or who he has served.”

“Ha! Quite right, quite right, young Snape. Now, shush! I need to concentrate! The little bugger is playing hide-and-seek. He's definitely not where I put it last – seems t'have moved again.” At that point, Harrow began flicking objects left and right, picking them up and inspecting them for barely a second before ejecting them behind his back. At one point, Harry had to actively dodge a rather hefty object that turned out to be a skull once he inspected it more closely. After a few minutes, Harrow suddenly began hopping and cursing, holding his left leg. “Curses! Morgana's tit! Who of you did it? Who of you kicked me shin?!” And then he suddenly stilled as Harrow saw what hit his shin.

“Ah. So there you are? Thought it fun to peek out and make me kick me shin against ya? You little bugger.” Harrow drawled softly and sweetly, bending down to pick up a large metal case that was stuck between two cabinets. As he put it down on the desk, he gazed ponderously over the 12” metal case that shone with a dark lustre in the shadowed shop. “But do I dare?” Harrow whispered, eyes locked on the intricate runes decorating the dark metal. “Do I dare? Tis dangerous, yes, and powerful too, but perhaps... Yes, perhaps.” Harrow side-eyed Harry from his position as he spoke to him. “Master Peverell, you wouldn't happen to have something of your mother's on you, would you?” Snape suddenly stilled besides Harry.

As he glanced up at the Potion Master, Harry threw up a brow as he queried the man. “I don't, do I, Professor?” Snape merely glanced away. “Well, Evans, I do have to confess that, perhaps, I could not bear to leave your mother buried without a memento.” At this, Snape revealed a previously invisible ring - decorated with a small glass vial embedded within the lustrous golden surface. And inside the vial, there sat a coiled ribbon of hair. “It is called a mourning-ring, Evans. Victorian Muggles introduced the concept of using the hair of the deceased as a keepsake, hidden within a jewel.”

Harry took a long look at the ring, touched by Snape's desire to own a keepsake by which he could always remember Lilly – though he also found it just a tad disgusting. “Yes, yes, all very well, Master Snape. Very touching. But we've got other plans for that pluck of hair, Master Peverell. Do you wish to see what is inside this box, hmmm?” Harrow drawled, standing behind the desk as his long fingers caressed the the metal box. Harry took a few steps towards the desk, Snape following close behind him. And as they came closer, Harrow clicked open the locks on the box and carefully opened it.

Inside, the box lined with a faded emerald velvet, lay a gnarled twisting piece of poplar wood. Split across its centre in a twisting spiral, it measured just shy of 11” and seemed blackened with age, polished with use. Harrow reverently lifted it from the metal case, holding it aloft in front of Harry's curious face. “This, Master Peverell, is a piece of the mage-staff wielded by none other than the legendary Morgana de Fay, the Sea-Bourne Fairy.” Snape stood still, his hand on Harry's shoulder and almost grasping the boy to the point of pain.

“IT is a powerful artefact, Master Peverell, all the more powerful due to its incredibly dark nature. This is, after all, from the Witch who killed the Muggle king Arthur Pendragon and bested the
legendary Merlin by locking him in a graven oak in perpetuity. Though that latter fight did not leave her unscathed – for she lost her staff in the battle and was grievously wounded herself, departing for the Isle of Apples soon after. Lucky for you that some enterprising scavenger collected the shards and splinters of her broken staff, down to the last sliver. Hell if I know where the rest is, but this piece has been lying around here for the past three centuries at least.”

Harry looked at the wood in awe, as even Snape had drawn closer and was inspecting the shard. “Now, Master Snape, if ya’d kindly grant me that hair, I shall fashion young Master here a wand to rival any other in this world.” Harrow drawled, his smile terrible and his stained teeth disgusting. “I could do without the hair, certainly, but the Gift of a Mother's Love to her child is more powerful than anything else that any magical creature can grant. No amount of Thestral Hair or Phoenix Feather could outshine that simple lock of hair, not where it counts...”

Reluctantly, Snape fingered the ring until Harry looked at him with pleading eyes. Thus Snape sneered in response. “Oh, broken hearts of the world, fine! But you better appreciate this, Evans.” Taking off the ring, he gingerly handed it over the Harrow – who instantly smashed the glass vial against the desk and plucked the hair out of the remains. “I have ideas, Master Peverell, Master Snape – such ideas for this wonder of a wand I shall fashion. Best I begin now and do not delay – for your luck is portentous, with a gibbous moon reaching last quarter tonight. Yes, a time when the forces of darkness are at a precarious balance against the light ’ere they shall win. Yet shall no darkness rule supreme, as long as the world keeps spinning.”

After that, Harrow disappeared into the back of the shop, after muttering they best return the next day at sunset. Snape plucked the broken ring from the glass upon the desk, slipping it into his pocket as they left the shop in mild awe at what just all happened. Seeing the darkening sky slowly set in, as they were now pushing towards six o’clock, they made their way towards the Leaky Cauldron. The streets, now a but less busy yet still understandably crowded, were beginning to become illuminated by the Flim-Flam Lanterns that hung above each shop-sign and -opening.

Dinner was a rather quiet affair, as each of the pair silently partook in their dinner. A simple stew, though for Harry it certainly was the best meal he ever had. There he sat, away from the Dursleys, knowing his parents had dearly loved him, that he was a Wizard and no longer a helpless child – though he certainly had never regarded himself helpless. But now he was free, in more ways than one, to pursue what he wished – instead of having to manipulate and manoeuvre his way through a strict household. Making plans for the next day, when they ought to go buy his school-books, he made sure that he'd remember to also buy many books regarding the history of the magical world and how best to manoeuvre through it.

His thoughts wandered back towards the wand being made for him, and towards the Potion Master who had seemingly reluctant taken charge of him – though Harry could recognize in Snape the type of loyalty that would never waver. The man was a minor enigma in some ways, but in others he was an open book. Snape knew how to act, though even he could seemingly be surprised sometimes to such degree that the act faltered. But then Harry's thoughts wandered to that mysterious overlording figure that was Dumbledore. Evidently, as he had gathered from the conversations of the past day, Dumbledore had been responsible for inserting Harry into the Dursley household – and Harry was bright and cunning enough to realize that the man couldn't possibly have not know about the type of abuse Harry'd face in such a household.

Dumbledore evidently didn't care – or had some twisted reasoning that'd make him think that facing such abuse would make Harry either more resilient or more pliant. Perhaps he had hoped that Harry would be so love-starved that he'd grasp at any display of affection or friendliness – possibly in an attempt to control Harry completely for some nebulous purpose. No, Harry had no good hopes of what to expect with Dumbledore – he would never allow anyone but himself to
manipulate his own life. So he finally spoke to Snape, as they were enjoying a cuppa after the sumptuous meal.

“Sir, what kind of person is Dumbledore?” Snape tensed almost imperceptibly, his gaze locked on some spot on the far wall behind Harry, as he raised the cup of tea and sipped of it. “Dumbledore is a powerful Wizard, Harry. He’s solely responsible for the defeat of Grindelwald, the Dark Lord who had risen and fallen before Voldemort’s time. That legendary feat alone has earned Albus a seat in almost every single wizarding council in Britain which are responsible for regulating and protecting our rather restricted community.” Snape set down the empty cup, filling it back up to the brim and adding a few sugars, before doing to same to Harry’s cup.

“Dumbledore has a lot of power in many bases of operation, yet he is not without his opponents. He publicly portrays himself as a informal titular Light Lord, a direct counterpart to the likes of Voldemort – and as such, he has opponents amongst the followers of the Dark Lord or those who adhere to the Philosophy of the Lady’s Balance. But not solely there, of course. Others are simply weary of the enormous power that Albus could yield if he so decided – and Albus does not easily display that power, unless he judges it absolutely necessary. Yet, like many others at the top, Albus has come to view those at the bottom as somewhat... expendable.” Snape fell silent for a few minutes, as Harry merely kept gazing at him.

“In the last war - when Voldemort was at the height of his power, Albus had, as you know, founded the Order of the Phoenix. But even after Voldemort disappeared, the Order endured for some years still. And that did not sit well with others, such as the previous Minister of Magic. It, thus, came not as a surprise that the previous Minister suddenly announced she wished to retire, shortly after the war ended. But Albus was never a fan of taking the spotlight - instead preferring to use puppets instead. Make no mistake, Evans - if Cornelius Fudge, the current Minister, ever says he is glad for you to be here, it is because Cornelius wishes to use your fame to escape Albus' shadow. Fudge is gullible enough, true, but he is by no means stupid.”

“Fudge, above all else, is still a Slytherin – though he is not very impressive by any standards, safe for his undoubted skill in Transfiguration. As such, Cornelius seeks a power-base wherever he can, whenever he can – similarly to Dumbledore, in a sense. For years, he has been taking Albus' advice, but he is not adverse to surrounding him with experts of all fields of government and economy as to make sure his decision generate as much public good will towards him as possible. These past years have been quiet enough, though now that you have come out of hiding so to say, he will seek to use you to grow his power base and become less dependant on Dumbledore.” Snape sipped his tea slowly, organizing his thoughts before he continued on.

“As for Albus, he will probably seek to control you in a similar manner, to a point. But to what end exactly, I can not say for certain – though I have a vague inking that would bode ill if proven correct.” Snape softly spoke as he finished the cup of tea and put it back down. Rising from his seat, Snape addressed Harry. “Now, it is late enough and the day was long too – let us retire to our rooms, as today will be equally tiring for certain. You have the room directly next to mine, but rest assured that I will know when you – or anyone else, opens or passes through the door of your room.” Signing Harry to follow him up to their rooms, Snape quickly strode towards the stairs and began their ascent.

Retreating to their rooms quietly, Harry bid Snape a polite good night before entering his room and locking the door behind him – checking twice to make sure the lock was fastened securely. Small though the room was, it certainly was much better than the spare bedroom he’d been sleeping in the past two years. A slanted window, equally as crooked as the odd corners and tapering walls of the chamber, looked out over a still-busy Diagon Alley – where Harry now began to notice certain figures cloaked more deeply in blacks and greys than during the day. Undressing in order to slip
into the plain white night robe that was splayed across the bed by courtesy of Tom the Innkeeper, Harry contemplated the past day – and how this had been the longest stretch of time in a single go where he had been happy, intrigued or curious. And he found he could easily get used to a life like this...

Chapter End Notes

Harrow the Fool is a character I am very excited for - and I hope you all will be too. Developing his background and place in this story had me dragging up some rather underdiscussed characters from Rowling cannon. As such, taking liberties with things left undiscussed by her personally, I find it interesting to draw upon certain things mentioned fleetingly in the books as mere filler - such as shows shown but never explained, or antagonist never mentioned but implied by the mention of their protagonist counterparts.

Poplar Wood = In wand-lore, poplar can be considered essential to those wishing to be victorious, transformative and visionary. It is a wood destined for great leader, not unlike oak and elder - but less excessively so. It is a tree with strong roots, hard to topple but also difficult to move or change once it has rooted itself.
In Ogham, poplar is symbolized by Edad - where it stands for uncertainties and fears in regard to matters of security.
In Celtic Runes it is symbolized by Berkanan, as with birch - where it presents fertility, promise, youthfullness and abundance.
In older symbolisms, poplar has a tendency to be tied to notions of kinship and kingship, through Roman forums being surrounded by poplar - or through Heraklas being crowned with poplar. And it is almost always anotated to Earth deities of every kind.

The Philosophy of the Lady's Balance is a belief that Magic, above all else, desire a Balance between all things. Wether that it a balance between Wizards and Muggles, Creatures and Beings, or anything similar.
Chapter IX

Chapter Summary

In which trust is hard-earned and curiosity peaks its head...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The morning was heralded by paperboys running up and down Diagon Alley, shouting and hollering as to ply their copies of the Daily Prophet. As Harry washed his face and found his old clothes of yesterday neatly folded, washed and fresh, he decided not to think too much about it. Washed and dressed, he proceeded downstairs, opting to wait for Snape there if the older man wasn't already awake. However, as he descended the stairs, he found that an ill conceit – as Snape was already seated at a solitary table, in a far corner. Out of sight for most of those passing through, the secluded spot allowed one to see everybody else in the Leaky Cauldron. Harry timidly made his way to the table, making sure he kept his hair down and his scar out of sight.

“Good morning, Evans.” Snape politely greeted Harry as he drew back a chair and seated himself opposite of Snape. “Have you slept well?” Harry nodded, as Tom brought the pair a few plates serving a traditional English breakfast. Silently topping up the pot of Moonflower Tea, Snape offered Harry a cup – which he gladly accepted. “I slept okay, I guess. Can't say I'm tired, so I guess it was good.” To this Snape quirked a brow. “Do you often have trouble sleeping perhaps, Evans?”

“Well, I don't have trouble falling asleep – I just never dream. I fall asleep and then I wake up, without any time seemingly passing by. It's just how it is for me.” A few moments passed as Snape merely contemplated Harry's words. “Would you say that you can't have dreams or merely don't have dreams?” Harry pondered this for a while as he began eating. “Well, I do dream sometimes, but very seldom. And it's usually the same dream, over and over again.”

“Oh? And what is it that you dream about then?” Snape queried, sipping his tea as he finished the meagre breakfast he had desired from the innkeeper. Harry squinted his eyes in an effort of focus, trying to bring forth the memory of the dream clearly to the forefront of his waking mind.

“It always starts the same. Everything is darkness, but a loud bang begins the dream proper. My eyes open and I'm staring around a room, which looms larger than myself. I hear two men yelling in the distance and a female voice is comforting me nearby. A soft hand touches my face and I can distinguish a pair of eyes, fern-green, comforting yet worried. After that, another loud bang – a pair of voices yelling. One pleading and begging, the other demanding yet also asking as if with pain of being denied. After that, a flash of vibrant green and silence. Then one of the voices speaks again, worried and almost sorry about something – before it yells and pain bursts across my eyes.”

Snape had become quietly, and now Harry noticed how the background din had fallen to a quiet whisper. “But sometimes, the dream doesn't end there. Sometimes, after that burst of pain, I can see the room again but as if through a haze. And it feels like I have lost feeling in all my limbs. Not a pin-prick feeling of a hand that has fallen asleep, but like a complete absence of feeling. Yet everything hurts, like when you accidentally peel off a bit of skin around your nail bed but all over your body. I leave the room, then the house – but I can never remember how any of it looks like. I
run into the night, into the rain and wind and the beginning of November sleet.”

When Harry quietly finished his meal and looked up at Snape, it was to find the man with his hands trembling and his eyes blazing murder at a random spot somewhere in front of it. But as quickly as Harry saw, so did Snape notice Harry staring at him and instantly recomposed his stoic mask of indifference. “Well, we can discuss this further this evening. For now, if you're quite finished eating, I suggest we leave to gather your books and standard supplies. Have you kept track of your finances up to this point, Evans?”

“Yes, sir. I might need to top up on Galleons, though – I didn't take out too many and I didn't know some things were so expensive.” Snape held up a hand before he let Harry continue on.”No need for that, Evans. For today, if you find yourself short-handed in Galleons, I shall pay in your stead. If you're so inclined, you can simply pay them back later on. I don't mind you wishing to become financially independent, but until your seventeenth birthday, you shall always remain dependant on your guardians to a degree – as children should be. You are young, Evans, though heavens knows how rough your home-life has been. Try to have faith in me and trust that I have your best interests in mind.”

Harry eyed Snape warily, remembering all too well what happened when he tried trusting adults. After all, even when he had tried alerting the teachers of his school about the coercive nature of his home-life and how he was nothing but a slave when within the walls of the Dursley home, they either didn't believe him – or they told the Dursleys, which inevitably always ended up with him trying to placate them for weeks on end in order to avoid more sterner punishments for his “spreading of lies and besmirching the good name of decent people”.

As Snape looked him directly in the eye, he swore he saw the man's eye slightly twitch as he once again felt that slight mental breeze of sorts. The Potion-master sighed wearily after a second, before drawling with an air of disappointment. “Frankly, Evans, that you would lump me together with those idiotic or gullible Muggles that pretended to care is an affront to my sensibilities. I'd rather you show a bit more cunning and trust in my motives for supporting you.”

Frankly startled, Harry glared at Snape, his lips thin and mood instantly soured. “Did you just read my thoughts, sir? If so, kindly keep to your own mind. If I was to share, I will when I want to.” He got up and pushed past Snape, who sneered and instantly followed Harry outside. There he rounded before the boy, after casting a general Privacy Charm and Disillusionment Charm, and drew to his full height, eyes cold and gaze deathly. “If I use Legilimency on you, brat, it is because you are being obtuse and unceasingly stubborn or foolish!” Snape spat the words at Harry, who kept his head and refused to look up at the adult.

“If you wish to avoid me utilizing Legilimency upon your all-too-open mind, Evans, than make it a habit to come to me when something bothers you. You may not trust me, or any other adult for that matter – but you will have to, sooner than later. Because, believe it or not, you can not survive on your own! You deployed cunning and typical Slytherin guile when under the roof of those bastards that dared call themselves decent – but they still sheltered and fed you, even if against their very wishes! You could not have hoped to survive otherwise. You are many things, but omnipotent or omniscient are by far not on that list!”

As Snape took a calming breath, he lowered a hand to Harry's chin and raised the boy's head to face Snape's own. “I made a promise to your mother, Evans, before our friendship fell apart. And that promise was to always offer help to her when times became dire. She may be death these past 10 years, but you are still alive. She threw herself between you and the Dark Lord, all to save you from possible harm – and in doing so gave you the greatest gift of all. A future. Be not a Gryffindor fool, Evans, and recognize the value of that gift.”
Now those dark eyes of Snape became softer than Harry could have imagined possible as the emotion behind those words, the feelings behind that promise between two scorned friends, brushed against his mind. “You are all that is left of her, and thus the promise stands, in my opinion. And let it be known that I, Severus Tobias Snape, if nothing else, am a Wizard of Honour. Let me then make this promise anew, Evans.” Snape took out his wand, clasping his right hand with Harry's right hand – lifting his left hand, holding the wand, before speaking again.

“I, Severus Tobias Snape, Heir extant to the Noble House of Prince, hereby swear, by sun and moon, water and iron, that I will always strive my utmost to aid Harold Jameson Philemon Peverell-Potter, in this life and the next, so he may be safe and have a future. So mote it by, with Magic as my Witness.” An emerald ribbon coalesced from the air around the tip of the wand, winding itself tight around their clasped hands in a zigzagging shape before it dissolved into their skin.

At once Harry felt an alien sense of reassurance flooding over him, as he was instantly aware that this time Snape had spoken the truth. And though he still had a grain of doubt as to the veracity of the Oath Snape had just took, Harry now knew down to his core that Snape really meant it somehow. And that, for some inexplicable reason, was even worse than not being sure if the wizard had been lying. Shaking his hand loose from the grasp, Harry sneered at Snape. “How dare you took such an oath without me wanting it? Are you insane?!” His voice came out much louder than he intended, yet Snape remained astutely calm.

“No, I am quite sane, Evans. It is true – I could have spent weeks upon weeks trying to show you that I can be trusted. But we don't have that luxury. The Oath I spoke is genuine – such a thing can not be falsified or committed to if one is not sure about that which the Oath proclaims. This way I have shown you how serious I am, Evans – and though you're obviously loath to admit it, you know now that I am serious. So stop worrying about it. We still have to gather up your supplies – and the day does not stop or rest. Come.”

Still angry at Snape, but knowing that he couldn't very well abandon the man and wander around alone, Harry reluctantly followed. Keeping close but again refusing to meet the man's eyes, Harry buried his anger and disbelief deep down and began thinking about the books he wanted to look for and buy. Their first stop, however, was at an apothecary – which a sign proclaimed to be Slug & Jiggers Apothecary.

“This is where all junior students are expected to buy their initial batches of potion supplies, though Hogwarts supplies you with any supplies free of charge later through the year. However, in my personal experience, the products of this store are substandard and only good to practice brewing potions with. You can certainly brew a competent potion with these supplies, but I would grade them as passable at best. I shall take you to my personal supplier here later on, where I can show you the difference in quality, Evans.”

They approached and entered the shop, evidently being the first costumers of the day as the ownership was still busy placing a few wares outside on display. “Ah, good mornin', Mr Snape. How can I help you this fine day?” Snape bowed politely, Harry following suit without being ordered. “Good morning, Neil. We're to buy the supplies for first-year Hogwarts brewing curriculum. I'm sure you have the list somewhere, considering I sent it to you not two weeks back so you could prepare your stocks.”

Neil, a rather young man standing about 6 foot high, wearing a leather brown apron that stopped at his knees, smiled sheepishly at Snape. Brushing a hand through his long auburn hair, he chuckled softly. “Yeah, thanks for that. Honestly, Severus, Unctuous Unction? Do you know how difficult to procure the main ingredient for that is?” Snape merely smirked. “Hence the reason why I gave
you the list so many weeks in advance. Do not worry – if you cannot supply it, I will merely direct my students... elsewhere.”

This made Neil redden mildly as he sneered at Snape in turn. “Well, that won't happen. Now, come in already. I'll fetch the packet for the first years. You don't happen to be the person who sent Hagrid by yesterday, so that I would keep a packet behind for you?” Snape merely nodded. “Well, next time, tell him to wait outside. He knocked over a stack of boxes of beetle-eyes. Took me an hour to retrieve them all – do you know how difficult it is to say 'Accio Eye of Scarabeus Sacer' almost a hundred times in a row? Almost lost my voice over it.”

“Well then, Neil, perhaps you oughta brush up on your wordless incantations? It would definitely be easier and less irritating on the throat...” Snape drawled as began showing Harry the most common ingredients for potion bases. Neil disappeared through a door in the back, coming back through about a minute later with a cardboard box about 50 by 50 centimetres wide and deep. “This should be everything, though I'd recommend purchasing the supplementary reserve-package. This alone should be enough for just a single phial of each potion you are planning to teach this year, Mr Snape.”

“Well, if my students are competent enough, that shouldn't be a problem. And if they aren't competent enough, they'll learn to be when their purses are bleeding dry by their constant purchases of new ingredients. Consider it a financial incentive for them to pay attention to my classes, Neil.” Neil merely chuckled as he put the box down on the counter. “yeah, sure – the way you terrify your students into obedience is bound to deliver results. Though you won't hear me complain – the more they screw up, the more they purchase again;” Snape gave him an amused smirk as he closed the box and Shrunk it down so it fit neatly in the palm of his hand.

Looking down at Harry as he gave the Shrunken box, Snape drawled droningly. “Usually, you should never Shrink or Enlarge any potion ingredients. Part of preparing your ingredients properly is making sure they come into contact with magic, raw or refined, as seldom as possible. The errant energy left over from the spells can interfere with the quality of the ingredients, and thus with the potency of your brew. Remember it well, Evans.” Harry nodded as he put away the box in the Extended pouch.

As they bid farewell to Neil and exited the Apothecary, Harry wondered why in heaven's name that some ingredients had so many different names. Aconite, monkshood, wolfsbane, ... Really, he'd be blessed if the potion books gave Latin species-names instead of a thousand-and-one synonyms. It's a miracle, he thought, that not more people died brewing potions than already was the case.

As they made their way to Flourish & Blotts, Snape took out the list of books Harry was supposed to buy fir his first year. Harry quickly scanned it over and immediately decided to add quite a few other books to the relatively small list. 'The Standard Book of Spells – Grade I' would be hard-pressed to be purchased without the six other accompanying volumes for later years. Harry was determined to read through at least three of those by the beginning of the next summer – and he would try to study the other four during the summer, if possible.

The rest of the curriculum list was fairly generic, if Harry could wager a guess. So until they were in the shop, he was unsure how to complement those books with others he could purchase for perusal during his spare time. Add to that the idea Snape had of educating Harry in the ways, customs and traditions of the Wizarding World. Not a chance in hell they'd exit that shop with only eight books.

As they sauntered down the street, Harry found himself able to better orientate himself already – and now he began to take better stock of the signs proclaiming the streets they were on. And
though Diagon Alley itself was quite lengthy, it was not the sole street – Knockturn and Diurn Alley evidently shewed that. And now Harry recognized the signs proclaiming the length of street between Gringotts and the Leaky Cauldron as Diagon Alley North. Flourish & Blotts occupied the corner-building right hand side on the intersection between Diagon Alley North, Horizont Alley and Carkit Market. And now too did Harry notice the shapely fountain that occupied the centre of the plaza-intersection in front of Gringotts and Flourish & Blotts.

As they neared the building, Harry could already see through the windows that the interior of Flourish & Blotts was a mess straight from a Librarian's nightmare of nightmares. Books were stacked from floor to roof, in some place seemingly supporting the overhanging first floor of the store's central hallway. Scrolls were stacked more like firewood than like items containing knowledge – and in a dark corner just in view of the display-windows, he swore he could see a cast-iron cage containing furry books that moved and snapped with their covers suspiciously shaped like teeth. Already he was excited to peruse those precariously stacked tomes and manuscripts.

Chapter End Notes

A Wizard's Oath is not equal to an Unbreakable Vow. Where an Unbreakable Vow is designed to kill its participants when they violate any conditions agreed upon therein, a Wizard's Oath is merely a way of showing that one is speaking the truth about one's motives by binding their statement or promise to their magic - thereby showing the importance of that statement or promise. It can be considered a precursor to the Unbreakable Vow - though the latter can be generally seen as belonging to the Dark Arts, whereby an Oath is seen as belonging to the Light Arts.

And of course Snape would personally know all the suppliers of Potion ingredients in the whole of Diagon Alley. He would be the sort to buy from all suppliers and determine which ingredient is best bought where.

It's a shame that the Monster Book of Monsters was seen/mentioned in only one or two of the books - they're so much fun! Who doesn't want a Book that you can feed scraps to?

Also, I gave Snape a middle name, being Tobias (another example of a patronymic name).
As they stepped in, a few Witches were just exiting the shop, giving Snape either a dirty or an interested look – to which the man only sighed. Once inside, they seemed to be the only costumers present – and the manager of the shop come forward to greet them with a weary but jovial smile. “Good morning, good sirs, how may I help you today?” He gave a small bow, which Snape and Harry returned politely. As he righted himself, Snape began to drawl. “We ordered the standard package for a Hogwarts First-year student yesterday, under the name of Snape.” The young man listened attentively, his curly brown hair softly sagging to the side when he cocked his head as to remember any such orders.

“Ah, yes, I remember. Standard Year 1 package, eight books total minus extra-curricular activities packages – those are bonuses and need to purchased separately. 10 Galleons total, at a discount of 3 Galleons for the whole package. Do you wish to pay now or do wish us to send off the payment-order to Gringotts, due to collect at earliest convenience?” The manager answered, a sickly sweet salesman-smile plaster on his face. Snape waved a hand, impatient at the attitude. “No need for payment-orders – we'll pay when we are done seeking out the other books my young charge needs for his education. And no, we shall need no further assistance, unless specifically required.”

Taking Harry by the arm and letting the somewhat flabbergasted manager stand alone, he took the boy into the stacks towards the back – where Snape knew etiquette-books where usually stored and displayed. Immediately finding the section and glancing over a few titles, Snape let go of Harry's arm – who quietly made his way deeper into the stacks. From outside the shop had seemed relatively small, but inside the stacks it became simply enormous.

And as Harry kept wandering deeper and deeper, he began to feel somewhat trepidatious. The stacks seemed to go on forever – and now he had wandered into a section where he could no longer recognize the titles anymore, or the alphabets in which they were written. He thought he could recognize something that could've been Aramaic, but he wasn't sure when the next book against it was simply a sequence of pictures.

All of a sudden, the space in which he moved seemed to warp – and backwards seemingly became forwards when he stumbled to the side and actually fell upwards! Panic began surging through the reptilian parts of his brain and breath began to come alarmingly slowly. Harry recognized he stood on the verge of a panic attack and was about to drop on his knees so he could begin counting to ten – when he suddenly slipped over a discarded banana-peel. Falling harshly on his behind, a litany of curses streamed from his lips – curses which alarmingly turned into semi-corporeal shapes, horribly disfigured and making sounds that set the hairs on his arm upright.

As those shady curses fluttered off into the eternal heights of the stacks – which shewed a starry night-sky rather than plastered ceiling, Harry was mere inches away from snapping into insanity. As he began whimpering, a large shape suddenly loomed over his petite frame – which actually
forced Harry to return his attention to his own physical well-being rather than the depths of despair his waking mind was about to fill into. And when that shape smiled an enormous smile full of yellowed teeth, sporting canines several inches long, it made a most incongruous sound.

“Ook!” The shape murmured loudly, as if in greeting. And as other snippets of observed information filtered through to Harry's racing mind, he finally came to a quite startling conclusion. What loomed over him was not some benighted demon from the deepest pit, but merely a rather shabby and hefty Orang-Utan. And for some reason, a part of his mind, closely connected to the source of all knowledge that was the space within which he had found himself, reported than this particular Orang-Utan was a male of the species Pongo Tapanuliensis.

“Er, hi?” Harry ventured cautiously as a response – to which the animal smiled broadly once more and pulled Harry to his feet. Holding Harry's hand in a palm twice as large as his, the creature kept smiling happily. “Euhm... You don't happen to know the way out, do you?” Harry queried, anxious to leave this maddening space safely behind – to which the animal simply nodded. Pulling the boy along - Harry's hand clasped with the right, brushing the stacks of books with the left – they began to make their way out of the titanic labyrinth of books, tomes, manuscripts, scrolls, slates, clay-tablets, stone slabs, floppy's, hard drives, crystals, brains in jars, …

After a dozen minutes and turning more sharp corners than Harry had been able to count, Harry began recognizing some of the books they passed – and he soon found himself back near the stacks which he had entered through. Still holding on to the ape's hand, Harry turned to it. “Thanks for bringing me back. If there’s anything I can do to repay you, please show me.” letting go of his and grinning madly, the ape merely showed the discarded peel which Harry had slipped over. “Ah, yes, of course. I'll be sure to buy you a bunch when I can.” Harry was about to turn, to find Snape, when a hair hand took hold of his once more and the ape pressed a coin into it before sauntering off back towards the stacks.

As Harry watched the orang-utan wander into the darkened stacks, he was startled when Snape barked behind him. “Evans, don't go running off. It will be a while before I have decided which books will be adequate and non-biased towards more Pureblood traditions. I will not teach you from any books that put emphasis on simpering traditions that bias only certain parts of our society!” The last part was spoken with such a sneer as to be almost palpable – and Harry almost forgot about what had happened, until he felt the edge of the coin almost cutting his palm.

He lifted the metal disk to inspect it, recoiling a bit when a faint smell assaulted his nose. It was like being held over a pool of water that had been stagnant for years, until it had reach the point of becoming more solid than liquid. Keeping the coin a distance from his nose, but close enough to inspect its details, he took stock of its appearance. It was seemingly made of gold, but its lack of that typical gold-luster proved to Harry its actual gold-content was in all probability very low – if gold was present at all.

One side, it showed a curious weapon-shield – displaying two standing hippopotami bearing chain and crown, while holding an escutcheon that was per bend sinister and per pale - first vert, semy of cabbages proper, second and third argent, a money bag Or. The fourth sable, overall three scarpes wavy azure surmounted by a stone tower issuant from base and terminating in chief proper. Above this, surmounting the rim, stood a Latin motto, reading as “Quanti canicula ille in fenestra” at the top and “Merus in pectum et in aquam” at the bottom. On the obverse stood portrayed a portrait of a man, bearing a straight nose and obvious widows peak, adorning a skullcap. And though only a single eye was portrayed, it was portrayed in such a way as holding such emotion that Harry felt as if his life was but an ironic joke written by a middle-aged widow.

Determined now to learn how to speak Latin decently, Harry added any books of Latin self-study to
his list. He pocketed the coin, briefly told Snape he was gonna look around for other books – to which the older wizard reluctantly acquiesced, and Harry left to find the manager again. Quickly spotting the curly-haired wizard near the entrance, talking to and waving goodbye to a departing costumer who was followed by stacks of floating books. “Ah, young sir, how can I help you?” The manager asked when Harry tugged at his sleeve. “Can you find me all the other books for the Book of Spells series, please? I’d like to purchase them all, from Grade I to Grade VII, if I can.”

This earned Harry a bright smile, to which the wizard amenably answered. “Ah, most certainly, young sir. Easily done and done!” He whipped out his wand, waved it around and quite quickly six books came soaring through the air in a wide arc from the first floor of the store. Neatly settling into a stack besides the manager, on the counter. “There we go, all the accompanying volumes of the Book of Spells series, available for you at 5 Galleons total. Under what name may I enter them, young sir?”

“Simply Evans, sir. Pleased to make your acquaintance, sir?” Harry raised a hand at the manager, who promptly took it and shook softly. “Fillius Flourish, manager of this establishment and co-owner of the Flourish & Blotts booksales’ chain together with my cousin Bartholomew Blott.” As they finished introducing to each other, Harry saw Snape wander somewhere in the back, keeping an eye on their interactions whilst casually perusing some other books. “Could you perhaps advice me on some other books, sir? Something that would well complement my standard curriculum.” Harry asked, making sure his eyes were bright and innocent – knowing how this particular trick worked well on certain people, and Fillius was definitely someone who loved children with a healthy curiosity.

Less than an hour later, Harry had bought a stack of twenty books, excluding the first-year books they had ordered – and after paying Fillius 35 Galleons total, they made their way back to the Leaky Cauldron to stow away their purchases and take a quick lunch. As they returned from their chambers and sat down together, Snape began talking in earnest with Harry after erecting a Privacy Charm. “So, you bought quite a few books, Evans. Dare I hope this extravagant purchase will not end up being a waste of money?” As Snape then turned to Tom to relay their order, Harry waited a few moments until they were alone again. “I do plan on reading all those books, sir. I hope to do the Book of Spells, Grade I to Grade IV, through the course of year. Practical and theoretical. Do there happen to be extra-curricular clubs that practice practical spell-work, sir?”

“Hm. There used to be, from year to year, but they are not a yearly recurrence. After all, it takes a good leader to direct and prepare such lessons – why else do you think that attaining a Professor-tenure at Hogwarts would require an additional degree approved by the Ministry? Though I must say that this technicality has not prevented Dumbledore from appointing less-than-stellar teachers to certain classes – much to the dismay of those of us who are competent. Minerva and I often agree solely on this point – and considering that we seemingly never agree on anything else, that is saying something.”

“However, Evans, if you think there is need for such a club, you could always broker the idea with any of the Professors – and I shall make sure a club will be arranged. Alternatively, there is a standard Duelling club that is arranged as part of the duties of the Head Boy and Girl, together with the prefects of all the Houses. But considering that this requires extensive knowledge of spells learned before you take part in the club, I consider this a less than suitable alternative indeed.” Snape fell silent again for a moment as Tom arrived with their lunch.

“Besides student-taught clubs, you can also take up Ghoul Studies or Magical Theory – they are not curricular classes by default, but they are taught by the staff on hand. If I recall correctly, Professor Flitwick teaches Magical Theory as a non-elective for those students that perform dreadfully in their practicals – but you can always take the subject as a complement to all your
practical classes, even if it is purely theoretical. Ghoul Studies used to be taught by the Professor responsible for Defence against the Dark Arts, but it was changed to be taught by the Professor responsible for Care of Magical Creatures about fifty years ago.

After that came a bit of small talk, before they'd finished their lunch, partook in some tea and finally left for the remainder of their shopping. They stopped by several small stores, buying the rest of Harry's supply list – which were things like a few cauldrons (which Snape tested for quality and thickness), phials (of several sizes, glass and crystal – as Snape pointed out that certain potions kept longer in crystal phials and others expired quicker otherwise), a telescope (which could be easily Enlarged or Shrunk with a password the owner could decide), a set of scales (aluminium, as brass could be easily bent out of shape if mishandled), …

As the clock struck five and the sky began to darken again, Snape insisted they entered one last store before they'd make their way back for a decent supper. They made their way to the plaza before Gringotts, turning into Carkit Market. There they entered a shop on the left of the street, titled Cogg & Bell Clockmakers. Swiftly entering, Snape headed straight for the counter, curtly pressing a bell and waiting for the owner to react as the clear note of the bell echoed through the space. Soon, an ancient-looking chap came wobbling out of a doorway behind the counter. “Yeah, yeah, whaddyawant? Repair? Commission? Directions?”

The old man came to a stop in front of Snape, still standing behind the counter. Raising his head, peering at Snape through a complicated magnifying-glass perched atop his head. “Ah, Mr Snape, here to pick up yer commission, eh? Bout time – been finished six days hence. Was wonderin’ if ya’d still come an’ pay up. Just a mo’, please.” As the owner began hobbling back to the doorway, Snape started tapping his fingers on the counter. A few minutes passed once more, before the old man was back behind the counter, carrying a small box in his hand.

“Ere she be, a real beauty. Specially crafted fer you, sir, one of a kind. Ya'd be hard-pressed to find another anywhere in the world.” The old man drawled as he opened the box, taking out a pocket-watch of exquisite craftsmanship. Placing it on the counter, where Harry and Snape could inspect it closely, the ancient codger set away the box and started speaking. “Platinum-steel alloy interior, silicon-greased, cogs as small as 0.5 millimetres and calibrated using Unbreakable quartz-zircon crystals. Encased in moon-silver, gilded on the inside of the casing with 24 karate gold. The plate covering the hour-dial is crystal-glass, and the mirror is made using spell-cast silver. Now, as for its purpose, you should let no one else handle it but you and the other person you'd wish to use it.”

Snape looked extremely pleased, especially when he had begun inspecting the pictorial filigree that decorated the gilded exterior of the pocket-watch. Righting himself, he turned to Harry. “This is a variation on a Two-Way Mirror, Evans – a device utilizing two mirrors that are virtually perfect copies of one another that let two people communicate with each other through the Mirror. I had this commissioned a year ago as a gift for someone else, but now I have decided they can serve a better purpose by letting us communicate securely through them. It is a much safer and quicker alternative to Owl Post of Floo-Calls.”

Harry hadn't understood half of that explanation, but decided instantly to postpone any questions until they were back in the Leaky Cauldron – as he had become speechless when Snape told it was for him. Him! Such a beautiful thing and it was for Harry. He almost couldn't fathom it. “But sir! It was for someone else! I can't accept this!” Harry began, but Snape cut him off with a sneer. “I am giving this to you, Evans, so accept it! Do not question my motives or my sincerity – I have proven those yesterday.” Evans, so accept it! Do not question my motives or my sincerity – I have proven those yesterday. Snape picked up the watch and held it outstretched in his hand, gesturing for Harry to pick it up.

Reluctantly, accepting Snape's word and knowing he couldn't change the Potion-master's decision,
Harry took the watch from Snape's hand – only to almost drop it when he saw it left an after-image of sorts in Snape's hand! As the original and the image finally separated completely, a small gong-sound reverberated and a slight tremor shook the air around them. Instantly the after-image solidified and became an exact copy of the original Harry now held in his hand. The artificer almost childishly clapped his hands in glee. “Yes, yes, perfect execution of the Gemini Privatis Curse. Splendidly fuelled too, may I say, Mr Snape. Well, if that's that, I shall eagerly anticipate the pending payment, sir. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have several other commissions to take care off.”

They left the store quietly, Harry still in quite a stupor as Snape's gift had struck him absolutely speechless. Leisurely they made their way over to the Leaky Cauldron, where Tom announced that a package had arrived for Snape. “Ah, that would be our Muggle-solution to your Cursed problem of a scar. We'll discuss it further later this evening. For now, let us partake in a well-needed supper, Evans.” Again, the meal was a quiet affair and when they weren't eating, Harry was subtly fingering the beautiful watch in his pocket. Snape seemed to notice, but didn't let on for some reason – and Harry didn't mind that. But as the meal drew on, he began to take more notice of their surroundings again. The Cauldron was a fair bit busier than before, probably because the weekend had arrived. Taking stock of his mental calendar, today was Sunday July 28th – so even wizards had a sort-of week-weekend arrangement apparently, he thought.

Quite suddenly, a witch stood besides their table and as Harry regarded her, he immediately decided he didn't like here, not one bit. Firstly, that sickly sweet smile on her lips seemed more suited to attracts wasps than bees. Secondly, her gaudy outfit made his eyes almost water and seemed designed to confuse the mind by constantly drawing its attention on another unique yet frivolous detail in the clothing. How could such a limited surface of fabric ever harbour such a seemingly endless multitude of details and decorations? It was almost as if the fabric was larger than life and tried its best to actually portray every aspect of life somehow. And if that didn't make Harry's mind hurt a bit, he wasn't sure what would.

The witch wasn't ugly by any means, however – she was quite tall, though not as tall as Snape. Her hair, an almost luminous platinum-blond was tightly-curled and kept in a perfect coiffure. Her eyes, set behind a gaudy pair of spectacles bedazzled with rhinestones and a few gems, were a moss-green and shone with an observant air that made Harry's skin crawl. Dressed immaculately in a poison-green dress trimmed with red-streaked dark-brown fur, she could almost be compared to some sort of scaly serpent. Her hands clutched a quil-and-notebook, her nails almost digging into the paperback with their painted two inches of talon.

Harry quirked an eye at Snape, who gave an almost imperceptible shake of the head. As Snape vanished the Privacy Charm with an eloquent flourish, the witch wasted no time in introducing herself. “Rita Skeeters, Daily Prophet journalist and international liaison. I was wondering if Mr Potter would care to take an interview with me?” As she spoke, she let go of the notebook – which merely started levitating as the quill became animated and quickly flicked the book open on a blank page, ready to take notes. Snap drawled slowly, his every syllable punctuated and spoken clearly. “Potter will not be giving interviews, madam, to no one. However, should that ever change, we shall contact you firstly.”

Though it obviously didn't please the tabloid-serpent, Rita merely huffed with her nose upended and swiftly left to probably find a better story elsewhere – though Harry had a feeling she would just as easily merely spin a tall tale, just to sell something. And he had a feeling he would probably be front, back and centre in any tale she was going to sell today. And as Skeeter made her way out of the Leaky Cauldron, her snappy Quill flying after her like a pin-missile, she was replaced by another witch before Snape had the opportunity to re-establish the Privacy Charm.

“Doris Crockford, Mr Potter, so delighted to meet you! My grandchildren are such great fans of
you, Mr Potter! Such great fans!” Snape quickly waved away the ecstatic waif, before hastily re-establishing their Privacy – though curious eyes kept their gaze upon the pair for the rest of the evening. Only when Snape turned slowly about and fixed each errant gaze with his own did those people swiftly look elsewhere. And as Snape turned back with a malicious sneer on his lips, Harry couldn't resist but ask. “Did you read their minds?” Snape simply chuckled.

“Oh, most definitely not – but it may be best to keep them thinking that. It will keep them quiet and away from us. However, now I might find myself forced to create a more permanent solution to our anonymity until we no longer have any business within Diagon Alley – so starting tomorrow I shall teach you how to cast a decent Disguising Spell. However, it is best we eat our supper now – before it turns cold.” As if right on cue, Tom brought their supper – a simple affair of bean-stew with rogge-bread and a small bowl of chicken-soup each. All accompanied by a light wine for Snape and a substantial pot of tea for both to share afterwards. Harry did wonder how Tom was always able to choose just the right meal for the right people. He guessed it probably came with being an inn-keeper for decades on end.

After supper came a casual drinking of tea, at a relaxed pace and accompanied with a fair selection of biscuits. They had re-seated themselves, now nearer to the fireplace. People had been actively avoiding them now, ever since Rita had outed them during their supper. But that suited Harry just fine – and he had began perusing one of his books, ‘The Book of Charms & Spells’. It provided an interesting theoretical basis for spell-casting, Harry had already concluded this – as it delved into detail concerning the creation of spells of every kind and the precautions needed when creating new spells. And in that explanation, it gave a solid and understandable basis on why the exact movement of the wand works for a certain spell.

After another hour or so, as the clock was nearing half ten, Snape readied himself to stand up and move out – announcing that sunset had finally arrived and they should probably go to the Msaw Aetere shop. Putting away his book and dredging the last of his tea, Harry followed Snape and they made their way to the south-end of Knockturn Alley. When they neared the shop, Snape had cast a Disillusionment Charm on them again – and the sky had turned completely dark when they entered.

Harrow was lounging in his decrepit well-worn arm-chair again, having apparently collapsed therein after a hard night's work – now appearing to them as an unsightly mess of gangly limbs sprawling across the spare fabric of his seat. His one good eye cracked open when they entered, a pale milky saucer glaring almost luminously from the dark folds of his collapsed form. “Ah, Master Peverell – right on time!” Harrow drawled, with a tiredness in his voice that instantly wearied Harry's soul alike. Harrow slowly unfolded from his nest, his lanky arms erupting from the pile alike a spider's legs, slowly heaving the rest of his body into a shape once more vaguely resembling that of human anatomy.

“It is a right master-piece, Master Peverell, my personal Magnum Opus I would say.” Harrow drawled as he made his way to the pair. He gestured the pair to follow him through the door in the back of the shop, making his way past the piles of objects and boxes like a stream of water – deftly evading each obstruction in his path and in some places even contorting in unsightly ways to pass by a stack of things. Harry and Snape evidently tried their best to imitate Harrow's deft evasion of obstructions, but after just a few seconds, the first pile of objects began crashing down rather obnoxiously. Harrow, however, didn't seem to care – and kept going.

Harry didn't know what he had expected to find in that back-chamber – perhaps just another storeroom, or some sort of living spaces, maybe a small studio with fireplace to cook and a bed build into a wall of cabinets. But whatever it had been that he might have imagined had he thought to ponder about it, it would have never been this. Instead of being indoors, they exited into a wide
open space somewhere in the country-side. Before them, where Harrow was evidently walking towards, was a circle of stones. At first Harry could only imagine this was Stonehenge, but after a second more, he realized it was too small to be Stonehenge. And as he gazed at the night-sky, he found he could not readily recognize any of the constellations – even though he was sure he should have been able to recognize Orion’s Belt, Draco or even just Polaris.

Harrow was quickly leaving them behind, his spindly legs easily casting him forth a meter with each stride. His tattered cloak billowed behind him – and for some reason, Harry imagined that it was exactly like how Snape's cloak billowed whenever he stormed away. And now Harry wondered how Snape had come to know Harrow – and if they were friends in any way. As he sped up to keep in pace with Snape and Harrow, Harry wondered how far the circle of stones actually was – for they hadn't seemed to be that far away when they had crossed the doorway.

As they arrived at the stones, Harry became quite startled when the menhirs began thrumming with power almost tangibly. He was sure he could feel the sheer presence of this place thrumming beneath the ground, reverberating right through the soles of his shoes. And it quite honestly scared him almost witless! This was more power than he had ever felt, anywhere! And he could not believe that Snape and Harrow seemingly didn't notice or didn't mind! Taking a few moments, he steeled his resolve and forced his body back into motion, crossing between two of the menhirs and entering the circle itself.

As he entered the circle, Harry's senses were bombarded with conflicting information. All at once, the singular menhirs seemed overlaid with other structures that most obviously weren't there – at their size seemed almost incongruous and paradoxical. One second, they were only about 5 metres tall, the next second they seemingly stretched to the sky to altitudes of tens of kilometres. Their number seemed to keep changing as well – originally only counting 39 menhirs of similar sizes, then suddenly observing there to be dozens, if not hundreds, laid in parallel lines and of myriad sizes and designs, all criss-crossing one another.

And then, as suddenly as it began, a singular vision seemed to be enforced by his senses – and the untold variations of design and size boiled down to a singular vision. There now stood 13 trilithons of each about 7 metres high, surrounding a central dolmen reaching only waist-high for Harry, all of this encircled by a horseshoe of small menhirs about 1.5 metres high and finally a seemingly infinitely repeating series of circles of small stacks of stones.

It took a few seconds for Harry to recalibrate himself of sorts, something that Snape had to do as well, as Harry noticed from the corner of his eye – all the while, Harrow standing unconcerned and seemingly unaffected by the central dolmen. “Come, come! The night lasts not eternally – time's awastin'!” Shaking his head a few times, in vain trying to clear the disorientation he still felt, Harry pushed himself upright and kept his eye on the dolmen – forcing his body to walk straight towards the goal he set himself. Harrow saw and grinned, evidently pleased by Harry's forceful recovery.

“Yes, Peverell, yes! Conquer the body, stronger is the mind! Well done, well done!” Harrow cackled, holding his arms aloft to one side, clapping wildly as he hopped from leg to leg. Finally, after what seemed interminable hours or more, the disorientating feeling left and went – Harry taking a shaky breath as he arrived near Harrow, resting his hands on his legs as he took a breather. Looking back, he saw Snape was having a much harder time gaining ground – seeing the Potion-master stumbling a fair few times, before he finally joined them near the dolmen.

“Painful, disorientating - yes, all that and more when one comes here first. Illusions and lies are shattered, hopes smashed or nurtured – a converge of power where only truth can remain. And the truth now is clear – standing here, only the strong, yes. And you, both of you, master and student, are strong.” Harrow drawled cryptically, rounding behind the dolmen as Snape joined to stand
besides Harry. Finally they both recovered and stood upright, their whole bodies aching and shaking tremulously.

“What is this place, Harrow?” Snape spat at the ancient codger, who now seemed to loom larger than life behind the stone table. It was evident that all his cautious patience and politeness had vanished under the bodily onslaught he had just experienced – and Harry definitely couldn’t blame him! It felt like he had been mangled and thrown under a bulldozer! Each inch of muscle and sinew felt stretched and beaten!

Harrow didn’t answer, simply cackled – and clapped his hands once more. Suddenly a small stack of wands were piled carelessly on the stone table before them. Steepling his hands before his gnarled face, Harrow merely gazed at Harry – which seemed an invitation for him to figure out what to do next. Only problem being that Harry didn’t really have any idea what to do! Turning to Snape and arching a brow in question, the potion-master shrugged – evidently all too glad to leave it to Harry to solve this riddle. “Pick one.” Harrow demanded, voice as quiet as a breeze.

Harry stood thinking for a minute, smoothing out the pile somewhat and aligning the wands roughly next to one another. Not really to leave this to mere chance, Harry began inspecting the wands. He thought to be clever and focus on the types of wood the wands were made from – but the moment he tried that, they all seemingly shifted in appearance and all became identical to each other. “Clever.” Harry thought as he then began considering it may be a case similar to the stone circle, maybe he ought to focus on how the wands felt.

Carefully, he began to discard from the row all the wands that somehow felt wrong to him – a process that took him almost two hours before he was left with two. And then he got stuck. All three felt equally fine – and when he couldn’t decide which to discard next after another half hour, he became painfully frustrated. Snape, who had been silent until now, seemingly neared the end of his renewed patience and was about to snap – when Harrow interrupted Snape’s intake of breath. “Why not take a chance, Peverell?” Harrow said, waiving an arm over the three wands. Harry didn’t like this – he was never one to really leave things to chance if he could help it. But evidently, this was one of those case where chance was the last option. He stretched out a hand, letting it hover over the centre wand for a few seconds – before picking it up. He looked at Harrow – who merely waved an arm again. “Try it.”

Holding his arm up high and flicking the wand, Harry felt it draw power from within him and he decided to push along with the draw. Suddenly the wand jerked and one of the standing stones was struck with a powerful explosion – which actually undid a sizeable chunk of its top. Letting the wand fall from his grip, Harrow deftly intercepted it and put it away. “Nope, nope! Definitely not!” Stowing away the rest of the discarded wands somewhere within the folds of his coat, Harrow waved at the two remaining wands. “Try again!”

Resuming his position, Harry once more held his hand above one of the wands, taking his time and trying to get a feel for it. It wasn't a bad feeling, but it seemed like there was something missing. So he changed position and hovered over the other wand – to find it lacking that same something. “Chance it is then.” Harry mused as he picked up the second choice – waving it again, only to have the wand itself splinter itself apart when he pushed his power through it. “Ah, best not! Indeed, one left.”

No choice left, Harry picked up the last wand – and was startled when it began a battle of the wills against him! He could feel how it was not drawing forth Harry's own power, but pushing against it – as if it was convinced he needed to draw upon the wand's power! “No!” He was surprised by the vehemence behind that thought – which was definitely not his own! He felt that extra something
which had been missing before – and called upon it, desiring it to flow with Harry's own power against that of the wand! He was starting to break out in a sweat, forcing his every ounce of willpower in this internal battle.

He could almost envision how his will was a dam, straining against the onslaught of pure power, raw and unadulterated. He strained, envisioning his dam to be emboldened by buttresses and pillars, stone and metal. He pushed and pushed, adding more and more reinforcements against his mental wall, stemming the tide. On and on it went, for several minutes – before the wand finally surrendered and gave in against his power! Almost on instinct, he immediately raised the wand skyward and shouted. “Lux Leporum!”

A brilliant light erupted from the tip of the wand, the illusion keeping it anonymous instantly dispelled, as the heavens themselves were rent by a violent outburst of light. A luminous curtain broke forth amongst the clouds, an aurora proudly displaying above the countryside outside the circle. A vibrant green, with hints of purple shading the far hue of its spectrum, it lit up everything for miles around in any direction.

Harry felt instantly drained, almost collapsing upon the dolmen as Harrow started hopping on his legs again, performing an idiot’s dance in pure merriment to the display. “Splendid, splendid! Well done, Peverell, well done!” Snape rushed forward, holding onto Harry as the boy tried to regain his balance and will his legs to support him. “Steady, you idiot child. What were you thinking, throwing so much power in that Charm?” Harry chuckled. “Couldn't really not put so much power in it. It was that or the wand blowing up and killing us all. God, why didn't you warn me it would be so temperamental, Harrow?”

Harrow cackled as he came to stand opposite of Harry. “I did. Twas Morgana's staff 'twas made of – and was there ever one as stubborn as her! You're lucky yer mother's hair worked so well – though I knew it would. Can nothing fool old Harrow, nothing. But now, Master Peverell, you have a Wand of Wands, which none can beat easily or without great sacrifice. But beware, for she'll always test you – she ain't one to give without a fight. But tame her and she'll be loyal till the end. Shall none be able to conquer her from you – only in utter death will she abandon you.”

Harry merely nodded, observing that Snape looked a whole lot more appreciative of that fact than he did. “Bloody hell. So I'll always have to battle with my own wand? That's fucked up!” Snape slapped the back of his head. “Language, Evans! You can be sure language will be part of your etiquette education now.” Harrow chuckled softly as he crossed his legs and sat against the dolmen. “No, not like today, she will not. But she will ever test your resolve – and that'll do you good, believe Harrow on that. But now, now we have to leave. Ya did quite some damage on my circle and I gotta cleanse it soon now. So, up! Up and off you go! No payment needed, Master Peverell. The sheer joy of making this wand is payment enough. Now, go! Go!”

Unceremoniously ousted from circle, Harry had just enough time to see Harrow close the backdoor – and saw him turn a small dial with several coloured panes that was attached to the doorknob. He wondered what that was about, but hadn't much time to wonder about it when Snape pulled him through and out of the shop into Diagon Alley - the pair of them disappearing towards the Leaky Cauldron as the Gringott’s bells announced the hour of midnight with twelve booming strokes that followed Harry into his exhausted dreams...

The next morning did not bring, much to Harry's grievances, sweet relief from the bodily aches that plagued his muscles and the throbbing pain that tortured his head. Turning over, cursing aloud the insolence of the sun to be rising so early already, his eye fell on the wand. Placed in a small casket,
which Harry could not remember bringing along, it rested on the velvet interior. Displayed openly and illuminated by the morning rays of the sun, Harry now had a chance of really taking in its appearance.

Overall, he could readily recognize the shape and texture of the wood before it had been worked on. It was a deep dark-brown, twisting sharply but not longer split across the middle – though Harry could see what looked like a miniscule seam of gold following the absent split. The handle, however, was decidedly a different wood altogether – and Harry had an inkling it was oak and almost as old as the poplar shaft. As he stared at it, he could feel a force pulling at him, a feeling pleading for him to pick it up and use it. He sneered and turned over again, ignoring the pull out of pure spite.

He wanted to lie in, until his body no longer ached – but Snape evidently had different plans altogether. A noisome banging resounded against his door, and try as he might, Harry found it impossible to ignore it for long. Jumping out of bed and yanking open the door, he sneered at the tall potion-master. “What?” Snape merely raised a brow, eyes hard as steel as he sneered back in equal measure. “Ten has come and gone, eleven is swiftly approaching. Is it mayhap too much for me to ask for you to join us downstairs?” Snap drawled, his sneer clearly displaying his rather lengthy canines as he spoke.

“Yes. My muscles feel like they've been massaged by a bulldozer and my head feels like it's been split apart and roughly stitched back together. I am very much not in any mood to do anything!” Harry made a move as if to throw the door closed, but a fast reaction from Snape kept it open and forced it fully open. “Stupid child! Had you said this before, I would've given you a potion earlier! Now sit down.” Harry harrumphed, turned and stomped back to the bed, all but throwing himself against it. Snape entered the chamber, gently closed the door and turned to Harry. Taking out a pair of phials from inside his cloak, he handed them to Harry.

“The cyan potion is a personal concoction, a combination of Murtlap Essence and Star Grass Salve. It will help with the minor body aches. The brown potion is also a personal creation, a combination of the Wiggenweld and Wit-Sharpening Potions. It will deal with the headache and clear your thoughts quickly. If these don't help within the next hour, we shall go see a qualified Healer. But in the meanwhile, you will join me downstairs so you can partake in elevenses, considering you have already missed breakfast.”

Begrudgingly swallowing the foul drinks, Harry dressed and followed Snape downstairs, quickly pocketing his wand and limiting his contact with it as he felt it react eagerly when he touched it. As they took up a table, in a darker corner on Harry's request as the light aggravated the headache, Snape ordered a simple breakfast for Harry and a simple tea-menu for himself. As soon as Tom had taken their order and left their table, Snape once more ensured their privacy and began talking with Harry in earnest.

“You did well yesterday, Evans. Your display of power was remarkable, indeed, and if you are able to cast that Charm flawlessly once more, you can colour me thoroughly impressed.” Harry just made a non-committal sound, as he lowered his head and rested it on his arms. “Still, now that you have your wand, it is time we conclude our business here and make our way to my personal abode. Today we shall have to stop by Gringotts. They sent a message yesterevening and it seems they have, for the time being, cleared the mud concerning your Potter heritage. You are cleared to receive your inherited Heir-ring, which will grant you several advantages when dealing with transactions or your rights as a person underage.”

This piqued Harry's interest, as he straightened his gaze on Snape as he spoke. “An Heir Ring will also solidify your right on having a seat in the Wizengamot, which is the Wizarding Court of
Justice. By right of your seat, you can appoint someone to sit in on their meetings and cast a vote in your stead.” Snape explained patiently, eyes locked with Harry's. “So, what happens to my seat when I don't claim it – or when the only hair is not of age, as I was?” Harry asked, curiosity gaining the upperhand over his foul mood and dispelling the last remnants of the headache.

“Usually, the Wizengamot reneges the seat as if its claimant abstains from voting – clear and simple. However, sometimes, someone can claim to vote for the empty stead by calling upon a Right of Stead by Association – which is just a fancy way of saying that they think they deserve to vote instead of the absent owner merely because they are either friends or family. And that is what happened to your seat.” Snape drawled – Harry quickly snapping in response. “Let me guess – Dumbledore?” Snape nodded – and slowly Harry started seeing red. This anonymous 'benevolent' overlord of the Light Arts apparently saw fit to just meddle in any and all of Harry's affairs – as if Harry's rights didn't matter or should be disregarded because he had been a clueless child!

“Why did nobody ever come to the Dursleys to explain all this?! I'm pretty sure that what happened with my Vault, inheritance, Wizengamot seat, … is not at all standard, is it?” Snape cast down his eyes, shaking his head wearyly and seemingly exhausted for some reason. “No, Evans, it is not. And the only reason that Dumbledore has gotten away with it all is simply because of his fame and stature in our small community. To many witches, wizards, and their offspring, Dumbledore is the epitome of Good, the rightful avatar of the Light Arts. Many people say his name with the same revere and awe as they would speak of Merlin's. He is to them what the Queen of England is to patriotic Muggles. All they see is an ideal, an image he has carefully crafted these past 80 years.”

“As such, whenever doubt is raised over his motives – or some minor misdemeanour of his is accidentally uncovered, people are quick to sweep it under the rug as nothing but jealous opponents spreading lies. Every criticism is reduced to lies spread by practitioners of the Dark Arts – and as such disregarded as being worth nothing more than muck under their shoes. They can not possible conceive of Dumbledore as a mortal man as fallible as any of us – it is simply a paradox in their way of reasoning. And all of this is by design – Dumbledore's design. It would be unwise to go against his wished in a public manner. Subverting his demands requires a more cunning strategy – one geared towards a long game of push and pull.”

Harry understood all too well what Snape was saying – tearing down Dumbledore's country-wide web of lies and favours required more than simply shouting from the rooftops that he was a hack. No. They needed to make Dumbledore stumble at every corner – make the man himself prove to everyone he was just that, a man, and not a god. The majority of Harry's mental processes were daunted by such a prospect – the child in him very much wanting to opt out of this and not bother at all. He was only eleven, for pity's sake. But the deep parts of him, the cunning and sly corners of his mind, the pride and anger – all that which had been furious about the way his life had been going on, which had been aching for revenge since he could put a face and name to the nameless adversary that was his Destiny. Those parts were very much stirring and rearing, roaring to go and strike down the Enemy whom was Dumbledore...

Harry ate quickly, faster than Snape could finish his tea – and of years of manipulating the Dursleys hadn't taught the young boy a disciplined form of restraint, he would have dragged Snape from his seat and all the way down to Gringott's. By the time they finally entered the Wizarding Bank, all of Harry's anger and fury had solidified into an ice-cold thirst for vengeance. He had pulled Snape aside before entering Gringott's and pierced Snape's eyes with his own gaze, subtly demanding the wizard to once more breeze through the surface of Harry's thoughts – through which he shared his wish to immediately appoint a new representative for his seat, and his choice had left Snape blinking for a few seconds.
After that, a silent discussion had begun between them – Harry directing his answering thoughts through Snape's Legilimency and Snape quietly answering in turn. By the end, a tentative plan had been agreed between them – a plan whereby Dumbledore would no longer hold Harry's right to vote, and whereby a first of many favours would be won in the game of politics that Harry could no longer keep out of with a conscience.

The goblins, indeed, seemed to expect them – and they were quietly re-directed, once more, to the back-office of Gnalte. Gnalte, now appointed as the official spokesperson between Harry and Gringott's as a whole, quickly ushered them in after a few curtius greetings between them.

"Welcome back, Mr Potter. Welcome back. We are aware it has been just a few days – and that we had said that plotting out all your paperwork would take a few months, but we are pleased to share the news that your direct Inheritance is checked and found to be in order. Therefore, the Potter Inheritance can be safely transferred in full, for as far as is possible, until you come of age. Now, this time we must observe full protocol and require you prove yourself to be, without a shadow of a doubt, to be Harry James Potter." Gnalte procured a small obsidian box, the lights in his office reflecting from the dragon-glass surface in wicked and sharp angles. Carefully placing it down and opening it, the goblin withdrew from it a small silver pin – like that of a sowing-kit, but almost fifteen centimetres long and glinting dangerously as if out for blood.

"Your hand, please, Mr Potter." Obediently placing his right hand in the outstretched hand of the goblin, Gnalte's grip became as of steel, holding Harry's hand firmly in place. Without another word, the goblin plunged the pin directly where Heart and Fate crossed on Harry's palm. The pain was excruciating and it felt as if the pin had skewered through his whole hand – but Harry bit his tongue and kept his silence, merely screwing his eyes in reluctance of daring to admit the pain.

Gnalte noticed and seemed to approve, as he made no apology and merely continued on. "Do you swear that you are Harry James Potter, heir extant of the Peverell line, sole surviving descendants of the Potter family, son of Lilly Evans and James Potter?"

Instantly the pin began growing warmer – and Harry feared what denying the fact or lying about anything would undoubtedly bring now. So he took a few breaths, pushed away the pain as best he could and tried answering in as level a voice as he could. "Yes, I swear I am Harry James Potter." Gnalte pressed on with the next question. "Do you swear that you are of sound mind and that you recognize the importance of your blood?" Harry spoke again, this time a small tremble in his voice as the pin had become warmer again. "Yes, I swear I am of sound mind and recognize the importance, as far as I can."

"Do you swear upon your magic, upon your blood, that these answers were the truth, through and honest?" Gnalte continued, eyes kept level with Harry's whenever Harry's were open. "I do." Instantly the pin become cooler – and Gnalte nodded, before quickly removing the silver tool from Harry's palm. Surprisingly, removing the needle didn't hurt – and when Harry went to inspect the wound, he was relieved to find none present. "Thank you, Mr Potter. Most admirably done for your first time and without any proper preparation as to what you could have expected."

"Yeah, thank you for that, sir – could've warned me next time." Harry bit out, quite annoyed at being subjected to the painful procedure, though he lowered his voice when Snape cleared his throat in silent warning towards his behaviour. "Sorry, sir. I mean to say that it was... unexpected." Gnalte chuckled, placing away the obsidian box after he had cleaned the silver pin and returned it to its container. "No need for an apology, Mr Potter. Consider it a supplementary test towards receiving the Ring. Our Manager found it necessary to test how well you could handle the unexpected pressure of the procedure. And you did, indeed, admirably well. You realized the importance of answering truthfully and I wager you somewhat understood what could have happened had you lied. Your innate grasp of understanding magic is considerable – and that is a good thing too."
Harry wished to preen about those words, but could not do so for longer than a few seconds when Snape took the lead. “I was under the impression we were here to receive Potter’s Ring, not to applaud a surprisingly well-developed sense of practical magic.” The potion-master drawled the words, as if rebuking Gnalte without actually insulting the goblin. Gnalte, in turn, merely flashed a toothy grin as if he somewhat approved of Snape’s verbal wit. “Quite right, Master Snape. But protocol is protocol – so on towards the signing of the Duty of the Heir. I hope your skill with quill and ink is decent, Mr Potter. There is a lot of paper to go through and we do not use Muggle pens or pencils…”

The next hour or two was pure horror for Harry’s fingers and wrist. He had only used a quill a few times before that moment, mainly when using it to make certain annotations in the books he had begun to read – and only because he hadn’t thought to bring a ball-point of pencil with him. To say that his penmanship was atrocious was almost kind – for Harry was sure not even he would be able to read any of his scratchings after the first twenty minutes. His signatures had slowly regressed from his full name, to just his initials – to finally merely a hastily scratched cross wherever he had to sign. Gnalte hadn’t seemed to object, beyond remarking that the papers had to be re-signed once he came of age and that he had better learned to use the quill more efficiently by then. And if that thought didn’t instil horror in his aching wrist, Harry didn’t know what would.

Finally, after almost 130 pages of parchment (Harry had counted them with a vengeance after the first fifty), they were done. Gnalte began stamping them at a breakneck pace, the rubber stamp flying from the ink-pad to parchment so quickly that it became nothing but a blur – and Harry wondered how Gnalte kept the parchments flitting neatly aside when the last one had been stamped. He reasoned it was probably an effect of being a seasoned employee in the Bank, something that came with years – if not decades, of practice.

“Well, Mr Potter, Master Snape – the paperwork is done and accounted for. Now on to the Receiving of the Ring.” Gnalte tolled a small bell besides him on the desk, to which a Goblin quickly responded and brought in a oaken box. Placing the box on the desk, the goblin quickly left. Gnalte held out his hand, gesturing for Harry to extend his. Taking a hold of it, a small pin was produced and Gnalte deftly pricked Harry’s finger – then pressing it against the box, before smearing the drop of blood into a runic symbol. The moment the symbol was finished, it glowed in a silver light – and the box opened on its own accord.

Slowly the corners of the triangular box unfolded, as various parts became visible and slowly began sliding out of the main-body. It evidently had been designed as a puzzle-box, as pieces slid out, through, under and over each other. Mesmerizing as it was to watch, it seemed like quite a bother to keep something in – unless it were worth a lot, of course. Finally, after a minute of smooth motion, the last piece unfolded to reveal its prize. At first, Harry thought it didn’t look very noble or interesting. It was a ring, true, but it seemed so plain as to be worthless.

“Ah, Mr Potter, looks can deceive. This is the official Potter Heir’s Ring. Made from the clay on which the first Potters were born, it was moulded by your ancestral clan-father as an example of his artistry and control over the medium. But you shall see more when you take it, Mr Potter.” Not ignorant of the polite order, Harry cautiously took up the ring. It felt warm, somehow – he had expected it to feel cold for some reason.

It looked simple enough, a bit broader than most rings he’d ever seen – but it was an intriguing colour. A deep rich terracotta brown, wit streaks of moss-green and small flecks of white, it seemed to portray a thing with history. As he carefully turned it about, he felt it react to his magic – and gasped when a small band of symbols began blazing with a vibrant warm light on their own! It was a row of Runes, engraved or carved on the interior of the band – where they’d be spared from defacement or erosion. Though he could not read it, he could feel it was part of him – and a steal
resolve grew in Harry's mind to learn all he could about Runes.

Slipping the ring over his ring-finger on his right hand, he felt it almost fuse with his magic – the vibrant light of the symbols blazing through his skin almost, as a soundless rumble reverberated through his very being and through the rest of the room. Gnalte looked about as happy as he could look, with his semi-permanent scowl – while Snape held a ghost of smile on his lips. “Welcome, Lord Potter. We of Gringott’s are anxious to keep an eye on you in the future.” Gnalte congratulated Harry, shaking his hand vigorously. “We’ll keep in touch with your guardian, Lord Potter, as we try to clear out the bureaucratic paperwork concerning the rest of your inheritances.”

As they rose, Harry still eyeing the ring with unbridled curiosity and knowing this had once belonged to his father, they made their way out of Gnalte's office and into the Hall. Snape had a hand on Harry's shoulder all the way, with a sense of pride in his eyes and a small smile on his lips. As Harry finally lowered his hand, before they'd step into the Hall, he sensed a small change and looking down saw that the ring had become Disillusioned. Snape noticed and softly spoke. “Heir Rings always become undetectable to any who are not family, guardians or in similar relation to those who own it. It is a measure of protection and anonymity.”

Harry nodded mutely, straightening his posture and setting his eyes on the prize still far in the future – a future where he would be free, know all he could know about his family and their heritage, and where Dumbledore could no longer control him. Glancing and speaking at Snape, no small amount of steel resolve had entered Harry's voice. “I would like to contact those responsible for the Wizengamot as soon as possible. I don't want Dumbledore in my seat any longer than necessary.” Snape gave a small nod, smiling almost sagely as Harry's tone. “Tomorrow then, we shall visit the Ministry before we travel to my home in Spinner's End...”

And thus went into Gringott's an ignorant child – and left from it a wiser Lord...

Chapter End Notes

Oak is traditionally seen as a wood symbolizing kingship and the right to rule. It symbolizes power, survival and ancient wisdom. It is commonly associated with Zeus, Jupiter and Thor.

Murtlap Essence, blue in colour and made from strained pickled Murtlap tentacles, is designed to heal and soothe painful cuts and abrasions.

Star Grass Salve, green in colour and made from 'Aletris farinosa' (also known as Star Grass, Unicorn Root and Ague Grass), is designed to soothe sores and wounds.

Wiggenweld Potion, green in colour and made from several ingredients (too many to list), is designed to replenish stamina, cure simple injuries and as an antidote against various sleeping potions (such as Sleeping Draught and Draught of the Living Death).

Wit-sharpening Potion, purple in colour and made from several ingredients (scarab beetles, ginger roots, armadillo bile, newt spleens), is designed to think more clearly and as an antidote against the Confundus Charm.

Heart and Fate are the Heart Line and the Fate Line on the palm, famous in palm-reading for being able to show one's true intentions/desires and what one's future holds.

Filius Flourish, co-owner of Flourish & Blotss, current manager (from ca.1981 to 20--),
nephew of Bartholomew Blotts. Both are direct descendants of the original founders of their co-owned shop and the chain of book-stores of the same name. Together they own roughly seventy book-stores throughout Europe – and they've recently begun spanning across the Atlantic Ocean. They have opened their first store on the American continent in 20-- and are already planning to open more.

Gemini Privatis, a Light Curse created and patented by an anonymous patron has as its sole purpose to create a Two-Way Mirror. It creates a perfect copy of an original looking-glass that is quantum-linked and creates a visual vortex of its surrounding to be reflected in its counterpart – all without any time delay or any inaccuracies, regardless of the distance between the original and its quantum-copy.

Lux Leporum, a Light Charm that recreates with accurate detail an instance of Aurora Borealis. The strength of the luminous display depends solely on the caster's magical core, and as such most people only manage to cast an Aurora just a few feet across. Stronger casters can manage an Aurora several dozens of yards across, though the largest officially recorded spanned only fifty yards.

I wonder if people know who that mystery primate was? Or where that coin came from?

Also, whatever could that dial with coloured panels be about? I remember a movie about howles and castles, something, something, Ghibli, something, ...
Chapter XI

Chapter Summary

The First Day of Harry's Future begins...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

That evening, Snape had taught Harry the basic theory behind the Disguise and Disillusionment Charms, even making Harry perform them a few times when he deemed Harry to understand the theory well enough. The Disguise Charm was easy enough to master, Harry thought – it merely relied on the caster being able to strongly imagine the disguise they wished. The wand movement and verbal spell were easy to learn – Harry quickly managed to turn his hair a fair few shades lighter, along with changing the colour of his eyes to a blue rather than a green. It was just enough to make him look like another person, especially if you couldn't see his scar.

The Disillusionment Charm, however, proved more difficult than Harry had thought. He understood both wand movement and incantation perfectly, as they weren't that complicated – but casting it with the right amount of magical strength behind the spell proved much more difficult. Only bits and pieces of his general appearance managed to become Disillusioned, and not nearly enough to make Harry less noticeable – instead it made him stand out even more! Harry wanted to keep trying, but Snape made him stop after a dozen tries when Harry had managed to invert the colours of the Disillusionment and suddenly looked like a negative copy of a photograph walking around.

Besides the Charms, Snape had given Harry the bag of Muggle cosmetics - having called for Tom's wife to help the young boy in learning to cover his scar with the purchased products. What had followed was an exhaustive education in all the differences between concealer, primer powder, foundation and contour powder. If it weren't for the fact that these products would help ensure Harry's anonymity wherever he went, he would have given up right there and then. After an hour or-so, Harry had learned enough to manage and conceal the scar in such a way you couldn't even tell make-up was applied. Shrinking the products afterwards and placing them in his Extended pouch, he was glad when dinner came.

Sleep came quick, though Harry took some time before he went to bed as to arrange his thoughts about the day. He had transcribed the inscription on his ring and placed it with the transcription of the engraving in his family's Vault. Slowly he was working his way through a cope of The Rune Dictionary – Understanding & Reading Runes in Modern Times' and side-comparing the book with the copied texts.

He had rather quickly managed to isolate all the different runes in both texts and was now slowly translating them back into some form of English. That part was simple enough – the hard part was then translating what was obviously Old English in which the inscriptions were originally written. He really should've bought an Old English Dictionary as well, he thought lamenting as he put away the papers after finishing the translations into Old English. Just one more thing to do when he had a free moment, mentally noting to visit Flourish & Blotts one last time before they would leave for Spinner's End.
The moment Harry laid himself down in bed and closed his eyes, he fell instantly asleep – and morning’s radiant dawn was what woke him immediately afterwards. As Snape picked him up for breakfast, promising to gather their items after they’d returned from their visit to the Ministry, Harry quickly dressed and ate. It was barely ten o’clock when they left the Leaky Cauldron via the Floo, Snape casting a handful of Floo-powder into the separate fireplace for all Flooing, gesturing Harry to stand beside him. As Snape put an arm around Harry's shoulders, he deftly called out.

“Ministry of Magic!” A swirl of green flames engulfed them both – and Harry saw a kaleidoscope of rooms and scenes flash by.

Not even ten seconds later, they stepped out of a fireplace in the Ministry itself. The space was impressive and the level of ornate detail that had been put into its construction was almost enough to strike Harry speechless. The hall, which Snape called the Atrium, was a broad long hallway, of a hard-wood floor and a domed tiled ceiling. Dozens upon dozens of Floo-fireplaces were evenly spaced apart on both sides of the Atrium – and it the far end of it, opposite the direction they were headed, Harry saw several red public telephone boxes descending and ascending from and into the ceiling.

The hardwood floor was a dark auburn, polished to a shine by centuries of people passing upon it. The tiled ceiling was a peacock blue, with all manner of golden symbols streaking across the curving expanse. Most of the symbols seemed to be represent stars, obviously enough, and Harry could recognize a plethora of astrological symbols he had become acquainted with during his lessons in school. The fireplaces were decorated with ebony-black tiles, with golden cups suspended from the corners obviously containing Floo-powder. From the side on which Harry and Snape exited the fireplace, people steadily streamed out – and on the opposite end, short queues of wizards were waiting to exit the Ministry via other fireplaces. The constant roaring of the green flames made for a loud almost deafening din.

As they neared the end of the hall in which they arrived, it narrowed slightly before opening up in an enormously tall space – which was almost a hundred metres in diameter. Small cubicles with offices, each a small contained studio with large windows opening up into the tall space, stood side by side around the entire perimeter of the space, starting from about five metres up and going up all the way to the roof almost two-hundred metres high. Dozens upon dozens of offices looked down on all those walking the chamber, with a large elliptical pool and fountain dominating the centre of the floor.

The fountain, which a plaque on its pedestal proclaimed to be 'the Fountain of Magical Brethren', stood central in the elliptical pool. The pool, rimmed on the outside with granite hewn blocks and decorated on the inside with azure ceramic tiles, was about fifty by thirty metres long and wide – with about one metre of water standing in it, water that seemed to constantly flow in different directions as if propelled by magic. In the pool’s centre stood the fountain's pedestal, seemingly made of golden bricks and jutting above the water-level by about thirty centimetres.

Standing inside the pool, the pedestal for the statues divided in two sections joined by a small footbridge beneath which water flowed, were five larger-than-life statues. Stood apart from the other four, on the smaller section of the pedestal, was a Wizard, bearing a large flowing mantle, pointed hat and waving a wand high above his personage. Sculpted to look dignified and radiant with nobility and strength, it instantly appalled Harry's sense – and the only words that he would describe it with would be 'gaudy, narcissistic and plainly self-elevating'. Inscribed at the base of the Wizard's feet, on a small slanted brass plaque, was written “Magica Gratia Magius”.

Central to the other section, visually anyway, was a statue of a Witch. Her mantle and robes flowing behind her in a spiral pattern that surrounded the last three statues, her hair seemed to be waving in a silent never-moving wind, frozen in place. One hand stretched in friendship towards
the three others besides her, the other hand reaching longingly towards the lonely Wizard. Her face was sharp and exuberantly feminine, as if the creator wished to portray the epitome of womanhood. Her eyes, seeming almost watery with emotion – and Harry could swear he saw subtle tears flowing down her cheeks, looked with anguish and reverence to the Wizard. As if he was an object of loving adoration that had rejected her in some way.

The three other statues, each smaller than the last, all three diminutive compared to the Witch and Wizard, stood as if protected by the Witch's cape. Three pairs of eyes locked with the Wizard – who looked away from the other group to some unknown horizon. They were a Centaur (which Harry could immediately recognize from Muggle tales), a Goblin (easy enough to recognize if you had ever met one, even if the statue looked almost like a cartoonish caricature with exaggerated features beyond even the scope of normal Goblin physiology), and a small figure that looked like a withered Goblin.

From various points on those statues, small arcing fountains sprouted, gracefully leaping through the air as the jets of water ended in the pool. From the Wizard's wand-tip, the Witch's open hands, the Centaur's high-thrust spear, the Goblin's nose and the withered Goblin's pair of ears – from all these flowed steady streams of water, some arcing, some simply flowing straight down. A variety of waterplants, mainly lotusses, were planted in strategic places in the pool, adding some colour to the otherwise duotone colour-scheme.

And as Harry took in the sight, he also took note of their relative sizes. The Wizard stood at about fifteen metres, the Witch at about twelve or-so metres, the Centaur just under nine (if Harry had to take a guess), and the last two at just over three metres. It was obvious how the Ministry thought about themselves and who they regarded as most pure and noble – or as races that should serve and be submissive. It was absolutely disgusting to see that horrid thinking displayed in so awe-inspiring a way. And Snape seemed inclined to share Harry's thoughts, as he sneered when they passed the display – though most people seemed to be in awe at the display.

Harry could see a small group of children, with their parents, on the opposite side of the Fountain, with an obvious tour-guide seemingly explaining something to them. The children were awestruck at the golden titans, while the parents listened attentively to their tour-guide. “And so indoctrination starts at the age you start to wonder at the world.” Harry thought sourly, almost sneering at the display before he caught himself – obviously Snape was starting to rub off on him.

As they passed by the fountain more closely, Harry suddenly saw its bottom was littered with hundreds upon hundreds of Galleons, Sickles and Knutts – with a small wooden post-sign announcing that “all donations to the Fountain go towards supporting Saint Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies & Injuries”. The fact that there were at least some specialized healing-centres in the Wizarding world, despite the seemingly overall archaic state of the rest of their amenities and public services, gave Harry some hope yet. And he very much doubted that all those donations would end up at the hospital anyway – he was sure a few self-deserving bribes would make a dent in the number the hospital would otherwise receive.

Surrounding the Fountain on all sides, except on the places where large circular passages were present – which oddly reminded Harry of the few times he had ridden the London Underground, were a few dozen small shops. Ranging from simple cafés to small restaurants – and even a temporary pop-up of Flourish & Blotts and the Daily Prophet, they gave the otherwise formally sterile Atrium a homely touch that much alleviated its otherwise cold radiance. Here and there, an evidently obvious Security Wizard patrolled the area, their uniforms sleek and matte-shiny leather with plum-coloured accents, a small cap on their heads and their wands holster in blatant view where all could see – which Harry thought a quite idiotic idea, as anyone could nick your wand before you'd even notice if they were deftly handed.
Above the passage-ways, hung from huge bronze rungs, were suspended enormous banners displaying a middle-aged Wizard in a pinstripe suit, his gaze looking off to one side into the distance. In bold words, displayed beneath the subtly moving black-and-white portrait, stood in plum-coloured bright words “The Minister for the Ministry”. Watching the portrait, Harry would wager the Galleons in his Vault that this was probably Cornelius Oswald Fudge, the current Minister for Magic. And judging on the indignant know-it-all smile the portrait was sporting, combined with all Snape had told him, Harry was determined to loathe the man and not let him use Harry’s name to gain fame. Rather, Harry almost chuckled as he thought this, he'd rather play that game by using the Minister.

As they passed through on the passage-ways, following the signs pointing towards the Visitor's Desk and the Elevators, they had to pass through a security-checkpoint near to the Security Desk. A gruff-looking elderly gentleman, dressed in the typical Security-uniform, halted them and requested they hand over their wands for inspection. Harry noted Snape's quiet acceptance and how he had handed over his wand, after which the gentleman took a while to check over Snape' wand thoroughly. “Ebony, 10', Unicorn Hair Core, yielding but firm. An excellent wand for the Light Arts.” And though this last was said as if it was an unchanging fact, the dark look the gentleman threw at Snape betrayed the officer didn't really think Snape was anything but Dark.

Then, as the gentleman returned Snape’s wand and took hold of Harry's wand, the officer's eyes were suddenly wide open. The gentleman almost let the wand fall in surprise – before recomposing himself and gently taking the wand between his index finger and thumb. He inspected it for a few seconds, before glancing up at Harry and swallowing the lump in his throat. “Fair Poplar, 11', a dual core – Augery Feather and Mother's Lock. How unusual.” The gentleman carefully tried to bend the wand. “Unyielding, yet somehow springy. Very contradictory, but not impossible.” Slowly he handed it back to Harry, who immediately stowed it back away in his sleeve-holster. “Take good care of that wand, young man – I have a feeling it will serve you well in return and bring you far in life.” Gesturing to his colleague on the other side, he let the pair through. “Welcome to the Ministry of Magic, gentlemen.”

They made their way through the check-point, heading straight towards the Visitor's Desk where a fair few people were waiting in seats. Taking a number and seat, waiting patiently for their turn, they didn't have to wait too long before they were called up to the Desk. “Reason for your visit to the Ministry, gentlemen?” A plump witch asked them, seated behind the counter, dressed in an auburn uniform that seemed to change to plum when not in direct light. “Here to contest a Wizengamot appointment of representative in stead.” Jotting down the reason, next to their names, a pair of pin-buttons slid out of a dispenser worked into the counter of the desk. “Level 2, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Wizengamot Administration Services – Madam Bones will handle your case personally, Mr Potter. Please take Elevator 2. Next!”

Making their way from the Visitor's Desk to the Elevators, foot-traffic had diminished substantially and only a handful of people were waiting at the Elevators when they reached those. Now Harry finally noticed the sheer armada of paper planes that were flitting about over their heads. They ranged in colour about ten different hues - with ruby, puce and cobalt making up the most. Others that Harry noticed were plum, gold, white, gray, emerald and sapphire. And as they stepped into Elevator 2, Harry noticed a single solid black paper plane quickly slipping in with them. “Level 8, Atrium, now ascending.” A lithe female voice announced via a speaker-system in the ceiling of the elevator. Slowly the elevator started moving – backwards. Harry was about to ask why it was moving backwards – when its speed suddenly increased greatly. In a second or two, the elevator lurched about a hundred metres backwards – jolting to a sudden stop. Just in time to right himself again, Harry was nearly flung to the floor when the elevator shot up!

The lift, as it stopped at each level between 8 and 2, always stopped harshly and departed slowly.
By the time they stepped out of the elevator at Level 2, Harry was sure he'd gotten a whiplash, as his neck had started to ache tremendously. The female voice announced the level. “Level two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters, and Wizengamot Administration Services.” They quietly exited the elevator, which swiftly closed again after one swarm of paper planes exited with them and a larger swarm took their place within the elevator.

Snape seemed to notice Harry's discomfort and gently touched the painful area with his wand, instantly soothing the ache to a dull barely noticeable throb. “Thanks, sir.” Harry murmured as he cracked his neck slowly and rubbed his hand over it. “No thanks necessary, Evans. Now, compose yourself. Madam Bones' office is this way.”

A small swarm of paper planes was swiftly coursing through the heights of this level, some dipping down into doorways leading to offices and other rising up from those same doorways to join the travelling swarms. Obviously this was some form of communication between offices and department-levels. It looked neat and interesting, though Harry doubted their efficiency very much. Following Snape, they passed through the small hall in which the elevators were – a hall that was lined with six windows that looked out on wide-open natural spaces, which baffled Harry as they were hundreds of metres under ground, obviously.

Soft tittering of birds and woodland animals resonated through the open windows, though no animals were visible. And when Harry tried to place his hand through the window, he immediately hit an invisible wall. So they were definitely some form of illusion, designed to probably keep people in good spirits despite being underground every day. An ingenious solution, Harry mused as he silently studied the window for a few seconds more – before moving and following Snape into the corridor which led to the offices. Six doors lined the sides of this corridor, three each side, with small narrow windows between each door. Small potted plants were located under each window, and small plaques graced each door proclaiming its inhabitants and their functions. As they passed the first pair of doors, they almost ran into the occupant of the second office to the right – of which the plaque read “Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office – Weasley, Perkins.”.

A tall red-haired man had opened the door rather abruptly and was about to collide with Snape when they quickly held themselves back each. “Ah, Snape! How strange to see you here!” The man exclaimed, equal parts curious and paranoid. “Morning, Weasley. Rest assured, we have a good reason to be here.” Snape drawled in response, brushing some non-existent lint from his robes as he silently studied the window for a few seconds more – before moving and following Snape into the corridor which led to the offices. Six doors lined the sides of this corridor, three each side, with small narrow windows between each door. Small potted plants were located under each window, and small plaques graced each door proclaiming its inhabitants and their functions. As they passed the first pair of doors, they almost ran into the occupant of the second office to the right – of which the plaque read “Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office – Weasley, Perkins.”.

Weasley quickly honed in on Harry's brooding presence and drew a curious glance at Snape. “And who is this then? Have you taken on an apprentice, perhaps? Bit young, though, don't you think?” Snape went to stand behind Harry, laying a hand on Harry's shoulder as he answered. “This is Harry Evans, Weasley. I have been appointed as his guardian after an accident befell his previous... guardians. Rest assured that any apprentice I would take on would have to convince me of their skills first – which is something anyone younger than me would be hard-pressed to do.”

Weasley merely kept an eye on Harry as Snape spoke, scrutinizing the boy under his observant gaze. “As for why we are actually here, we are here to rectify a manner concerning his rights as a law-abiding citizen. We have been sent to Madam Bones' office in this regard, which is where we were going presently – if you hadn't held us up.”

“Ah,” Weasley sighed with an air of acknowledgement. “You'll just have to go into the door at the
end of the corridor then, the one signed Magical Law Enforcement Squad. Her office is at the end of their subdivision – you can't miss it, really. Huge set of double doors at the end of the office, next to their own personal Head's office.” Weasley supplied as he closed the door of his office, straightened his coat and moved to leave for the elevators. “I would love to stay and talk, but some Deatheater-wannabe has cursed some automotives in Holbeach, Saint Johns. Got in spelled so it goes after elderly Muggles and baby-carriages – really nasty. Already got seven non-fatally injured Muggles and unfortunately Muggle-authorities have already been warned. Might become serious if we don't act quickly.” And with that, the red-haired officer turned and ran to the elevators hall – before suddenly vanishing with an audible crack. “Tsssk. Typical Weasley. Can't bear to upset his disgusting office mess, so he steps out to Apparate there. Well, no matter. Come, Evans.”

They entered the door at the end, immediately being queried by a secretary on their left what their purpose of being there was. “We have an appointment with Madam Bones, concerning a Wizengamot matter.” The male secretary merely shook their head sternly, as if to rebuke their insolence. “Wizengamot business doesn't warrant an appointment with Madam Bones. All Wizengamot business must be handled by the appropriate-” The secretary was rather swiftly interrupted by a loud voice calling them out from the end of the office. “Let them in, Greg. They're approved already.” The secretary looked put out, nodding at the pair to proceed. As they turned and walked to the end of the office, they were met by a square-jawed witch with close-cropped grey hair and a monocle – she looked rather serious, even as she gave a small smile and invited them into her office.

As she seated them at her desk, she turned to offer them both a glass of water before sitting down herself. Placing her hands on the desk and looking at them with stern eyes, she spoke softly. “So, Master Snape, Mr Potter, what do I owe the pleasure of meeting you for? As my secretary Greg just wanted to tell you, usually all Wizengamot business is handled by the Wizengamot Administration Services. So for you to be directed to me instead of them, that must warrant a serious matter of sorts, correct?” Snape cleared his throat, placing his hands in his lap, folded. “Yes, Madam Bones. It has come to our attention recently, after trying to clear out some paperwork at Gringotts, that Mr Potter's seat in the Wizengamot has been unrighteously usurped by an unappointed representative – all without Potter's knowledge or approval. We wish to remove this person from this position and have Mr Potter resume it until the time he has decided on a worthy representative in his stead.”

Amelia leaned back in her seat, eyes dangerously sharp and narrow now. “Those are serious accusations, Master Snape. If proven true, such a misdemeanour can be grounds for harsh judgement indeed – but they'd have to be proven true first then. If you can give me the name of this person, I can personally investigate this matter and see if there was ever been paperwork submitted to approve their appointment as representative or not. If not, we can proceed to submit an official complaint. And considering this is in regard to a traditional inheritance-seat and not an elective one, it could upset some people indeed. Now, who would be this person be?”

Harry smiled, putting on his naïve innocent mask, speaking softly and with feigned respect and timidity. “M- Mr Dumbledore, Ma'am.” And if Amelia's shock and incredulity weren't a treat to remember later, Harry didn't know what could be.

Chapter End Notes

“Magica Gratia Magius” means “Graceful is more magic”, a slogan portraying the
Exclusion of all things Muggle from the Wizarding World in Greater Britain.

Ebony wand-wood has an impressive appearance and reputation, being highly suited to all manner of combative magic and to transfiguration. Ebony is happiest in the hand of those with the courage to be themselves. (taken from Pottermore and official sources)

Unicorn Hair wand-cores produce the most consistent magic, were least subject to fluctuations and blockages, were most difficult to turn to the Dark Arts, and were the most faithful of wands. However, they do not make the most powerful of wands (unless the wand wood compensates) and are prone to melancholy if mishandled. (taken from Pottermore and official sources)

Poplar wand-wood is said to be a wand to rely upon, of consistency, strength and uniform power, always happiest when working with a witch or wizard of clear moral vision. See earlier end-notes for more info.

Fair Poplar, also called Dark Fairy Cotton, known to Muggles as Populus Nigra Dryadalis, is an almost-legendary type of wand-wood that was renowned to have originated from the Isle of Apples, Avalon, the legendary resting-place of the Muggle-king Arthur Pendragon. It is extraneously difficult to root anywhere else in the world, though it was known to grow in a few very select places – such as on the prison-island Azkaban (though these trees are no longer alive or viable for wand-creation, marred as they are by the Dementor's poisonous presence). The legendary Morgana had a mage-staff made from Fair Poplar, which she had crafted herself.

Augurey Feather, though easily obtainable, is seldom used as a wand-core – with reason. A melancholy creature with the peculiar ability to sense the oncoming storm, wand-cores made from their feathers can be highly emotional and melancholy, easily seeing a possible enemy in any opponent. Easily sensing danger, even when unwarranted, it is a wand-core that will protect its user by any means. Like their Phoenix-brethren, their loyalty is unshakable and they easily adapt to new magicks.

Interdepartmental Memo's (Paper Planes) Colour Coordination is as follows;
Plum for Level 1 (Minister of Magic and Support Staff)
Cobalt for Level 2 (Department of Magical Law Enforcement)
Ruby for Level 3 (Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes)
Puce for Level 4 (Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures)
Azure for Level 5 (Department of International Magical Cooperation)
Grey for Level 6 (Department of Magical Transportation)
Gold for Level 7 (Department of Magical Games and Sports)
White for Level 8 (The Atrium, Visitor Entrance)
Black for Level 9 (Department of Mysteries)
Sapphire for Level 10 (Courtrooms)

Lay-Out for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was inspired by a fan-recreation of the book description, as found on professorannlouise.tripod.com / magicalministry / id3.html
Chapter XII

Chapter Summary

From the Ministry to Cokeworth, finally going home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, was by no means a gullible woman – this was clear to Harry the moment she had recovered from the mild shock and had started asking him a barrage of questions regarding his accusation. She was shrewd, cunning – and Harry very much suspected she was probably a Slytherin when at Hogwarts, something almost affirmed by Snape's equally shrewd answers. The two were dancing around one another, each vague answer soliciting a double-edged question. It was interesting to watch and Harry took notes on their behaviour, knowing it could be invaluable when dealing with Slytherins once he was attending Hogwarts.

“When did Mr Potter learn his Wizengamot Seat had been unjustly usurped, in his opinion?” Amelia queried, quill and parchment in front of her. Snape was seated opposite of her, Harry to his side. A pair of glasses with water stood on their side of the desk, a steaming cup of tea at her side of the desk.

“Yesterday, the 5th of August 1991.” Snape answered, an incredulous look in his eyes as Amelia gazed into Snape's eyes. For a brief second, Harry could swear he felt that mental breeze again, though much less pronounced. It seemed she was using Legilimency on Snape – and Snape let her, though reluctantly so.

“Was there anyone appointed in the Last Will and Testament as written by your deceased parents?” Amelia turned to Harry for this question, eyes locking with his. He felt the mental breeze, allowing it to go ignored and calling forth the memory of their reading of the Will with Gnalte. “No. There was made no mention of an appointed representative, as far as we know.”

“Is there anyone who you presently wish to appoint in stead?” Harry turned to Snape, remembering the short conversation they'd held that morning, discussing possible representatives. Turning back to Madam Bones, Harry answered with a slight tremor as if to convey he was unsure. “We – We had thought of perhaps appointing Madam Longbottom, as she was good friends with my parents-” Here he let a small sniffle join the tremor, before continuing to speak. “B-But maybe we could choose Mr Malfoy. Se- Severus said he trusts him.”

Her narrowed eyes, briefly darting to Snape, told Harry she thought that was a terrible idea, in her opinion. Harry smiled inwardly – make her believe that Snape was trying to subtly influence him, use Harry for his own game. Harry trusted Snape – the last five days had shown nothing that would make him question the man's motives. But that didn't mean the rest of the world ought to know – not quite yet. They had an agenda to complete before that.

She continued her questions for another good half hour, before proclaiming she knew all she needed – for now. “Now, Master Snape, Mr Potter, I will inform you by owl as to the progress of this investigation – though I will not breach Ministry protocols merely because of your fame, Mr
Potter. Thank you – and have a good day.” Rather unceremoniously, she led them out of her office – closing the door behind them once they were out, leaving Harry a bit nonplussed about it all. “Well, that was rude.” Harry huffed as he turned to Snape.

Quietly they made their way back down to the Atrium, Harry stopping Snape to go and visit the pop-up from Flourish & Blotts. He quickly popped in, asking a young witch for a copy of a Old English dictionary. It took her a few minutes, but she eventually found it – and Harry paid her almost twice the price in his excitement. Waving a happy goodbye to the smiling witch, he rejoined Snape. As soon as they arrived in the Leaky Cauldron, they partook in a simple lunch. They discussed Amelia and her potential – Snape agreeing with Harry's suspicion that she had been a Slytherin.

“I knew her when she studied at Hogwarts. She was a few years below me, but from what I remember she was an excellent student. She excelled in Duelling and Defence against the Dark Arts. And if I recall correctly, she was always quite fair and unbiased – a rare trait amongst any of the Hogwart's Houses. There was even a rumour circulating at one point that she had been Chosen as the Herald of Gryffindor – though she never outright denied or confirmed it.” Snape spoke as they slowly ate their soup.

“Herald? What is a Herald?” Harry asked, quite intrigued now. Snape finished his soup, clearing aside his plate and filling his teacup before taking a slice of bread to eat. “A Herald is someone who represents the core-values of a House beyond compare. Though traditionally a Herald is chosen by Hogwarts herself from the students within the respective House, this is not always the case. The Herald of Ravenclaw, for example, is just as often chosen from any of the other three Houses as they are chosen from within Ravenclaw itself. Though for a Herald of Gryffindor to be chosen from within Slytherin is a rare occurrence indeed. Not many Slytherins value fairness and justice above their own interests.”

Harry pondered it for a while, finishing his soup in silence. “Is there a Herald every year?” Harry asked, curious now about this. Snape pondered for a while, before answering. “No, not traditionally. Heralds can change every year – or a Herald can be appointed in year 1 and remain as such till they graduate. But there have been years where not a single Herald was appointed, sometimes for decades on end. It is by no means a position that is assigned every single year.” After that, their conversation was quickly put to a close, and Harry rose to leave for his room, intend to clean up his effects before they would leave to Spinner's End.

Snape watched after him, seeing his young charge leaping up the stairs, crossing multiple steps at a time. He felt himself oddly attached to Potter, all too easily recognizing Lilly's clever wit and sharp mind, amplified as it was by Potter's cunning and creativity. Indeed, their child was very much each of them and better than each separate. He could not recognize in Harry the haughty arrogance that James had portrayed due to his Pureblood heritage and early mastery of childhood magicks.

The child was clever, quick of wit, had a swift understanding of magicks. He had even recognized Snape's Legilimency for what it was – and had even now started to figure out rudimentary defences against it. It was uncanny, yet encouraging. Quietly he sipped his tea, savouring the subtle fragrances of Moonflower. As he stared into the fire, he slowly immersed himself in his ruminations – all his observations of the Potter child from the past five days, beginning with the day Dumbledore had begrudgingly appointed him as Potter's new guardian.

It had taken Snape years to slowly persuade the old fool, so that when the time came he could push Dumbledore to consider Snape as the only person acceptable to become Potter's guardian. Snape
had argued by manipulating Dumbledore's obsession with control and his grand plans for a Light future for all wizard-kind.

“...hadn't the fool read into that Snape was saying he agreed with making Dumbledore the Light Lord? Really, the old fool became easier and easier to manipulate as old age came creeping in. But Snape didn't want to rule – no, he had seen what change leadership brought to men's hearts. Riddle fell to it – and Dumbledore was ready to leap into the pitfall headlong, just to make a stand against the Dark.

The Dark – what a notion that the light-hearted fools of their community had managed to concoct out of fear for the Unknown, fear of that which required sacrifice to be begotten. As if the Light Arts did not beget a sacrifice for power. All the difference lay in what was sacrificed. Where the Light Arts desired sacrifice in manner of the material artefacts being offered, the Dark Arts desired sacrifice by offering a part of one's self - be it your blood, your life-force or a piece of your soul. It was the weight of the sacrifice that thus typically divided the Arts, Heavy or Light. Yet Dark Arts could be utilized without offering blood or life or soul – if one made an effort to gather enough rare ingredients. Yes, effort is what defined it all – the will to exercise enough effort to gain what you sought. And that was what terrified Dumbledore.

Dumbledore was terrified of those with the willpower to build their own path – he thought it wrong for anyone to willingly pursue power, only respecting those who had it thrust upon them and willingly laid it down when no longer necessary. The Dark Lord had known this, thereby daring to go as far as he could in his efforts to take over the wizarding world. He had known Dumbledore would not directly battle the Dark Lord face to face, and therefore dared to personally go out to slay his opponents when possible.

Yes, fear – fear of death, fear of power, fear of being weak. Fear is what drives those who succumb to the deathly temptations of the unbridled Dark – just as the unbridled Light drives to death any who hail the Dark Arts. A balance is needed, has been needed for a long time. Ever since ancient times, power rose and fell on both sides. From Morgan and Merlin, to Grindelwald and Dumbledore, all the way to Voldemort and the Boy-Who-Lived, ... Both sides opposing each other in a precarious game of balance. And as long as either side went to its extremes, balance can not be held.

The flames in the hearth danced hypnotically, their cinders and embers small radiant stars as they were sucked up into the chimney, illuminating that dark corridor to the outer world with faints flecks of heat. Yes, the world was like a fire, Snape thought. Fan the flames too hotly and they shall consume all. Ignore or smother them and the fire shall be extinguished, its life-giving warmth dying out and the cold of the night creeping into men's hearts. Thus it also was with the wizarding world. And Snape had hope that Harry would prove a fire that could return vibrant life to their world. How Snape hoped, without any real reason save intuition – and he would do anything to see that hope become reality.

Harry packed his things quickly, placing them in the trunk Snape had bought for Harry on their first day in Diagon Alley. Specially enchanted, to be both Extended and Uncrackable. Only Harry's conscious touch could unlock it – and the Extensions placed on it allowed one to call forth specialized compartments depending on what they wished. Harry had inspected it thoroughly once Snape had finished his enchantments upon it.
It was a sizeable trunk, about 80 by 40 centimetres, yet it was still easy to handle for Harry's lithe frame. At first Harry had mistaken it to be painted black, but when he had inspected it more closely, it turned out to simply be an impossibly dark brown wood. It was furnished with copper decorations that gleamed like torches in the lowest of lights, even seeming faintly luminous in the complete darkness. On the bottom of its sides, back and front, there was a motive painted.

From a distance, it looked like a stylized wave, but when inspected more closely the motive displayed not waves, but hundreds of small feet – some even seeming to trod violently on a half-imagined enemy underfoot. It was a quite intricately painted motive, in Harry's opinion, even if it was a bit odd. When Harry had queried Snape about the trunk, he found it had been incredibly cheap – something about the owner complaining it kept being returned. “Some nonsense of some sort about it having a devilish temperament and trampling its owners. Who even knows what rot-gut the shop-owner drank to say that...” That had been all Snape said on the matter.

It took less than half an hour for Harry to put away all his belongings. He had taken Hedwig from her cage, placing the sleepy Star-Skeever on his shoulder as he went to fetch Snape. Harry was more than ready to finally depart Diagon Alley for Spinner's End. He had all the books he needed, Snape had bought all the ingredients he needed for his potion-making, Harry's list of school-supplies had all been purchased. The only thing they had finish here was the paperwork regarding Harry's inheritances, but that was days away from making any progress.

Soon they were both packed and ready to depart. Thanking Tom for all his hospitality and generosity in providing with room and board, Harry slipped in almost a quarter more Galleons into the pouch they handed over to the aged bartender. Snape gestured for Harry to get a move on, ordering his young charge to stand in the fireplace with him. A bit of powder and a clear shout later, they were on their way to their first stop towards Cokeworth and Spinner's End.

They Floo'ed to a public Floo nearest Cokeworth, from where they took a Muggle bus towards the actual town. For the occasion, Snape had changed from his usual black robes into simple Muggle attire, adorned with a grand black cape – which somehow still billowed magnificently whenever Snape wanted. Harry really wished to know how Snape did it – it would be an interesting intimidation-technique. As they drove through the countryside in silence, Harry took to observing all he could. Most of it was simply fields and barns, but soon they neared Cokeworth – and their surroundings changed dramatically.

Wide open fields gave way to sprawling close-packed suburbia – slowly and gradually at first, until they had hit the outer edge of the actual town. Suddenly there were no more trees to be spotted and every surface was crammed with dilapidated buildings and warehouses. Row upon row of rundown two-story family-homes, jammed between neighbours and all looking as if they'd been squeezed into a space just too narrow for the intended building. Precious few shops were present and none of them looked to be doing too well – if anything, the entire town felt as if it were teetering on the edge of extinction.

Snape had explained a little bit about the town, which at one point had been a thriving and prospering city on its own rights. It had begun to flourish as the Industrial Revolution, as the town's farmers began to switch to working at textile-factories instead. The nearby river, the Irwelling, had been used to transport goods to and from the factories – all of which were being powered by several mills and coal-power plants near the river's edge. Nowadays, the decline of Britain's importance in the world since the 1800's, Cokeworth had seen half its population leave. Young people didn't hang around once old enough, so slowly but surely the town was bleeding to death.

It had been where Harry's mother had lived – that had been pleasant news for Harry. He knew so little about his parents, but Snape had been regaling him with small bits of information every day.
Such as Lilly's favourite colour, where they had met, and so on... True, it was pretty one-sided and focussed almost exclusively on his mother, but Harry didn't mind. It helped him to know her better- and that was worth the absence of James' story in Harry's life.

Spinner's End was where Snape had grown up, smack in the centre of town, a stone's throw away from the local parish-church and the enormous textile-mill that dominated the town's skyline nowadays. They got off near the church, a sign proclaiming it to be Saint Ocham's Church of the Future King. It looked as worn-down as everything else in the town, but it had an inexplicable aura that held Harry's attention and he began to observe it closely.

It stood on a raised platform, held about a metre above everything else surrounding it – which was not much, as it stood bordering a small square surrounded on all sides by two-story houses. A churchyard hugged the walls of the structure, with broken granite crosses and fractured slabs proclaiming the eternal resting-places of their commissioners. A high iron-wrought fence surmounted the raised church-grounds, with wicked-looking spikes atop and close-knitted cast-iron decorations reaching halfway from the ground. It was apparent no one was permitted entry upon those holy grounds unless the vicar so desired it.

The church itself was rather squat, with its broad base making it seem like a slumbering toad almost. High narrow windows would not have illuminated its interior as much as rather obscure it more. Stained glass filled those windows, but their pictorial designs were difficult to make out and Harry couldn't really recognize any scene displayed upon them. A broad double door marked its front, where worshippers would've streamed into the church during services. Dark red bricks made up the walls, darkened with centuries of sooth and neglect, the colour now almost that of dried blood. The roof was all a dark grey slate, in relatively good condition all things considered.

But it was the bell fry that really typified the whole thing – tall and proud, reaching for the gray sky in vain to commune with the Christian God to whom it was raised. Here the windows where more broad, though as tall as elsewhere. The gabled roof of the thing almost gave it the appearance of a hat, with a slightly crooked crucifix affixed on its top. One large window stood facing the world on that gabled roof, one each cardinal direction, the eye through which the structure viewed the world.

And as Harry focussed on that highest window, with its glass panes free of grime and sooth by mercy of strong wind and cleansing rains, he could swear he saw a curious glint in the darkness behind it. But he was called from his scrutiny by Snape's demand to Harry to follow him. As Harry acknowledged Snape, he threw one last look at the scene – with its weed-covered fence, overgrown yard, half-boarded up windows, locked door, … and resolved to someday come back to investigate it better.

As they left the bus-stop, they crossed the square and entered one of the many side-streets that ended on it. They walked for the better part of twenty minutes, before the turned into a street that seemed to only go on for about 200 metres before hitting a dead end. A plaque on the entrance of the street declared it as “Spinner's End”. Another minute and they stopped in front of a house that looked well cared for, if a bit neglected. It had the air of a home where the owner was away for the better part of the year, but also where the owner still took pride in maintaining upkeep and appearances – if just to keep the neighbours amenable.

Snape opened the door, carefully herding Harry inside before checking all the post that had been delivered throughout his absence. The hall they stepped into was small but serviceable. A coat rack hung at one side, a full-length mirror on the opposite side. From it, they stepped into a small yet spacious sitting room, all the walls covered in bookcases safe a single street-side window that dimly lit the chamber. Harry was unsure what to say at first, seeing no other doors leading to any
other rooms. An old sofa stood in front of the window, with a rickety arm-chair aside it and small
table in front of both. All the furniture looked ancient, as if they would finally succumb to old age
were a single speck of dust to settle upon them.

“This way, Harry.” Snape drawled, pushing against the third bookcase on the right of the door
frame. It slowly pushed aside, disappearing in a neat arc to settle against another wall and opening
up into a small well-stocked kitchen. As they entered, a small pop announced the arrival of a small
creature, one of those that looked like a withered goblin. Harry was surprised at the sudden
presence and carefully observed Snape, who merely faced the wrinkled thing.

“Philly, please heat up some water. Harry and I will partake in some tea after we have cleared away
our personal belongings. Afterwards, I would like you to ready Harry's private bedroom to his
liking.” The creature, Philly, bowed politely, her large crooked nose just barely touching the floor
as her overly large ears flopped over her head as she bowed. “Yes, Master Snape, sir. Philly will
call young sir Harry when Philly is done with young sir's bedroom, Snake, sir.” She turned to put
on the stove and boil the water, then popping away – with a small thud announcing her presence
somewhere above them.

“Sorry, sir, but what is Philly? I noticed there was a statue of creatures like her in the Ministry, but
I don't know what they are.” Harry asked, setting his trunk out of the way and following Snape's
example in sitting at the table as Snape prepared their tea. “Philly, like many others you will come
to notice when you socialize in our little world, is a House Elf. They are magically bound servitors
– their sole purpose in life is to serve
Wizards and Witches. To someone raised like a Muggle, or
Muggle-born children, it would look akin to blatant slavery, but it is not – though I must admit the
distinction is small, even if important.”

“Phylies are, or at least were, of Mediterranean origin. The oldest evidence we have of House Elves
is in the very precursor of ancient Greece, and there are hints House Elves were known by or
served the ancient Phoenicians. What their exact origin is, no Wizard can say – though Muggle
archaeology, if it ever breaks through in our society as a useful scientific tool, may one day provide
a definitive answer. As for now, the most commonly accepted theory is that they are the tamed
descendants of a particular type of Demon, called a Farfadet – though this might also refer to the
older type of Demons called Fatori.” Snape explained carefully, placing three cups on the table and
retrieving a small bin of tea-leaves from the larder. Placing it all on the table, he stood by the stove,
drawling as he watched the water slowly boil.

“Fatori are a fickle type of Demon, Harry. Never dare to summon them – they are easily bound to
serve you, true enough, but they like to find loopholes in the commands they are given. Eventually,
the longer you bind a Fatorus to you, the likelier it is to eventually find a loophole in one of your
commands – and it will kill you.” Snape spoke softly, eyes intent on the dancing little flames of the
stove, as the water slowly began bubbling. Harry's eyes were riveted on the man, hanging on to his
every word.

“Fatori were once a popular type of servant, but their servitude ever came at risk of your soul. You
see, Harry, when you bond with a Fatorus, you pledge your soul to it. In return, the Fatorus will
serve you until your death. The more insidious thing however is the fact that a Fatorus never
pledges to honour a natural death. They are impatient things, even if a decade seems quick for them
and long for us. They will try to trick and kill you, force your end of the pledge to be honoured a lot
sooner than you'd have anticipated. That is the main reason their Summoning is an Unforgivable
Crime nowadays.” Finally the water had come to a boil, and Snape lowered the heat as he took the
kettle from the stove and filled the three cups.

“Now, some people believe that certain Wizards in the classical history of our world had managed
to tame a Fatorus, likely by interbreeding it with a lesser type of Demon, such as Kappa's or Pogrebins. Though this is highly unlikely as Fatori are essentially Summoned Demons, whereas Kappa's and Pogrebins are Material Demons – meaning Fatori are normally mere malevolent energies that dwell the Material Plane when not in their native realms, while Kappa and Pogrebin are born in our world and die in it. Breeding them would be like trying to breed a dolphin and a cow – their essential nature or purpose is too radically different.”

Slowly Snape sipped his tea, as the slow stumbling noises from Philly upstairs stilled and small footsteps could be heard crossing the upper floor. “There is talk, in ancient times, of Herpo the Foul having created House Elves – though why then is there rumour of them in Phoenicia, which was older than Herpo's own country at that time? The truth be told, perhaps it is best their origins are forgotten. People are too incensed with a House Elf's useful servile nature nowadays to care about their origins, if they care about their Elves at all safe as a free servant...” A sour sneer formed on Snape's face as he finished the sentence with a slow drawl – and Harry could see that Snape though a loyal House Elf deserved recognition and kindness, to be treated not like a mere slave but as a valuable companion. The emotions of this swirled in Snape's dark eyes – before he composed himself and that same cold mask slid over his features.

Quite suddenly, and silently as well, Philly had slunk into the room and plopped herself in the seat besides Harry. He hadn't even noticed her presence until she had taken her cup of tea and begun to blow at it before sipping. Snape's little educational speech certainly made Harry look at this strange wrinkly female creature in a whole different light – and he slowly put a hand out as he introduced himself properly to her. She slowly stilled, mildly shocked as she took in his waiting hand and his polite words. It took a few seconds, during which her eyes gazed at Harry with a calculating look usually reserved for gutted fish in a market without scales – but eventually she took his hand in hers and vigorously shook it.

“Philly knows who young Harry Potter, sir, is, sir. All House Elves knows the Boy-Who-Lived and mades disappear the Dark Lord, sir. Young sir is famouses in Elf circles, sir. Even those Elves that hates Light Wizards respect young sir Harry, sir!” Harry blushed a bit at her exuberant behaviour towards him, rubbing his neck as she began to accolade his achievement as a toddler – as if it were on the same level as the moon landing or the splitting of the atom. Snape merely watched Harry squirm in silent delight, finding great amusement in seeing the boy blush ashamedly at Philly's lavish words. But soon he softly cleared his throat, Philly immediately falling silent in recognition of Snape's approaching impatience. “Well, Harry, it is time we discuss how you will spend the next three weeks until you are to travel to Hogwarts. You have much to learn.”

Chapter End Notes

The Herald is an unique position within Hogwart's itself, being bestowed by Hogwarts on those who best typify the unique traits of any House. Heralds are not easily chosen, typically only once every 5 to 7 years – and years wherein multiple Heralds are chooses are a once-a-century event, usually. But there has been one unique occasion where a single Herald was appointed by two Houses – many centuries ago, thusly only rumours exist of it today...

Can you guess what inspired Harry's new trunk? Hint; It's made from pear-wood, though not the normal kind.

The Church was based on St. John's Roman Catholic Church, which stood on Sutton
Street, Federal Hill, in Providence, Rhode Island. It was unfortunately demolished in 1992, and was a beautiful example of New World neo-Romanesque architecture.

The Church is called after the Ocham Runes, and its latter part of the name is a reference to Nyarlahotep (if you've read Lovecraft's works, you will know why).

Farfadet is a French-Provençal folkloristic imp that cleaned the houses and farms of poor people, wishing no reimbursements safe for some food or drink in exchange for their efforts. Their name comes from the Latin Fata, root-word Fatus/For (To Speak, To Say), probably referring to the Farfadets listening to the woes of a farmer and doing the jobs the farmer laments of still having to do.

As such, I have presumed an older type of Demon, called Fatori (being a summoned Demon that thus must listen to their Master's every wishes). And which Demon isn't complete unless you add some soul-magick to the mix, right?
Chapter XIII

Chapter Summary

A schedule is decided and the first week commences in a new home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Your first week will consist of evaluating what you have learned thus far, and deciding a future course on your current knowledge. We will begin with Potions, however, as I would teach it to any first-years student – even though I will give you an introductory course on how to use your tools and prepare your ingredients. I will expect you to memorize that course from the top of your head – it will not be repeated, so ask questions then and there, not later.” Snape began, Summoning forth a few folders from the sitting room, deftly catching them with his free hand as he put down his empty tea-cup.

“We will focus on the different types of Potions, beginning with Draughts – which are usually medicinal Potions. Although some illiterate idiots tend to use this title simply because it alliterates nicely with their own creative designations for personally created potions – so, really, we could just as well throw that definition out of the window and kick it around the mud a bit.” Snape seemed curiously incensed at this fact, his sneer quite impressive as he spat his criticism at those who never keep in mind the standard meaning for certain potion definitions.

“After draughts will follow Poisons, as your fame and status as a celebrity will obviously ensure your contact with the most common of poisons in vain attempts at your life. And I say vain because I will ensure you will be able to recognize and counteract most, if not all, of the most commonly used poisons – and depending on your skill and how swift on the uptake you are, we will also discuss the rarer and more dangerous poisons as well. Mark my words, Harry, I will make sure you are not going to be harmed by such cowardly attempts on your life. I would make a poor guardian otherwise.”

Harry, oddly enough, didn’t really feel anxious or nervous when Snape so blatantly proclaimed he would probably be poisoned in the coming years. Somewhere Harry had already thought about the possibility, knowing what he did about his defeat of Voldemort and how not all of the Dark Lord’s followers were apprehended. That, and Snape's confidence at making sure Harry would learn to recognize those poisons, and that Harry would know how to counteract them, really made harry almost giddy. Nobody had ever shown such confidence in his ability to learn – or shown a wish to protect Harry from such things. The Dursleys certainly never did – Harry had been alone then in ensuring his safety and well-being...

“Then we will review Mixtures, which are mixtures of different Potions that do not react to each other and thus enable a single potion to have dual properties. Such examples include Skele-Grog and Unctuous Unction – though Heavens know why one would practically combine those two for usage.” Snape's delightfully dramatic eye-roll and slight sneer almost made Harry snort out his sweetened tea, just barely containing himself and quickly swallowing it before he sprayed it all over the table and Snape.

“Lastly, we will discuss Balms, Pomades, Elixirs, … and so on, and so on. I am certain you can
deduce the rest, Harry. I expect you to be diligent, attentive and, above all else, genuinely curious and interested. Potions as a subject leaves no room for boredom – safe at your own risk. Practical potion-making requires your complete attention and unwavering focus. I can not stress this enough – truly.” Harry would've liked to believe Snape's warning, but the blatant vacancy of interest shown in the man's eyes really made that difficult. Still, Harry knew better than to ignore spoken warnings of any kind and quickly nodded in agreement.

“I will teach you Potions thrice a week – on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. These personal lessons will last half a day each time – and trust me when I say this will be necessary to bring you up to par with your peers born and raised in our community. Each session will consist of a theoretical discussion of the potions we will review, a practical review of the actual Potion – whereby you will learn to recognize them by sight, scent and taste. Lastly, with a small selection of potions, you will learn how to brew them properly. And I do not mean properly as in 'the bare minimum of brewing standards required simply for barest potency'. When you have made them, you shall make them like a Master of Potions can - at the highest standards of potency and clarity.”

Snape rose, grabbing the kettle and refilling their cups, watching Philly look put out that he was doing the work she could do. His eyes never locked onto Harry's eyes, always roaming around the room, as if he was not sure what to expect from Harry at this point. Only once, for a second, did their eyes meet – and again Harry felt the mental breeze of Snape's Legilimency. Immediately Harry focussed on his mental image of a wall, by now easily able to call it to mind by repeated practice – and already it had changed from a blank obstacle to a textured brick structure overgrown with brambles and thorned roses. Snape was mildly impressed at the strength of the image, how each addition to the mental wall actually seemed to make it physically stronger as a defence.

Snape sat silently, watching Harry sip his tea, waiting for the boy and Philly to finish their cups. When they had finally finished it all, Snape rose, beckoning Harry to follow him. They stepped out of the small kitchen, back into the sitting room. There Snape turned to the corner opposite of the door they'd just exited, pushing aside the bookcases to reveal another hidden passage. Glancing back to the small entrance hall they'd come through not an hour before, Harry was surprised to see it no longer there. Instead there was only the door leading outside, with no entrance hall anywhere.

Harry turned back to Snape, who merely walked to the right corner of the room opposite the window. Looking to the kitchen door, Harry noticed it too had changed places, now sitting in the left corner of the room. He was genuinely being bewildered by this – houses don't just change their rooms nilly-willy! Snape, however, didn't seem bothered in the least! So Harry guessed it was normal, even if it was disconcerting and confusing. This world definitely would take getting used to.

Sliding aside the second bookcase, Snape revealed a narrow staircase leading up to a small hall. Ascending those narrow dimly lit steps and walking into the narrow hallway, Harry saw two doors and another set of stairs leading further up. Snape turned to the door on the left, pointing Harry to it. “That will be your bedroom whenever you are staying here. My own quarters are behind the second door. The attic-room upstairs is currently merely storage, but if you can devise a better way to utilize it, share your proposal and we shall discuss it.” Snape explained, waving a hand to both sets of doors and eventually to the stairs leading up.

“However, if any of the doors in this house are closed, you are not to open them. This will be for your own safety, especially considering the cellar – which can be found through the marked door in the kitchen. That is where my potion-making happens, thus it can be dangerous to enter when I am making a brew. Understood?” Harry quickly nodded, eager to see how his room looked.

Pushing open the door, Snape let Harry step in first, all too aware of childish exuberances when
denied care in their earlier youth. He had to console too many of his small Vipers in Hogwarts when their abusive home-lives had become too much to bear – and it was a sight he wished to remedy in Harry, as soon as he was fully able.

it really was fascinating to Snape, watching Harry cautiously yet still excited step into the room, scooping out its size first – flashes of Harry's memories of spending years in that infernal cupboard sprang unbidden to the forefront of Snape's mind, having observed those memories when he had brushed Harry's memory with his Legilimency. Brief as it was, it showed too much hurt and distrust. This child, so cunning and sharp, had become so out of its own self-interests and self-preservation.

Harry instantly became enthralled by the room, scooping out the small lay-out and gazing over all it contained. It was not a large bedroom by any means, just a mere three by four metres – with three small windows on the street-side that gave a clearer view of the street than the sitting-room window did. Harry could easily observe the other end of the street and had a clear view of the various alleys that terminated into the street. It gave him ample opportunity to keep check of their surroundings – and that somewhat alleviated his anxiety about this totally new environment about which he had no definite certainties.

Turning around the room, Harry noticed it had spare furnishings – all it contained were an impressive wardrobe, a small cot, a bedside table and a small desk. It was clearly furnished with a child in mind and Harry had the suspicion Snape had kept it bare so Harry could add his own personal touches to it all. Running his hands over the cot, the blankets felt incredibly soft – somehow Harry had imagined they would feel rougher. But it seemed Snape had spared no expenses making sure that the bare minimum he had provided still answered to a high standard of quality.

The desk, and its chair, looked very simple, but testing them a bit Harry found them quite sturdy indeed. But the bedside table and wardrobe were very finely decorated, more so than Harry would have expected from Snape. Perhaps they'd been some sort of family heirloom, expensive purchases passed on from generation to generation. The bedside table, which was more plain than the wardrobe, still had some nice carvings on the front – yet the sides were bare and plain wood. A merely decorative frontal piece, Harry surmised, something made decorative as an afterthought.

The wardrobe, however, was a totally different matter altogether. It was ornately carved and chiselled, its every square inch of surface was created to be beautiful, to inspire wonder. Carven heads of lions roared at the observer, while eagle's claws gripped at the world in defiance of time's grievances and gnawing whispers. The corners were decorated with carven pillars of a Roman design, sporting Corinthian capitals, with stylized seated portraits decorating their bottoms – each portrait depicting a queen or king of sorts, not all of them looking completely human. The double doors, which open in a non-linear pattern, depicted eleven scenes in plates surmounted by carven ropes.

Four of those scenes, located in the corners as five inch squares, depicted realistic scenes of various heraldic symbols. From top-left to bottom-right, they depicted a strong heart ablaze, a coiling serpent in oaken crown, a winged horse being crowned, and a graven bell ringing gladly. Harry sensed, rather than knew, that these symbols represented certain persons of importances. Yet they felt to be alive rather than long dead, and a small part in his mind wondered if they somehow represented people currently alive.

The next four scenes were slender rectangular scenes of various settings, seemingly from myth or otherwise fantastical and legendary places. On the left, from top to bottom, the first of a set of two showed a griffin and peacock mounting Ygdrassil, with its crown of oak, yew and elder. Graven in
its bark was a solemn face, rivulets of tears streaming from its haunted half-lidded eyes and pooling amongst its sprawling roots where small castles sprouted in multitudes. The second scene shewed a granite monolithic plateau arising a sea of trees, with a thicket of sequoias dominating its summit. Flocks of birds overshadowed the sequoias, though only dimly so.

On the right, from top to bottom, the first of a set of two showed a forest glade, three pools of shallow water in its centre, each pools reflection shewing a scene different from the glade or the of the other two reflections. A unicorn stood sheltered in the trees, gaze locked with the pool nearest it. The second scene shewed a castle of titan proportions, high spires and turrets climbing to the heavens, numerous courtyards between its main-wings. Owls circled the highest tower, where a small group of people stood observing the high heavens through telescopes. It felt oddly familiar to Harry, though he could not fathom why.

The last three scenes formed the centrepiece of the wardrobe's front, with a large scene in the middle of two smaller ones. From the top, it showed first three crowns interlinked, flanked by holly and yew. On the holly, in two sets apart, nine and seven rings adorned equal numbers of branches. On the yew, in two sets apart also, three and a singular ring again adorned equal numbers of branches.

Beneath that, largest of the three, was a scene of a solitary apple tree, its crown laden with ripe fruit, its roots lost in a sea of grain. Besides it, one on each side, stood two figures, a man and a woman, each cloaked and holding a staff aloft, eyes skywards. The man, cloaked in stars, wore a crown of elderberries. His hair was long, down to his waist. The woman, cloaked in the sun, wore a crown of thorns and roses. Her hair was short, barely shoulder-length. Small runes were inscribed along their forms, which Harry could easily translate now, thanks to his self-study in Runes – runes which identified them as Merlin and Morgana.

The last scene, below those two, showed a radiant sun, shining over a sea of shimmering stars, a wave rippling through it all. It was simply that, nothing else, as if denoting the end of the pictorial tale. It completely entranced Harry, as he let his hands wander over the rich apple-wood and trace the extremely fine details. There he stood for almost ten minutes, exploring the pictorial design and all the hidden details. As he rounded the sides of the wardrobe, it showed two additional portraits, almost hidden.

They were extremely faint, definitely not chiselled into the wood, but hard-pressed when it had been steamed. One the left, it was the portrait of a noble lady, her hair dancing in the wind, crystals of ice and snow encircling her closed eyes. Below it, runes titled her Jade of Cairn. On the right, it was the portrait of a wise lion, whose eyes smiled at the world, his manes waving and mimicking the rays of the sun. Below it, runes titled him Atlas, Son of the Sea-Bourne Emperor beyond All. Though both looked equally beautiful and enchanting, the lady's portrait left Harry with a distinct headache, as if her charming appearance was difficult to comprehend by the mind. It left him quite bewildered – until he looked away from it and couldn't remember what he felt. Yet, part of him remembered.

He turned to Snape, who stood still, merely watching Harry's fascination with the wardrobe. As if in response to Harry's questioning look, Snape merely rose a brow, his face stoic awaiting Harry's baited curiosity. “Where did you get this?” Harry finally asked, after observing Snape's quiet for a while. Snape merely quirked the corner of his lips, as if smirking at the question. “I didn't buy it anywhere – it was one of the Potter artefacts the Goblins have cleared just yesterday. They informed me through my personal communications, desiring to know where to send it to. I theorized it would be best suited to be a piece of your personal quarters. Why do you ask, child? Was I wrong perhaps?”
Harry turned his attention back to the wardrobe, pondering Snape's snide remark before giving the man a smirk of his own. “No. In fact, it's perfect here. Would be a shame to see it only three months out of the whole year, don't you think?” It was a small act of defiance in Harry's book, and Snape noticed. Snape laughed inwardly with a smirk, thinking the brat finally dared to be insolent, if only a little bit. It was as clear a plea to Snape as it would've been if Harry had spoken it out loud and begged for it. Snape gave a small sigh, turning away from Harry as he descended the stairs again. “If you behave and do well this summer, we shall see what I can do, Harry. Now unpack your belongings and make the room your own. Supper will be served at seven.”

Harry spend the next hour slowly unpacking his trunk, deciding the display the books on the desk until he could ask Snape to place a shelf above his bed. Putting aside those books he had started on already, Harry placed all his notes and research of those books on the desk as well. His clothes had finally started to arrive the day before they'd left for Spinner's end, so the wardrobe now held a few simple outfits for everyday use.

And Harry had to admit they looked really good on him. In all those years of having to wear Dudley's modified hand-outs, Harry had no idea clothes could be so comfortable yet form-fitting. As Harry had looked into the full-length mirror in the sitting room, he had to concede that Madam Malkin had been correct – these colours really made his eyes enchanting to look at.

His trunk had been neatly unpacked by five-thirty, so Harry took up one of his books and began reading it in the sitting room, patiently waiting for the next one and a half hour to tick by. Somewhere on the ground floor there was a grandfather clock, as its ticking and tocking echoed softly through both the sitting room and kitchen – yet Harry couldn't immediately see it anywhere. He guessed it was probably hidden like the doors had been – and he was having difficulty finding those doors when he tried to enter the kitchen. It took him almost ten minutes – ten minutes! - before he could even remember which bookcase hid it.

From time to time, Harry could notice Philly the House Elf from the corner of his eye, watching him through the kitchen door – which she had left open when she had noticed he had difficulty finding it. He guessed he was grateful for that, but she did creep him out slightly – reminded him a bit too much of aunt Petunia when she was watching him perform a decent job in the garden. Harry sighed, thinking he couldn't really fault the little thing – she was probably worried, no doubt having heard of his circumstances at the Dursleys from Snape himself.

Harry closed the book, turning to face Philly and eyes locking with hers. “Is there something wrong, Philly?” Harry asked, eyes wide and innocent, a naïve smile on his lips as he spoke gently to her. She looked almost startled when he spoke, and he suddenly noticed her presence became at once more noticeable. “So, she had been using a Disillusionment Charm of sorts...” Harry thought, as she opened the door further and stepped into the sitting room.

“Master Harry is powerful, sir, indeed. Not evens Master Snapes can sees Philly when Philly not wants to be seens, sir.” She spoke, her tone almost apologetically, her hands wringing together yet her eyes were not cowering or fearful. “Is Master Harry angries, sir, that Philly has beens watching Master Harry, sir?” Harry pondered it for a few seconds, cocking his head slightly as he took in her attitude. She certainly didn't seem to be malevolent, like her alleged ancestors are rumoured to be. She was probably just curious, nothing more. Still, Harry didn't like to be observed from the shadows.

“I'm not angry, I think. Just annoyed. Don't like it when people just stand there, watching me. Makes me feel like a freak.” The words were true, even if they hadn't been what Harry wanted to say. It seemed his emotional side thought now was a good time to come forth, and maybe it was – it felt right to confess to this small elf, Harry thought. Snape had said House Elves took the care of
their masters in highest esteem, so she would never share what he said with anyone else, unless he or Snape commanded her to do so. So maybe he should ensure she wouldn't see-and-tell.

“Philly, if you want to keep watch over me, you can do that. Just don't be creepy and Disillusioned. And never tell anyone else what we talk about, okay? It's not nice when people tell private stuff to others.” Harry looked away from her for a moment, acting the part of an emotionally-conflicted child – even if he hadn't been one for at least three years by now. No, he knew his emotions, had plenty of time on his own to figure them out. But he put away those thought – he needed to stay focussed. He looked over at Philly, who was looking somewhat curious and incredulous – as if she didn't know what to believe.

Harry kept up the mask of a child afraid of its own emotions, eyes slightly averted from Philly's eyes. Eventually she moved forward and took his hands from his lap into her own grasp. “Philly can sees Master Harry has many things that master worries about. Many think-things troubles master's mind and Philly understandes. Master Snapes was likes young master many yearse agoes. And Philly did what Philly always does. Philly keepses quiet and serves masters, until masters is healed. And Philly will does this for young Master Harry, she wills.” The words felt warm, nothing but truth in their meaning as her eyes shone with tears held back by pure willpower. She held their hands together a few more seconds, before letting go and turning back to the kitchen-door.

Before she entered through the door, Philly turned around once more and spoke to Harry – who had sat there quite struck with silence at her loyalty. “Philly will always bees listening earsees for young master, Master Harry sir. And Philly wills never tells, nevers!” At that, she finally entered the kitchen and softly closed the door behind her, leaving Harry alone in the sitting room.

Harry shook his head, impressed by her loyalty and strong instincts of caring for her masters – and she had also given Harry some things to think about, her remarks about Snape's past behaviour not lost on him. Opening his book again, trying to focus, he found his focus quite gone and put the book away with a huff of frustration after several minutes. He didn't know how to feel about the elf now, she had quite managed to upstage his expectations of her. And a small part of him wondered if perhaps she was trustworthy after all, even without her instincts of loyalty. She could be quite a boon indeed – and then his thought were quite interrupted by Snape exiting the kitchen.

“Philly is quite impressed with you, Evans.” Harry winced, hearing Snape call him by his mother's maiden-name meant he wished to talk business. Harry was never Evans unless it was serious in Snape's mind. “Remark my surprise when she regaled me with a small story of how my young charge wished to deceive her by acting the role of a child quite unlike himself, as if wishing to purposely misdirect her very thoughts. It was, in her words, really quite impressive.” Snape said it all as if it was light-hearted, just an everyday occurrence, but the way his lips had thinned and his eyes had gone cold told something very different, indeed. And Harry couldn't help but swallow thickly as Snape resolutely closed the door behind him. The sound was like that of a jail-cell's door falling closed and locking behind your back. Harry thought that maybe he was in trouble now...

Chapter End Notes

Who can guess what elements from other well-known series has sneaked theirway into here? Well, not really sneaked, more like crashing down like a meteor, coming down brighter than the midday sun and taking all the attention of like half the world population...
Edit (15/01/20); Changed a few sentences, correcting mentioned times so that they align more neatly together and time doesn't suddenly compress narratively.
Chapter XIV

Chapter Summary

Boundaries set for wayward children, for curiosity killed the cat.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Philly was busies making suppers for her two masterses, stirrings the pot of stews as the breadses baked nicelies in the ovenses. She could hears the two masterses talkings in the sit-in room, Master Snapes was busies talking sense in the young Master Harrison. Philly knews that Master Harry had seen her watching hims from the shadows, when Philly had been enchantsed to be invisibles. It had startled Philly quites a bits, as Philly knews that wizardses couldn't sees invisible Elfeses. How the young master had seen hers, she couldn't guess so she had notifieds Master Snapes. Philly knews kind Master Snapes should knows such thingses about his present-son. And the kind master hads always been kinds to Philly, so Philly was happy to tells Master Snapes. And now all Philly knewed she hads to do was makes a good suppers. So Philly was busy cooking yummies stew and breadses for the masters. Philly kept stirrings the stew.

Snape could see when Harry realized he was in trouble for trying to manipulate his House Elf – the slight narrowing of the eyes, the soft thinning of the lips, the almost audible swallowing of his nerves, … The child metaphorically reeked of fear and concern, of distrust towards him. Snape thought it best to cut off that train of thinking before it could derail the tentative relationship they had managed to build in the past week.

“Evans. Look at me.” Snape ordered, waiting for the young boy to uplift his gaze and lock eyes with Snape's own. As soon as they locked, he sent through a subtle mental incense of trust through the Legilimency link they had established. It was a wordless plea not to block Snape out now, to accept his invitation and let him connect a more direct link between them. It was not something he normally did, nor was it in way easy to initiate or maintain. All it did was to enable a form of semi-telepathic communication, a way to mentally show the truth of one's words, through emotion and instinct.

Harry spoke better through these links, Snape had figured out. Every time he had subtle excercized Legilimency on the child, each time making a point to give clear indication he was doing so, he allowed Harry to accept or deny the connection. When Harry denied it, he simply erected a mental barrier – which manifested as a brick wall in their mind's eye. It still amazed Snape – he had never seen someone who could so effortlessly grasp the basic principles of Occlumency without formal training – and if Snape hadn't known any better, he would swear the child had previous training it. Yet, when he skimmed those surface memories of the child, he never saw any indication he had ever encountered Legilimency or Occlumency before.

Harry accepted the link, a mental landscape of fences and open gates rising in his mind. And as Snape watched, he saw more details emerge and arise. There sprang forth bushes and shrubs, flowers and seedlings. Yet, behind each innocent facade, Snape could sense a mental defence awaiting to spring forth and protect Harry's mind. The bushes and shrubs hid bear-traps of sorts, or
were furnished with sharp thorns and brambles. And the flowers turned out to all be poppies, laden with pollen – nearing them abruptly led Snape to feel dizzy and disoriented, as if the world was slowly spinning. It impressed him – and mildly terrified him too.

Somehow Harry had grasped that to imagine his defences as accurately as possible, along with their intended effects, it became a part of the natural walls the mind erected to protect itself from outside influences. But Snape drew back from the forefront of Harry's mind – this was not what he was here for. He was here to discuss Harry's manipulations of his personal servant. Snape drew forth his own mental defences, letting all background thought and memories fall away, drawing to the foreground the relevant topic and his personal concerns about it all.

Snape slowly sank into the single arm-chair besides the sofa where Harry had seated himself, carefully maintaining eye contact. “Now, Evans, can you guess why I want to have this talk with you?” Snape queried, his gaze unwavering and Harry couldn't look away – the idea to look away wouldn't even present itself in his thoughts. “Yes, sir.” His voice was small and wavered, uncertainty and fear evident in each syllable. The child was obviously terrified, afraid of physical punishment of sorts – and it broke Snape's heart, as he could all too well remember that same fear from his own youth.

“Evans – Harry. I am not going to punish you.” Snape tried to assure the child, hoping their mental link could convey his absolute sincerity best he could. “I only wish to talk about your behaviour.” Snape tried to place as much empathy in his words as he was able to, cocking his head slightly and trying to give off a forgiving energy. It seemed to work, if only barely. Harry's tense shoulders became more relaxed, but the wariness in his eyes did not diminish, nor did the barely-hidden fight-or-flight stance his lithe body was in. “Okay, sir.”

“I understand that at your previous home – and please note I use this definition very loosely when it concerns that place, that you had to be able to act innocent and naïve to survive. I can understand how it could give you the edge all those times when otherwise you would have been beaten – or worse.” Harry slowly nodded, head bowed low yet eyes still locked with Snape's own. Snape gave a small sigh, letting his proud bearing fall away in a weary sigh, visibly deflating as he let out the exhausted sigh. “But please believe me when I tell you this will not happen in this household.”

“This house has seen too much violence in the past, and I have not a single intention to add to that painful past. Too many tears have been spilled here, all because my own father could not handle our heritage. So trust me when I say, I shall never lift a hand to you. Or my wand, for that same reason.” Snape's words were almost breathless and nigh inaudible, the link showing a mere fragment of Snape's own memories of childhood abuse. Harry almost let out a gasp, shocked at the faint memory, and Snape could see that the young boy now understood just how well Snape could understand Harry's behaviour and manipulations.

“In Hogwarts, this behaviour will enable you to survive and discern friend from foe. Learn how to perfect this subtle form of manipulation, by all means, for all those in Slytherin who stand against you most certainly will do the same. But in this house, under my roof, refrain from it. And if you ever feel you have to act in such a way to accomplish something, I wish you to either meditate upon your reasons for it or to come talk with me about all of this. You were alone before, yes, but you are not alone here. And you will not be alone, as long as I can do something about it. I have shown you the truth of my intentions, of my wish to protect you, in Diagon Alley. And I will show it to you again when we live under this roof together.”
just as Philly's mother makes them and all her mothers had knowns the recipe. Philly had sets up
the dinings table and Philly was nows listenings at the sittings room door, waiting for the masters
to finish their talkings. They was in the rooms for quites a whiles, Philly thinksed and Philly was
glads she had puts Heating Charms on all the foodses.

Philly went to sits at the tables, cleanings it with a rags as Cleanings Charms only dids so much to
keeps ancients furnitures very cleans. Manual Elfs power was always bestes to makes things most
clean, Philly thinksed. But Philly was gettings kinds of bored of waiting, so she hoped the masters
was soons done talkings. Philly rubbed the table some mores, ands was still rubbings when halfs
an hours later the masters entered the kitchens. Philly sprangs up and started servings her masters,
happy their expressions were not angries or sads. Yes, Philly was happy her young masters were
happies.

The next morning saw the start of Harry's private tutelage, beginning with an introductory course
of potions, followed by a similar course for spell-casting. To say it was exhaustng would be kind –
Harry had to struggle through a mental fog by the end of the day and it had everything to do with
Snape's way of teaching. Which wasn't as much teaching as it was him expecting you to perfectly
memorize every single word he says.

The morning had been left free, Snape busy with preparing his personal potion-lab for the
course, having instructed Harry to read through his Potion schoolbook until he was done. Harry
had already read some of it, having skimmed through most of the early chapters to glean an overall
view of the process – which seemed simple enough. You choose your ingredients, preferably by
harvesting them as freshly as possible, prepared a thoroughly cleaned workspace, memorized the
brewing-process for the potion to minimize mistakes, then begun the brewing. Usually one or two
test-brews were made before a proper attempt is to be made at making a perfect potion, but Snape
had already told Harry this was not how he taught his lessons at Hogwarts. Snape expected
perfection from the start – slave-driver as he was.

Potions had begun after noon, with Snape explaining each separate process by name, history and
standard definition – going from boiling to braising, all the way to straining and diluting. That part
on its own had taken almost two hours – and that had only been the beginning! After that, Snape
had shown Harry the fifty most commonly used ingredients, most of which acted as bases for
certain classes of potions – and once again, Snape had provided a name, history and standard uses.
Another two hours of multitudinous facts shoved down Harry's mental gullet.

Then had come standard potion-making tools, focussing not only on cauldrons, but also on stirrers,
ladles, glass- and crystal-ware. Some of this, Harry already knew, Snape having explained some
during their first trip to the Apothecary. But most of it was new – and, oh boy, look! Another two
hours of name, history and standard usages or definitions! Harry was beginning to notice a steady
trend, indeed – and he already loathed it with every fibre of his being. Nobody should be forced to
endure all this without it being spread over a single week, rather than a single day! Mutinous
thoughts began clamouring for victory over Harry's determined will to see this through to the end!

However, at this point, when it was almost seven in the evening, Snape concluded the introduction
course and declared that a good supper was needed to mull over the ingested information and digest
it properly with a good night's sleep. But sleep was still far off for Harry. After supper – which was
a delightfully light course of braised mutton with sweet-spiced sliced potatoes and a nice green
salad, Snape took Harry to the sitting room. There, having closed the curtains and drawn down the
shutters over all the bookcases – shutters that seemed to slide out from the top of the cases, a neat
curtain of interlocking balsam-wood slats – Snape told Harry to take up a simple baton, which he
would use to mimic Snape's example of wand-movements.

Mimicking the wand-movements was easy enough, but when Snape instructed Harry to interpret the literal instructions of his Charms schoolbook into decisive wand-movements, Harry suddenly understood how this could spell trouble for anyone unfamiliar with wands and spell-casting. Some of the directions regarding wand-movement were devious and duplicitous. How the hell was anyone to properly interpret swish-and-flick as it ought? Harry certainly hadn't, as his interpretation was almost the complete opposite to the proper movement as Snape showed it.

This only went on for a small hour, before Snape had Harry reciting the incantations as best as Harry could. Harry had one minute to silently read and practice the written incantation before he had then to verbally and audibly demonstrate Harry's interpretation of the written words. Harry liked to think he didn't do too bad, until Snape intoned how Harry's rather susserous intonation of Serpensortia would have not resulted in a Summoned Serpent, but probably in a partial Transfiguration of one's self into a humanoid serpent – Transfigurations of the sort that usually went less than stellar, and were always invariably followed by a six-month stay at St-Mungo's. A half-year stay in which the botched Transfiguration had to be undone limb per non-existing limb, usually with copious amounts of non-too-good-tasting Potions and painful re-Transfigurations.

The way with which Snape gave such examples, the unadulterated glee that would shine in those deep darkened eyes of the man when he would notice Harry's unease at the mental pictures he painted – it almost made Snape look like a sadist, if Harry hadn't known better by then. But in those moments, Harry could well imagine the kind of picture it painted of Severus in the mind's eye of impressionable children not too accustomed to the Wizarding World. It would paint him as a sadistic, malevolent dictator in his classroom, a sour man with cold thought who lacked empathy but none of the psychotic behaviours typical for madmen. It wasn't pretty, and it made Harry wonder why Snape wouldn't oppose that – for the man surely knew how it would make him look...

The mental picture Harry was painting of his new guardian over the course of those following days was one of a person tormented by his past – and some allusions made by Snape certainly would've given ample reason for doing so. Implications that Snape, too, had been in an abusive household where love held no sway as to protect an innocent child. Snape's self-confession of the falling out between Harry's mother and him. The obvious guilt the man felt as failing to protect Lilly or Harry that fateful october-night.

Trauma had scarred Snape's psyche – and it this point, the man either had become apathetic to the numb pain it caused, or he actively sought it out in some form of self-punishment for never having forgiven himself over all those mistakes he had made in his earlier life.

Harry could relate – he felt much the same during the moments when, for days or weeks on end, a darkness blanketed his every thought and no light in the world could illuminate them. The only thing that kept him from embracing that darkness and harming himself in a moment of weakness and despair, were his Second Thoughts – that small voice in the back of the mind that is always hypercritical of each thought you think. The small voice that takes the back-seat when you are busy and drives the car when you're bored. It had saved him many times, by always questioning his motivations, aspirations and how certain plans would work out.

Yes, Harry knew it well. In those dark moments when late at night, as you lay in bed and cannot help but rethink all those moments of scorn and anger by other hands, when all you can do is think that, hey, maybe they were right? And then came his Second Thoughts, usually with a annoyed voice and a sneer on their metaphorical face. Demanding to know why Harry was thinking this or that. Why that plan would work when previously it hadn't.
It had such a presence in his consciousness that Harry had come to call it his Second ID – a gloomy twilight mirror image of himself that was always annoyed by Harry unless Harry double- and triple-checked his every move. Hell, it was like playing chess against a grandmaster.

Sometimes he dreamed about it. Conversed with it in a gloomy demi-plane of dream-reality, where they sat seated opposite each other, a discussion of myriad subjects going back and forth eternally – until waking stole Harry away. Dreams that he could remember having, but could never recollect the contents of. Those illuminating discussions were unknown to him in waking life, only being remembered when another selfsame dream brought them back.

They drank tea together before bed, discussing what Harry had managed to remember from the Potions introduction and what Harry thought he could do better in Spell-casting. It was a soft discussion, almost a pleasant conversation really. And by the end of it, any frustration Harry had felt at his slow progress or at Snape's way of teaching had bled away, diffused in his chiding yet polite critical remarks towards Snape or via his quiet self-contemplation of his own efforts of the day.

It was a wonderful way of placing in focus all he had managed to achieve in a few short hours, relatively. He knew how brewing worked now, the process already well engrained in his mind. He also now knew the importance of proper intonation and wand-movement in Spell-casting. Both would make sure he would be less liable to make stupid mistakes in his new school.

Snape knew what he was about, Harry had somewhat reluctantly conceded. His method of teaching was unforgiving and unorthodox, but Harry hadn't had this much fun trying to learn something new in almost three years. In the public schools he had attended, lessons had always become boring after a while. Slower students were coddled, the rest of the class held back in favour of keeping their education on a level playing field.

Only once each child had grasped the basics of something well enough, did the teachers increase the difficulty of their subjects. Great for the slower students, horribly boring for the diamonds of academia that were students like Harry. It bred resentment against the system, he mused, made quicker students resentful of slower students not being quicker in grasping their studies.

Harry's third day in Spinner's End saw the routine established – discussions of Harry's general knowledge in the mornings, theoretical and practical education in the afternoon. This time it was Magical History, as Snape deemed some foreknowledge of the Wizarding World's history essential once Harry was to start his year at Hogwarts. Snape had reasoned it would allowed Harry some insight in certain Pureblood behaviours and ways of thinking – and Harry realized it was Snape's way of showing Harry how to use history to understand the present and enable him to decently manipulate people through their prejudices.

All fine and well, but Magical History was boring as hell – Harry grudgingly mused the afternoon would've been better served had he taken a nap. As it was, he was constantly catching himself from falling asleep – and Snape's droning drawls did nothing to make the stale subject matter any more interesting.

Dinner followed and it served to awaken Harry somewhat, before the feeling of being stuffed with good food inevitable began making Harry drowsy again. Snape, despite obviously sensing this, did not let up and put Harry through another lesson of incantation and wand-movement. By the end, Harry could barely keep his eyes open and Snape began to tire of Harry's slow wit. “It seems you are unable to decently reserve your energies for a full day, Evans. Seeing how you are swaying on your legs like a drunk, I suggest you best go to bed. We'll discuss this in the morning.”

Snape left Harry in the sitting room – and Harry struggled up to his room, every step a battle
against the march of deep sleep. When he finally fell into his bed, it was without removing his
daywear, and within seconds his eyes were closed and darkness pulled his mind into a deep
slumber.

The dream had been exhausting, interesting – but the moment Harry woke, it slipped from his
memory. Waking came difficultly, eyes crusted with sleep and the muscles in his arms ached with
the repeated movements from the past evenings. Harry found himself dressed in his nightwear and
under his covers, the curtains of his room drawn closed. The door was slightly ajar, a soft light
emanating from the open door downstairs. A pair of soft voices were talking, though Harry could
not hear what they were saying. Harry rose, casting his covers aside and creeping slowly to the
stairs, straining to hear the voices down below.

As he stood silent at the topmost step of the stairs, he could spy the door of the stairwell also
slightly ajar. And from here, the voices were audible enough to be clearly understood – even
though Harry had to strain to understand them. Male voices, two – one was Snape, the other
sounded familiar but not well-known. But the conversation quickly made known who it was.

“... For the last time, Lucius, it is none of your concern.” Snape, clearly, tone high and obviously
annoyed. Seems Lucius was picking at a sensitive subject, clearly in vain. “really, Severus – and
this from the godfather of my heir and firstborn. Your conduct of late implies to me I have made an
error in that regard. Must I suspect you of having forsaken the ideals of our Lord?” Lucius, as
Snape had identified him – the high-born gentleman from Gringott's, Harry remembered now. A
hiss and half-sigh from Snape – he was mad at the implication, Harry suspected.

“Let me remind you, Lucius, of my role back then and my role now. We both know that the Dark
Lord is not dead – Dumbledore suspects as well. And the old fool is hardly ever wrong when it
came to the Dark Lord. I am fulfilling our Lord's wishes, keeping an eye on the old fool and the
Potter spawn.” Hatred in those last words, spat out almost in disgust and without any empathy. A
ruse, Harry surmised, remembering the Oath Snape had given him days before. So a mask, a role to
be played against either or both sides. Snape was a spy, perhaps a double-spy at that. Harry was
intrigued, shifting his body closer to the steps – before small hands softly held him back from
falling down the steps.

Harry turned his head, Philly stood besides him, a finger at her lips and pleading Harry to remain
silent. She waved a hand over him, the telltale feeling of a Disillusionment Charm washing over
Harry's body. She waved her hands again, at both their feet, slowly guiding Harry down. He lost
track of the conversation for a few seconds, before they stood still at the ajar door. Now Harry
could see Lucius and Snape, seated in the sofa and armchair respectively. A few cups of tea stood
empty aside, a pair of wineglasses now filled in their places.

“... and let me remind you, again, of my hand in keeping our Lord's ranks healthy and alive during
the skirmishes of the last year of the War. Would McNair and Goyle still be alive now, had I not
done as our Lord trusted me to do then?” Snape spat out, his every muscle in the face conveying a
loathing at Lucius' suspicions towards him. Lucius looked calm, if a bit bored, his face
inexpressible and void of emotion. But his cold eyes spoke with envy at Snape's former position
with Voldemort. “No, you must not. Still, Severus, I can not see why you do not wish to talk about
your fosteringling. The child seemed polite enough, if a bit dim and dazed. If not now, you will relay
me his circumstances soon.”

“You will learn all you need to know once the school-year begins at Hogwarts. Evans will begin
his first year then and it might behove you to impart on Draco the importance of keeping Evans as
a friend. I will not discuss Evans' heritage any beyond the mention that his true name will carry a
lot of political leverage in the future. As for now, I am steadily tutoring him. His knowledge of all
things wizarding is atrocious, due his being raised outside of our community in anonymity.” Lucius put a finger on his cheeks, mind whirling over the clues Snape had given him. Snape suddenly turned to the stairway hall, eyes locking with Harry’s. “Philly, would you kindly fetch Lucius’ cloak, please? It is getting late, Lucius, and I need to impart a healthy routine on my young charge.”

Philly went through the door, bowing to Lucius and fetching his cloak. Soon the two men made polite farewells and Harry watched as Lucius disappeared with a loud crack in a whirlwind of movement and implosion. As soon as Lucius had left, Snape turned and looked Harry straight in the eyes. “Penny for your thoughts, Evans?” He drawled, though a slight smile tugged at the corners of his lips and a soft amusement at Harry's eavesdropping glimmered in his eyes. And Harry, for the first time in Snape's care, couldn't help but give an amused smile back.

Chapter End Notes

The poppies are an allusion to the poppy-field from “The Wizard of Oz”.

Chapter XV

Chapter Summary

A gifted child, a concerned guardian, despondent fears everywhere.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The second week at Spinner's End became one of routine. Potions on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. Magical History on Tuesday, Transfiguration on Thursday, Herbology on Friday, and Etiquette on Sunday. Each evening was concluded with Spells and Charms, followed by an in-depth discussion of the day and Harry's thoughts on the subject matter discussed. Snape was glad to see that already Harry had made strides in his overall grasp of magic and history. Potions was going at an acceptable rate, and Harry had yet to make a grave mistake – which Snape, used as he was with bumbling first-years born into their magical society, saw as a complete victory and a sign that Harry was quite capable indeed.

In his free time, Snape had observed Harry having read through already four of his spell-books and saw the child almost always writing when he wasn't reading. What Harry was writing about, Snape wasn't sure - but considering Harry's serious scowl of concentration at those moments, Snape was sure it was to be something he could approve of. And Harry's spell-casting was becoming eerily and impressively accurate. Ever since Snape had stressed intonation and correct wand-movement at their first session, Harry had managed not to make a single mistake – and as such, almost every first attempt at a new spell saw Harry succeed to an unbelievable degree, which slightly worried Snape sometimes.

At the end of the first week, Harry came to Snape in the sitting room, as Philly was seated nearby on the sofa knitting a pair of comfortable cotton socks. A steaming pot of tea stood between them on the table, the aroma of earl grey filling the room which was silent save the ticking of Philly's knitting needles and Snape's turning of book-pages. Harry had come down from his room, standing in the door before drawing Snape's attention – even though Snape had sensed Harry the moment he descended those stairs. “Yes, Harry?”

Harry came to stand opposite Snape, thrusting a paper with scribbled notes into Snape's hands. “Could this work?” Harry queried, voice somewhat strained and clipped as if embarrassed or uncertain of himself. Silently taking the paper, Snape read it through several times, his chin held in his hand and a finger tapping his cheek. “Impressive, Harry. The idea has merit, though I wonder how you know if this could work?” Snape answered, raising a brow in question at Harry's written words.

“I don't know, sir. It just feels right, I guess. How is anyone certain that a new spell can work? Can we test it?” Harry replied, his eyes almost shining with barely-restrained eagerness. “Yes. Let us retire into the garden – we shall summon a dummy to test for negative effects on the caster first. I shall cast the spell first, rather than you, Harry. I can not in good conscience let you do this without me controlling potential problems.” Snape rose and Philly followed suit, laying her knitting down on the sofa and sprinting to precede Snape into entering the garden through the backdoor.

When Harry entered it as the last person, he saw Snape had already conjured up a scarily realistic
dummy. It almost looked perfectly like a human, even though it lacked a face and its extremities ended in stumps rather than digits or toes. Harry watched as Snape cast a large number of spells and charms on the dummy, which was now dressed in a simple jute sack. Finally, Snape deemed his work adequate and went to stand next to Harry. “I charmed it so that, if your spell is deathly or otherwise near-fatal in consequence, we can tell with pinpoint accuracy.”

Harry watched with bated breath as Snape lifted his wand, spun it twice anti-clockwise before finishing with a flick towards the dummy and speaking the incantation with a firm and resolute voice. “Concorpus.” The spell left the wand in a blaze of blinding green light, which reminded Snape of the near-identical shade of green of another curse he knew well. The light travelled in a zigzagging arc of speed towards the dummy, a softly-luminous after-image trailing behind the actual spell, hitting the dummy right in the face – if it had had a face.

The dummy began spinning wildly on the same spot, its limbs rag-dolling in a spiral besides the barrelling trunk before slowly grinding to a halt. There it stood limply as Snape waited for ten seconds and then strode over. Once more, Snape cast his charms and finally turned to Harry. “Quite a nasty piece of work, Harry. Admirable indeed. Not only would the immediate effect of being spun wildly about painfully disorientate the target, the actual effect of the spell hampers quite extensively with the thaumaural pathways that connect one's magical core with the entirety of your body. I would wager that if used correctly, your target would find it near-impossible to properly align energy and intent into a functional spell.”

Harry beamed, as he put his arms together and began visibly cheering. Snape continued on. “You not only make the target dizzy, thereby already hampering their aiming at you, but the spell would almost always prevent them from casting a spell 100% of the time for at least an hour – and that is if you throw in merely enough energy to cast the spell functionally. Were you to cast it with all of one's might, it might hex your target incapable of magic for a year easily.” This made Harry cheer even harder visibily, and Snape laid a hand on Harry's shoulder. “Well done, Harry. However, remember that all spells can backfire, making you the target instead of your enemy. And too, never use this spell without reason. It is a wonderful defensive spell, but should your mind turn to darker things such as vengeance, it would behove you to restrain yourself. This concerns all spells, for that matter. Am I understood?”

Harry nodded, his eyes still shining with mirth that his spell had actually worked. Harry didn't know why he had begun writing it down, but as he had thought about each aspect of the spell, he had the feeling it had all felt right. It was something deep down in his chest that had hummed whenever he had calculated the effects of the spell, using the books he had bought. Though he was still just glad merely because the spell had worked at all. Instinctively he knew it would work, but had still be uncertain about it all.

Snape cast the spell a few more times, just to be sure there were no ill effects, before allowing Harry to have a go at it. As Snape watched Harry, he took note of how Harry would improve on the stance if there was any improvement to be gotten. And improvement there was. Harry's incantation was slightly different from Snape's, drawling a bit longer on the first syllable, drawing it out – and more clipped at the last two syllables. The wand-movement too was subtly different, slightly more exaggerated than Snape's had been – and the effect of these subtle tweaks was noticeable.

The bright burst of light was stronger, much stronger – and Snape had to squint in order not to be blinded himself. And the dummy almost started spinning off the ground, with the speed its twirls had gained. When Snape diagnosed Harry and the dummy, he was surprised to find that the stronger burst of light had not bothered Harry as it had him. And the dummy was indeed worse for wear. Had it been a living man, its thaumaural pathways would've become semi-permanently damaged! Indeed, the raw power this spell packed when cast perfectly by its creator left Snape
somewhat speechless – and it left him remembering the mastery that another had over his power and spells. Here were becoming clear parallels that Snape could no longer deny...

That same night, coincidentally – or rather not coincidentally, as there was no such thing in Snape's books when it concerned Albus, Dumbledore came on a surprise visit to Spinner's End. Harry had retired to bed a few hours earlier and Dumbledore had sent word an hour before that he would be arriving near midnight. As such, Snape and Philly were once again seated in the sitting room, a game of Wizard's Chess between them. When Albus finally rang the bell, which only sounded to Snape as he was the owner, Philly was on a winning streak and about to checkmate Snape's Queen. Sneering at his little House Elf, who really was sometimes too clever for her own good, Snape rose to let Dumbledore inside.

Offering Albus a seat in the armchair and asking Philly to prepare them a decent night's cap, Snape stood at the fireplace which Philly had lit for the occasional visit. “I would ask how you are, Severus, but something is visibly troubling you. Is young Harry giving you any trouble, perhaps?” Snape solemnly shook his head, holding his chin in a hand again as he stared into the dancing flames. “No, Albus. If anything, he has proven he is nothing like his father. There is no arrogance in the child, only an enormous drive to be recognized and praised for his work. And work hard he does. He grasps magical theory like only a few do – he will certainly have no trouble following the standard curriculum for practical magicks.”

As Philly came back in and handed over a glass of Firewhiskey, Snape downed it in one go, setting the empty glass on the mantel shelf of the fireplace. “It is his intuition that concerns me, Albus.” Snape turned to Albus, striding to sit down in the sofa, hands clasped between his knees. “Harry invented a spell today, Albus.” If Albus was shocked or surprised, the old man definitely didn't show any outward sign of it. Instead Albus' gaze remained level and locked with Snape's, who shared his memory of that morning with Albus over their mental link. As Albus finished reviewing the memory, he sank back into the arm chair, sipping from his glass of Billywig Bourbon – an electric blue spirit, vintage 1859. They remained seated thus for almost ten minutes, before Albus spoke again.

“You fear him to be alike Tom?” The question hung between them, fear of the truth in both their eyes as they considered the possible ramifications of the dreaded answer. “No. In many ways, they are similar – in so many ways that it seems they are destined to follow the selfsame path as ordained by destiny. Yet, I do not believe, not even for a moment, that Harry is a child that would so willingly lay aside his innocences like He had done by the time He was eleven.”

“If anything, I see in Harry someone who recognizes the unfair hand he has been dealt and stubbornly decided to ignore it. Yes, Potter is very much alike his late father in that regard – the world may damn him into a singular path, but Harry would very much subjugate that path to follow his desires. Not vice versa.” Snape stared at his hands, Albus at Snape, Philly from the kitchen door in rapt attention – and Harry from atop the stairs, once more. The bell the visitor had rung some while before had awoken him, though he knew not why. And once he had heard them talking, he had crept to the top of the stairs and listened, his curiosity stronger than his fear of being found-out.

He sat there, listening to Snape's fears and Dumbledore's speculations, his heart sinking with every word uttered – and by the time Dumbledore left, sometime around half past midnight, despondency had conquered over the euphoric feelings Harry had felt earlier in the day. Harry stole back into his room, crying bitter tears over Snape's fears that Harry could have it in him to become evil. Sure, Snape had still the belief Harry would know better, be like his mother, but the dark whispers of Harry's self-admonisions, the self-loathing and fear-fuelled despondacy shuttered his ability to think logically. As Harry lay there, crying alone, underneath his duvet-covers with tears staining
the mattress upon which he lay, shivering and frightened, Harry failed to notice the diminutive shape of Philly who was standing in the corner of his room.

Philly had watched the young Master once again creepings about at the tops of the stairs, listenings to masters Snape and Dumbly. And when Philly saws the tearses begins to forms in the young Masters eyeses, she felts sorries for him and wished to makes him feels betters. She watched him crawls backs into his bedses and hearsed the soft cries of a frightensed childs coming from belows those coverses.

She wents back downstairs, to fetches a glasses of milks for the young Master, when Master Snapes sawsed her and spokesed. “Philly, where are you going with that milk? Is Harry still awake?” Philly didn't knows how to answers withouts making Master Snapes sads as wells. “Young Master Harry hads a bad dreams, master Snapes. Philly thinksed he might wanteds a glasses of milks to feel betters. Philly also thinks maybes master Snapes should talks to young master Harry tomorrows. Maybe young master Harry needeses to talks about his bad dreamses.” Master Snapes watcheded Hilly with a deep stares, before waving his handes and letting Philly goes back up and help the young Master.

Snape watched Philly ascend the stairs, going to deliver the glass of milk to Harry. He watched that open door and the flickering light of Harry's room going on and spilling into the stairwell. He though back to Lucius' visit, and how Harry had been listening in then. Had Harry been listening in now? Snape didn't know – and considering the heavy discussion he had with Dumbledore and the fears he had allayed upon the old man, Snape couldn't begin to imagine how Harry would have felt had he listened in on that. Would the child feel betrayed? Angry?

Or would he have felt indifferent, used to people being afraid of him, of his power? Already Harry had been so independent, so used to not being able to rely on those who were suppposed to be his guardians. All at once, the decision had been made. Snape could not risk Harry feeling insecure with him as his guardian. Snape couldn't bear the thought of Lilly's son not being able or daring to trust him!

Snape drew his robe tighter, the cloak billowing behind him as he extinguished the fireplace and stalked upon the stairs. His countenance had a dark overlay and he looked ready to kill, as guilt began to worry him. Standing besides the door of Harry's room, he overheard Philly talking to the child. “Now, now, master Harry, sir. Master Snapes isn't angries or afeareds of yous. Master Snapes is worrieds about young master, he isses. Philly had saids to young master Harry how master Snapes hads beens taken cares off by Philly, hadn't Philly? Master Snapes is justs uncertains of how to cares for anothers buts himselfs, young master, sir. Believe Philly, master Harry – Philly knows bestes.”

Snape became still as a statue, his face instantly expressionless as he listened to Philly's attempts of calming a distraught Harry down. Suddenly he was faced with the very fact that, even though exemplary and brilliant in behaviour and studiousness, Harry was still a child. And didn't every child wish to be approved by their guardians and friends? Having his life upturned so drastically in such a short time, even as Harry handled it remarkably well, was bound to put enormous stress on a developing mind.

Snape softly entered Harry's bedroom, moving to sit down next to the child on the bed, laying a hand on those softly shaking and trembling shoulders covered by the duvet, quiet sobs as loud as silence that need not be heard. “You foolish brat. It seems I must take to locking your chambers
then, whenever I have visitors. I had dared hope you'd no longer eavesdrop on my conversations with those that visit here.”

Harry remained silent, safe for his quiet sobs, and Snape felt he could do no more than simply sitting there and keeping his hand on that shaking shoulder. Eventually, after a considerable while, Harry seemed to have fallen asleep. Patiently waiting for the boy to stir, Snape felt certain that he was now deeply asleep after a while. Drawing back the duvet, Snape took Harry's glasses and put them on the bedside table, casting a quick Reparo on them – as he now realized he had quite unnoticed the way those framed were held together by tape.

Snape had to cast it a few times, before he deigned the glasses presentable enough and he chastised himself for not having noticed sooner. They'd have to go to an optometrist for a new pair, he mused as he carefully tucked Harry in and cast a soft Cleaning Charm on the boy's tear-stricken face. Leaving the door slightly ajar, he commanded Philly to keep an eye on Harry whenever she could – he very well wanted to prevent a repeat from tonight. And tomorrow morning, Snape mused, they'd have to have a talk about all this, indeed.

The following morning saw Harry as having retreated back into himself, the progress of trust made in the past weeks all but completely undone. As they sat at the kitchen table, eating their breakfast, Philly kept heaping more and more on Harry's plate, chastising her young master that he didn't eat enough. “Young masters is growing, he is, so Philly has to make certain that young Master eats enoughs and varieds. Philly will not allow young Master Harry to go hungries, no Philly will not.”

It gladdened Snape, seeing the House Elf busying herself around Harry, knowing she was desperately trying to coax a timid child from the fortress of solitude it had build around himself in an effort of self-preservation. Philly was an exceptionally loyal House Elf, even if many Pure-bloods would comment that Snape allowed her too many liberties. But even when Philly seemed to contradict a direct order, Snape knew she always did so with her masters well-being in mind.

Harry, unable to refuse against Philly's rather intimidating demands, ate more than usual, only stopping when Philly stopped piling his plate with more bacon, eggs or beans. But before he could leave the table, Snape bade him to remain seated. “You have forgotten your Nutrients Potion. Please, do remember that I am trying to undo the damage those Muggles have done to you. Now, drink it – or resign yourself to the fact that you'd be the runt of the litter in the entire First Year at Hogwarts.” Harry thought it a low blow, Snape reminding him of his small physique, almost seeming to taunt him with it – but he stayed seated and drank the disgusting contents of the small vial he'd been given. He guessed it lucky that the potion was always so small – small blessings, Harry mused darkly.

“There is also still the matter of yesterday we need to discuss.” Harry's heart fell like a brick into his stomach at Snape's words – and for a few moments, Harry felt he was going to be sick. He closed his eyes and forced down the horrible nausea that was now plaguing his stomach. Snape remained silent, merely watching Harry regain his composure – and Harry began to feel even sicker when he realized Snape was expecting him to start the talking! The nausea worsened, but his stomach refused to heave into vomiting – something Harry began to curse as the seconds became a minute and the nausea still didn't lessen.

Snape simply watched, knowing the boy was feeling sick – and having anticipated this. The potion, which held a simple anti-nausicum alongside the Nutrient Potion, would prevent Harry from vomiting but not stop the nausea. It was a bit cruel, he knew, but this way Harry would learn that uncomfortable things must be faced lest they fester and become downright dangerous. After a full two minutes, Harry seemed to have become resigned to the nausea and lifted his eyes to meet Snape's. Sweat flushed the boy's face and he had gained a sickly palour, the nausea obviously
being quite bad. For a moment, Snape felt a pang of regret, but he pushed it aside for later – this was necessary right now. Apologies could be given afterwards – better to ask for forgiveness than permission, in this case.

“Are you afraid of me, Sir?” It was spoken almost with a sneer, sarcasm and fear tainting that last word. The child was terrified that Snape was gonna let him fall, leave him alone again against an uncaring world. Snape could very much relate to that – a softer approach was needed to break that particular fear. “No, Evans, I am not. I am impressed and somewhat apprehensive about your mastery of the basics that underline spell-casting and -creation, yes, but only because your degree of mastery over those at such a young age are seldom seen. And yes, as you might presume, the Dark Lord may very well have been the last person before you who had ever displayed a similar degree of skill with so little experience.”

Harry latched onto the nuances, his mind working fast through the implications. “Apprehensive, because it reminds you of Voldemort when he was young. Similar degree? You mean he was better than me, then?” Snape shook his head. “Apprehensive, because skill and power at such a young age happens so seldom it has become somewhat of a social taboo almost. People nowadays tend to believe that those with such power at your age are not to be trusted. A misconception fuelled, but not started, by the Dark Lord's own prodigious skill in his First Year at Hogwarts. Grindelwalt was the same, in a way, but so was Dumbledore. But in people's minds, they only see the Dark wizards that held such power at that age – and prejudice is quickly born from fear and misunderstanding.”

“And no, in this the Dark Lord was, surprisingly, not better than you, Evans. He was prodigious, yes, and eager to learn all he could – but even the Dark Lord did not have the gift of Spell Creation at such a young age. Indeed, Spell Creation, even though widely lauded and always encouraged to be taught to especially bright and smart students anywhere, is a rather limited gift that one has to be born with, to a degree. It is not unlike those who are Seers, or Metamorphagii – while both can be taught to a very limited degree to those who are not born with it, the real results can only be begotten by those who bear the Gift in their blood, Evans.”

“Consider yourself, in this instance, very lucky indeed. Very often, those who are not Gifted in Spell Creation end up dead as a result of their experimenting. In fact, I say we might need to visit Lord Lovegood – his wife died in such an accident, and even though she was not Gifted, she came as close as you could get. I think you may find his daughter a very... illuminating, personality to be around.” Snape drawled on, Harry keeping his eyes locked with Snape's the whole time. And Snape could feel the subtle pressure of another mind trying to intrude upon his.

“As for Dumbledore, I can not tell with perfect certainty what his fears and hopes are. Most certainly, his hope is that you will turn out to be the perfect child-soldier he needs – someone not afraid to stand up against the Dark Lord and oppose the Dark. And in turn, most assuredly, his fear is that you will turn out to be exactly like the Dark Lord and join sides with him. Dumbledore can not perceive of a world where in the balance between the Dark and Illume Arts is perfect – for he has seen too often what terrible powers the Dark Arts can cultivate – though I should note that, like knowledge, the Arts can be abused by either side and any person.”

“A Levitation Charm can bring about just as much destruction as a Bombardment Jinx or a Killing Curse. It all really depends on the intentions of the caster. So, no, I do not believe Dumbledore is correct in his assumptions that only the Illume Arts can bring balance. Nor am I concerned that you, Evans, would fall to the allure of the Dark Arts’ worst traits. You are not a selfish or brutal person, this much I can see and know. Now, tell me, Evans, why all this brought about such a display of fear and angst?” Snape queried, subtly pushing back against Harry's presence in his mind, making known to the child that he knew Harry had been trying to Legilimize Snape.
Harry was full of many fears, Snape learned, as the young boy stuttered his every fear and angst out in a torrent of confusion, exhaustion and snot-nosed gibbering. A box of tissues became a necessity after five minutes, and a strong kettle of tea was needed after ten. It seemed, surmised Snape, that once the floodgates were opened, the torrent of anxiety and fear that Harry had kept inside for the past years came without end. He probably would only stop once every malthought and self-doubt had been given a voice after years of mute festering. Philly, bless her so Snape applauded, did her best to support both her masters by supplying tea when desired and tissues when needed.

Harry, a child taken into an unloving family for eleven years, had been alone for ten of those eleven years, so he shared. Apparently Petunia had attempted to love Harry as her own for the first year, desperately trying to bring up some attachment to the orphaned child of her only sister. Snape had known of Petunia's jealousy of Lilly, of how Lilly became the star in the family while Petunia was left behind – ignored, jealous and angry. Yet sisterly love had not been completely extinguished between them – for Petunia, so said Harry as he had found out from Ms. Figgs, had mourned her sister somewhat.

Snape was evidently surprised, as he listened to this story with incredulity. But apparently Ms. Figgs had noticed how Petunia, caring now for her three-year-old firstborn and an one-year-old nephew, had seemed rather dejected and listless in those first three months after receiving Harry with the news of Lilly's demise. Vernon had apparently been absent for weeks on end in that period, something about potential company expansions overseas, leaving Petunia to call upon Ms. Figgs to help care for her two children now.

Snape sat back, later mulling over the fact that Petunia had only begun to actively dislike Harry's presence after Vernon had returned from his overseas trip and was in the house again daily.

And Harry gave vent to every grievance he had as a younger child, of how Dudley was carried on their shoulders and given everything he wanted – while Harry had to make do with Dudley's scraps, leftovers and second-hand clothes. How Dudley was taken somewhere new every weekend, while Harry was dumped with Ms. Figgs and her three-dozen oversized cats. And on and on the boy went.

Until he was seven, when Harry decided, from one day to the next, that he deserved those same things – and came by them through cunning and blackmail. How he began memorizing the routine of each member of his household, cataloguing away their dislikes, preferences and hidden desires.

How aunt Petunia coveted the Garden Gnome and would do anything to win it – even going so far as poisoning the rainwater tanks of several neighbours with a dangerously powerful herbicide, leading so the death of several cats and dogs, and the hospitalisation of one elderly neighbour. Nobody had ever found out who had done it, but Harry had known, had seen her do it, and had made sure she knew it.

How he had caught his uncle Vernon cheating with the next-door neighbour's wife on a day when aunt Petunia had taken Dudley to London for some new high-end clothes Dudley would wear only once for a meeting with some lady descended from some half-forgotten local Lord. How he had spotted Vernon leaving the house, knocking at the neighbour's door and go inside. How Harry had climbed the drainpipe, which held him quite well due his petite physique, and had seen Vernon going on with the woman. A camera, taken with him in a sense of foresight, took damning photographic evidence and was developed the next week – after which Harry had made a dozen copies made of each picture, and shown some copies to Vernon, who was there after very meek when Harry wished it so.
And Dudley, curious Dudley who had reached puberty aged nearly eleven due some hormonal dis-
balance and apparently had a liking for boys and girls, even if he leaned more towards the former.
Harry had caught him several times making out with peers of his own age, and twice with boys
who were nearly adults. Dudley liked it rough and apparently seemed to like being dominated.
How large had been the temptation to out Dudley, to take revenge for all those years of the brute
bashing Harry and being favoured over him – but here Harry had drawn a line. Only threats would
be made when Dudley stepped out of line. And even then, Harry secretly had never the wish to
actually follow up on those threats. Dudley, annoying and dangerous as he was, was still only a
child. He could still grow to become a decent person, though that chance would be small if he were
to remain with the Dursleys longer than until his eighteenth birthday.

Snape listened to it all, breath bated, attention riveted and quite surprised by the extent of Harry's
manipulations, fears, anxieties and desires. “By Merlin's Beard,” Snape though at the end of it all
when he had sent Harry to spend his time reading his lesson books until noon, “this child almost
redefines what it means to be a Slytherin.” Indeed, Snape almost chuckled without restraint
afterwards, for it seemed his small vipers better watch out the day Harry Potter arrives at Hogwarts.

Chapter End Notes

Edit (15/01/20); Changed some mentioned time-stamps, to streamline continuity and
narrative pace.
Chapter XVI

Chapter Summary

To confront inheritances, dark stories and heartbroken good people...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A day or two after their heartfelt conversation, during which Harry had shown a great deal of trust in Snape by exposing his fears to the Master of Potions, they received a letter from Gnalte, requesting an audience at Gringott's to discuss their preliminary findings. The next day, once more they took the lengthy bus-ride, though this time they stopped at the nearest public Floo-Point, two dozen kilometres from Cokeworth. They arrived in the Leaky Cauldron just before noon, having left Spinner's End just after ten o'clock. Greeting Tom with a courteous hello, they once more entered that whimsical road of enchantments and fancies that was Diagon Alley.

It was busier, much busier. The middle of August was swiftly approaching, and with it the departure of the Hogwarts Express in King's Cross came ever closer. Families were finally doing their shopping, hoping to forego the end-of-August school-shopping rushes. However, it seemed almost all families had this idea this year and thus the Alley was packed full. Meanwhile, Snape had told Harry all about the train and the journey it would make, and Harry couldn't wait to experience it. He had never taken a train-ride that long through countryside that wild and couldn't wait to see what they would pass on the way.

Many shops were having lucrative pre-school sales, with Flourish & Blotts advertising a “5 Books for 10 Galleons” sale – which put Harry quite in a mind to return his books and benefit from the sale, hadn't it been for the fact that most of his books were already scribbled with side-notes and questions for the school-year. There was so much Harry had yet to learn and he had trouble organizing his thoughts as to be able to wait until he finally was Hogwarts.

Each passing day had added a bit on the pile of anxiety that growing in the pit of his stomach, and each night saw the hour slowly shift later before he finally fell asleep. Had it not been for Snape's Occlumency and Legilimency lessons, Harry was quite certain he would've become quite an insomniac by now – which wouldn't have lasted long, he knew, as Snape was always ready to solve any ailments with his gifted brews.

Slowly they made their way to Gringott's, weaving past the T-junction which led to Knockturn Alley and the small passageway that connected with Diurn Alley. Finally they neared the Bank, just as a far-off clock chimed midday, and they were surprised to see an enormous group of Wizards in puce uniforms blocking entry into Gringott's. Cautiously they approached a lone officer, who stood loafing off a ways away from the scene, smoking a fag anxiously.

“Good morning, Sir. Can you tell us why entry to Gringott's has been barred?” Snape asked politely of the man, who turned his sour face to them. “Break-in, I'm afraid. Dreadful business – the goblins are furious. They've threatened to garotte their entire Security division, I heard.” Snape looked quite taken aback, eyes wide and wild, before he composed himself again. “A break-in at Gringott's? Are we quite sure?” The officer looked kind of stifled, obviously reluctant to give away too many details about it all. But after Snape locked eyes with him and quirked a brow, the man
seemed to relax minutely.

“Yeah, quite sure. One of the Goblins was doing a morning security check-point of Branch 3-A, and found Vault 713 ripped right open, its vault-door at the bottom of the railway-chasm. They’re furious because no alarms had gone off and because only Goblins are supposed to be able to open those doors.” Snape nodded his head throughout, his eyes growing sharp and dark, before he thanked the officer and took Harry away from the Bank.

As they made their way back to the Leaky Cauldron, Snape remained silent as death, disconcerting Harry somewhat. As they seated themselves in a sheltered alcove, out of sight yet once again able to see all the other patrons, Snape finally spoke. “It seems, Evans, that my fears were correct.” His eyes were downcast, focused on his clasped hands that lay in his lap. Snape’s long hair obscured the rest of his face and Harry began to feel somewhat anxious. Snape’s implication was obvious enough, their conversation from two days ago still fresh in Harry’s mind.

“So He is still alive, you think, sir?” Harry finally asked. Snape didn’t react, instead he raised his wand and began to cast an unfamiliar spell. Waving his wand in a spiralling wave, Snape’s deep voice ushered a half-heard spell. “Expecto Patronum.” All at once, the moment the last syllable was spoken, a silvery doe, translucent and luminous, appeared from the tip of Snape’s wand and stood besides him. Their alcove was angled to the rest of the room, so Harry was quite sure nobody but them could actually see this spectral figure or that Snape had cast it.

Raising a hand to the doe’s snout, Snape caressed its head and whispered in its ear – before sending it, prancing through the wall behind them. A minute passed, during which Tom delivered their lunch, with tea and a plate of biscuits to accompany their drinks as a simple dessert. Then, through a round window situated in the wall behind them, another silvery creature arrived – an enormous bird, looking somewhat of a cross between a peacock, a vulture and an eagle. It settled on the back of the empty chair at their table, and a disembodied voice spoke from it. “I was informed, earlier today. The package is safe, Severus – no need to worry. I expect your early arrival at Hogwarts in two weeks time.” Then, once the message had been delivered, it dissolved into the very air and was gone.

Snape finally relaxed a bit, straightening himself against the chair and looking up at Harry. Though still looking pensive and somewhat worried, the edge of fear and worry that had coloured his dark eyes seemed gone now. Then he cast that same spell again, this time speaking loud enough so Harry could hear him. “Please go ask if Xenophilius Lovegood is interested to come over for tea at the Leaky Cauldron in two hours time.” They doe, again, pranced off through the wall. Now Harry couldn’t contain his questions any more.

“What was that Charm, sir,” Snape sipped his tea, bidding Harry to do as well, before he spoke. “Astute observation to recognize it as a Charm, Evans. It is called the Patronus Charm, which summons a Patronus, which are also known as Life Guardians. They are generally used to protect a Wizard or Witch from Dark Non-Beings, by which we mean certain Dark creatures that are neither natural or supernatural. One of such beings are Dementors, horrible wraiths that thrive on the consumption of positive feelings and memories. Prolonged contact with a Dementor can cause permanent insanity, or something that Muggles call Locked-In Syndrome.”

“Dementors? They sound horrible.” Harry shuddered as he contemplated their description. “Yes, they are, Evans. Though they are controlled by the Ministry, or at least so says the Ministry itself, they can not be trusted. They care not about human foils or feelings, safe as a way to satisfy their eternal hunger. Currently all known Dementors are found on the Prison-island of Azkaban, where they guard the worst criminals of the Wizarding World.” Snape fell silent for a minute, visibly contemplating something. His expressions were multifold, from disgust to thoughtfulness to
reluctant acceptance, before he spoke again.

“It is also where your godfather is currently residing, by fault of his own.” Snape said in a voice that reflected a pain of sorts, as if he wasn't sure he should be telling Harry this at all. Harry went deathly silent at Snape's words, eyes wide and shocked. “My... My godfather?” Snape looked away with a pang of regret, the hurt and hope in Harry's voice too obvious. “Yes, your godfather. A fool by the name of Sirius Black. Be glad you don't know him, Evans, for his last actions as a free man finally revealed his wicked character and devious nature.” Snape spat, venom in every word and hatred underlining each syllable. Harry was taken aback by Snape's venomous outburst, wondering just what had happened between them to warrant such animosity?

“What do you mean, sir?” Snape continued to inspect some dirty spot on the wall, steadfast avoiding Harry's eyes even when he swept the room beyond the alcove with his gaze from moment to moment. Finally Snape spoke, with a soft voice that sounded hollow and defeated. “Sirius Black, after betraying your parents to the Dark Lord, went on the run and killed twelve Muggles in a single blow when he assassinated the Wizard Peter Pettigrew.” Harry was momentarily stunned, his mind working overtime and yet also frozen in surprise at what he heard. Someone betrayed his parents to Voldemort – and killed a dozen people when attempting to flee. Rage came boiling up inside him, but Harry suppressed it. He knew better than to make assumptions, even in clear-cut cases like this.

“Why did he do it?” He asked Snape, who looked uncertain as how to answer. “My question exactly, Evans. In my opinion, though I loathed both him and your father, it made no sense. You see, Sirius and James were inseparable during their shared time at Hogwarts. Sirius was always quite at odds with his Pureblood family and often sought refuge, and sanity, with your grandparents. Indeed, his last year of Hogwarts was spent in the custody of your grandparents, for Sirius' own parents had apparently disowned him. At the time, that small fact brought me quite some enjoyment, though I know I should've sympathized with him, knowing my own history with my parents...”

“In all their years at Hogwarts, they had each others backs, often at the expense of me. You see, they enjoyed tormenting me – or any other Slytherins really. Though not the cause of the extreme inter-House bias Slytherin experiences nowadays, they certainly exacerbated what was already present and made it so much more worse than it was. Still, you couldn't say they weren't absolutely loyal to one another – safe a single incident in their later years, which I was involved in all too well. So when the news broke that Sirius, who had been appointed as the Secretkeeper for your parent's location in the last year of the War, had apparently betrayed them to the Dark Lord, many people were shocked. Though there were the odd voices here and there who pointed to his Black heritage and proclaimed that was all the evidence they needed for verifying the veracity of this claim.”

“So when Black was confronted by Pettigrew, another friend of your parents and Black, he simply blew the mouse of a man up. No warnings, no threats – he simply blew him up, leaving a crater the size of a football field in a Muggle neighbourhood in the middle of a work-week. He was caught hours later by Aurors and sent to Azkaban within a week, a period of time extremely short – probably because of his central role in the death of your parents.”

Snape said all this with an air of nonchalance, though his eyes remained furtive and his hand were wringing each other in his lap. Harry noticed this all, even as he felt numb and cold at the revelation, finally, of how his parents died. Betrayed by their best friend, and killed because they opposed Voldemort. Never before in his life had such a pit of fear and numbness taken hold of him, as Harry stared at his tea which was rapidly growing cold.
Snape stretched out his hand, placing it on top of Harry's, who had balled his fists in quiet anger at the truth – anger at the actions of the man who left him an orphan. “Do not let anger control your thoughts about this, Evans, for I suspect the true circumstances of Black's supposed betrayal are much more nebulous than they appear. And do not forget, I told you how the Dark Lord was easily able to bewitch his opponents to follow his every command – very easily he could have done the same to Black, who would then not be responsible for his actions. Indeed, if Black was a double agent by force, why had he not come out and say so the moment the Dark Lord was vanquished? Many suspected Death Eaters did so, and were released after months of investigation because their dubious claim had some merit.”

Harry nodded his head, his mental picture of Voldemort having grown more darkly with this added information. A tyrant who had been able to bewitch hundreds, kill dozens and nearly succeeded in taking over Wizarding Britain – yet he had been defeated, through some unknown means, by him? It was incredulous and confusing, and Harry felt he didn't want any part of it. He just wanted to be left in peace, to learn about magic and to have a normal life.

As they sat drinking their tea after finishing their lunch, Harry digesting this unceremonious dump of lore into his lap by Snape, they were eventually joined by a most strange companion. Approaching their table, sometime around two o'clock in the afternoon, was a tall man, dressed in a rainbow of colour. Wearing a cream-white cloak over his colourful shirt and dark green trousers, the man had entered the Leaky Cauldron with an air of hazed confusion and uncertainty, his gaze raking across the whole room before landing on their company. Followed by a young girl, probably about Harry's age and carrying that same hazy gaze in her eyes, he greeted Snape with a vigorous handshake.

“Wonderful noon, Severus, wouldn't you say? Why, I was delighted to meet your most brilliant Philly when I did, just as I was working on my recreation of Rowena's Diadem. She had the most wonderful suggestion when I tasked her to help me with it for a moment, implying that perhaps I ought to use Unicorn hair to fasten the ornaments to the diadem. How most wonderful a suggestion, indeed. I must beg you her company again sometime, so I might finally be able to finish it.” The stranger drawled, Harry immediately lost by whatever he was talking about. Diadems? Ornaments? Unicorn hairs? He couldn't even imagine how this fitted together, honestly.

Snape pulled back his hand from the vice-like iron grip the stranger had it in, wiping it surreptitiously on his robes before returning the greeting. “Good morning, Xenophilius. I am glad to find you in such a good mood. I hope your daughter is as good in spirit as you, today?” The girl skipped around her father, giving Snape a small curtsy, her radish ear-rings bobbing along as she curtsied. “Hello, professor. Thank you for inviting us for tea. Daddy had a horrible case of Wrackspurts sabotaging his creative flow, sir.”

Harry was quite stumped by their airy demeanour and aloof presence, though he could see – no, rather he could sense, that the girl was more clever than she seemed. The way she spoke to Snape, he could see how Snape immediately deflated and became a tad more relaxed with their presence. Which seemed odd, because why would Snape be tense around someone he personally invited for tea? True, it probably was to discuss Harry's seeming talent of spell-crafting, but still...

The pair sat down at their table, Snape signalling for Tom to come take their orders. “Any preferences of beverage, Xenophilius?” Snape politely asked them, as Tom drew nearer. “Ah, yes, hmmm, a simple cold Butterbeer would be quite refreshing and hit the spot for me, yes, certainly. As for you, Luna, my dear, what would you like?” Luna tapped her cheek a few times, eyes cast upwards as if in deep thought. “I would like some Fireseed Tea, I think, daddy. Can I have the Butterbeer cork, sir?” She answered to Xenophilius, and asked Tom, who looked at her with a simple smile and nodded happily. “Of course, Luna, I'll bring you the ones I saved since last time.
you were here.” Tom took their orders, gave Luna playful wink with a smile beyond his wild moustache, and returned to the counter.

“Why do you want the corks?” Harry couldn't help himself, but asking – curiosity most definitely piqued by this most strange pair of father and daughter. Luna, seemingly for the first time, took notice of Harry, her eyes meeting his, briefly flickering to his forehead and smiling serenely then. “Oh, you're Harry Potter. It’s nice to meet you, though I think you don't find it nice to meet us, do you? That's okay, many people don't like us. They're afraid, you see, that we're right and they're wrong?” Harry blinked a few times, confusion apparently a steady companion to this family. “Afraid of what? Right about what? I don't understand.”

Luna giggled behind her hands, her eyes screwed up in laughter. “We know things, and people don't want those things to be true, you see, silly. Things like wrackspurts, nargles, heliopath, lumpy plimps, ...” Snape rolled his eyes at her speaking, locking eyes with Harry for a brief moment. “Please, miss Lovegood, refrain from filling my young charge's head with such unproven nonsense. I very much would like his barely-begun studies to remain unbiased and untainted by fairy-tales and myths. The day you discover these outrageously sounding creatures and can prove their existence, please, by all means, instruct Evans then. Now, however, do not.”

Luna, unphased by Snape's retort and snippy sneer, just went on explaining. “And I need the corks for my necklace, you know, to keep away the Nargles. If I don't keep them away, they'll steal my stuff again and hide it wherever they can. They keep doing that, you know, I have to begin each day with finding my clothes – they like to stuff them up the chimney, you know.” Harry, knowing better than let his mouth drop open and staring at her, settles for keeping his tongue tied and lips sealed, only muttering a simple response. “Okay, yeah, sure – I guess.” Luna giggled again at his answer, turning away from them and eyes locked with something in the chandelier that was suspended above the central chamber of the pub. Harry wanted to look as well, wanting to see what she was interested in, but Snape brought his attention back to Xenophilius.

“I called you here, Xenophilius, to help my young charge explain the dangers and merits of spell-crafting.” Snape drawled. Xenophilius' face instantly fell, his aloof smile gone with the wind and a hard edge suddenly in his eyes. “Ah, well, ahem, sorry to disappoint, Severus, but this I very much do not want to discuss. Yes, no, not at all. You, uh, will have to find someone else, most definitely. I can not talk about her, not now, not yet.” And then he fell silent, though Luna, her eyes flickering to her father when Snape had spoken, remained seemingly relaxed – or at least not dejected and depressed. It seemed to Harry that the word sadness had no longer a place with her – incidentally or purposefully...

“Of course, Xenophilius, I understand. However, you accepted her drive to create, knowing full well the possible consequences and dangers. Now, young Evans here has incidentally created his first unique spell only a few days ago.” As Snape spoke, this seemed to perk up Xenophilius, who now turned to Harry with a mischievous glint of curiosity in his eyes. “Ah, Mr Potter, so you have the Gift of Spell-crafting, have you? That definitely changes things...” Xenophilius straightened, the hazy look in his eyes gone to be replaced by a sharp cold steel glint. All at once, he seemed evermore alert than Harry thought possible, causing him to inch perceptibly closer to Snape.

“My beautiful Pandora, heavens bless her Soul, never had the Gift, even as she longed for years to nurture her talents into a replacement of sorts. Yes, she had the talent, Mr Potter, to see the Arcane fabric of magicks and weave it together into new and novel forms. Yes, she came close to having the Gift and through sheer effort of will and wish, she too became a Weaver, Mr Potter, as you may, some day, become.”

Xenophilius spoke clearly, his every syllable crystal, every intonation perfect. It was like the man
had been replaced by another, as if his mind had suddenly become focussed into a clear understanding of... something. Harry found it altogether curious, and thought whatever it was, it definitely went way over his head to fully understand.

“Very well,“ Xenophilius suddenly erupted, standing straight up and shooting from his chair, actually knocking it to the floor, “I shall help him, Severus. To see Pandora's wish come true, even if not for her, for someone in her name!” He turned to his daughter, who was dreamily nodding her head about – but whose eyes had gained that same sharp edge and hadn't left her father out of sight for even a moment. “Luna, dear, take Harry for a stroll through Diagon, would you? I have to pop back home for a few. I'll be back by the hour. Stay safe, okay?”

At this, he actually pinched Luna's cheek and gave her a look filled with, what Harry assumed to be, parental love. Seeing this small interaction of pure honesty and care between parent and child, a pang of sadness and jealousy struck Harry's heart. Then Xenophilius left in a whirl of his crème robes and was gone from sight before Harry could follow his avenue of exit from the Leaky Cauldron.

Snape, turning now to face both Harry and Luna, addressed them. “Miss Lovegood, Evans, you have leave to wander through Diagon Alley. Evans, you may purchase a few things, if they strike your interest – but please, refrain from buying odious amounts of confectionery. I don't think I could stand the enduring horror of children consuming those horrible treats, with all the accompanying sounds and sights.” Handing over a small pouch to Harry, who counted about two dozen Knutts and ten Sickles in it, Snape waved a hand lazily, gesturing them off into the Alley.

Once they left the Leaky Cauldron together, Harry having the feeling that Snape would know where they were, no matter what, Luna grabbed Harry's hand and dragged him off into the wonder that was Diagon Alley, into the novelty that still amazed Harry's Muggle sensibilities...

Chapter End Notes

Gringott's has three main-branches, meaning it has three main mining-shafts down which it has its various Vaults. I have actually even drawn out a stylized map of this, dividing each main-shaft into three sub-branches, with each main-shaft able to hold almost 1,000 Vaults total. Branch 3A is in the same main-shaft as Harry's Vault is.

I imagined that Xenophilius' extreme aloofness was an obvious consequence of Pandora's rather gruesome death at the hands of a rather spectacularly failed attempt at crafting a new spell.

Weavers are those Witches and Wizards who are Gifted with the ability to intuitively sense the flow of magic, intent and ritual. It allows them to Weave these three together into functional and stable spells. Though the Gift cannot be taught to those who lack it, a similacrumb of sorts can be nurtured in them, allowing them to hone their sense into a similar form of intuition. However, as Pandora Lovegood's case shows, this is not a replacement for the true Gift - and all those dangers associated with Giftless Weaving will always remain.

I have edited some of the earlier chapters (just some minor tweaks, here and there) to streamline the exact timeline I had written down. I had lost all track of the dates and wasn't sure when this chapter was set. My gutfeeling told me it was much later,
already near the end of August - but going back and checking the earlier dates and
times mentioned, it turned out the second week of August (August 10th to be exact). It
also helped to determine a standard traveltime between Diagon Alley and Spinner's
End, all things considered. I really made this so much harder on myself than I needed
to, to be honest.
Luna dragged Harry from shop to shop, her wide dreamy eyes constantly flicking from subject to subject, each little thing of wonder claiming her attention and curiosity. As she pulled Harry into several shops he hadn't entered yet, she pointed out dozens of interesting things, telling a little bit about each and every thing she explored with him. Whether it was true or not, or somewhere in-between, Harry found he didn't care after about fifteen minutes. All he saw was that, not very much unlike him, Luna was filled with a wondrous sense of delight about the myriad things that made up their wizarding world.

She explained him about familiars, how one could bond with them and make each other part of one another. How the greatest wizards and witches could look through the eyes of their owl and cat familiars, and even command them from afar without a fault. How an owl familiar made one always known true north to lie, or make one see better in the dark. How cats gave one honed senses of sight and sound, and so on, and so on... She rattled for dozens of species that way for half an hour, before something new dragged her to another spot.

They visited Eeylops – where Harry once more thanked the manager for Hedwig, and quickly passed through Flourish & Blotts, where Harry thanked the store-clerk for his previous and intermittent purchases and promising his continual patronage for the foreseeable future. They ducked into apothecaries, flew through small second-hand shops, peered into the displays of the shops bordering the doorway into Knockturn Alley. Luna showed him so much more than he would've seen otherwise, and by the time they returned to the Leaky Cauldron almost two hours later, they found Snape and Xenophilius in deep conversation.

They ordered a few fizzy drinks at the counter and then went to join their parents at the table. And as Harry sat down, he realized that, for the first time ever, he actually considered a grown-up as his parent of sorts. It quieted him quite suddenly and Snape was quick to notice, looking at Harry with a look that promised a personal conversation later on. Just as Snape and Lovegood were heatedly discussing a potential contact with a Gifted Spell-crafter for Harry to learn from somewhere down the line, a most strange bird suddenly swooped down from the rafters above, apparently having just flown in through some owl-window high above.

It looked like a sad mottled vulture of sorts, its green-grey plumage drooping as if perpetually wet and with great round eyes that shone almost a luminous orange, with such a wet look that it seemed tears were always at the brink of rolling down its cheeks. It let out a mournful cry that tagged at some sad memories deep down in Harry's heart and held out one of its legs, to which was bound a vellum envelope.

“An Augurey, dad! Look at how beautiful its feathers are!” Luna cried, gently letting her hand near the bird, who studied it for a few seconds and then let her stroke its feathers. She wasn't wrong, Harry thought, as it was quite a beautiful bird once you looked past its dreary exterior. “Did you
know, Harry, that Augureys can sense when rain is coming? It's one of the reasons their feathers also repel any liquids – even if they always look wet, silly things.” Luna shared happily, as the bird was now actually preening under her fingers and budding against her hand with its head. Snape, in the meanwhile, had begun reading the letter, quickly scanning it through before folding it away into his robes.

“It seems that the preliminary investigation at Gringotts has been concluded and the bank is now again open for the public. Let us agree upon a date for another meeting, Xenophilius, before we departs. I am sure that young Evans and your daughter would like to meet up once more before the school-year temporarily keeps them apart.” The elder Lovegood heartily agreed, and after a dozen minutes, Harry and Snape left the Leaky Cauldron and headed for Gringotts.

As they neared the entrance of the bank, the first thing they noticed was the heightened presence of the officers in their puce uniforms. There were more of them now, spread throughout the plaza in front the Bank. Some standing in the shadowed corners of shopfronts, others blatantly obvious at street-corners and near street-signs. More Goblins lined the entrance now too, with four ferocious looking Goblins in armour lining the steps leading up to the front doors. As they entered the Bank, a Goblin held them up, asking for a wand-inspection and a proof of identity. Handing over both their wands, and when again asked for a proof of identity, Snape turned to Harry, apologized softly and pulled away Harry's fringe to expose the lightning-shaped mark on his forehead.

The Goblin, apparently satisfied with this proof, then inspected the wands and crooked a very curious brow as he noticed Harry's wand now. Giving back Snape's wand after a second or two, the creature held Harry's wand against the light of the chandelier hanging overhead, posing it various ways and even giving it a simple flick. When that little flick suddenly took out a sizeable chunk from a nearby pillar and cast fiery sparks all around the Goblin, Harry almost laughed at the Goblin's little dance to put out the cinders. Composing itself and giving it a last look, the guard returned the wand to Harry. “Welcome to Gringotts, Master Loucetios.” The Goblin stepped aside, permitting them entry.

“What was that about, sir?” Harry asked Snape quietly, as they passed by the Goblin and stepped into the foyer of Gringotts. “Well, Evans, it seems that the Goblins will now know of your unique wand, and at least this one already has given you a most fitting name for being its master – or so I think.” Snape gave a barely-there chuckle, patting Harry on the shoulder as they neared the front desk. Snape drew up to his full height, his head barely appearing above the tablet of the desk as he spoke to the Goblin seated at it. “Master Snape and Mr Potter, here to see Master Gnalte.”

All Harry saw was a large nose poking out over the edge of the desk, as the Goblin addressed Snape. “Good afternoon. My colleague shall escort you to Gnalte's office, sir.” Snape gave a small bow. “May your gold flow, Master Goblin.” Snape spoke politely. “And may you bath in your enemy's blood, Master Snape.” A short, sharp cry in some nonsense language was uttered to a Goblin near the back of the room, who jumped into alertness and huffed over to the pair. “Please follow me, gentlemen.” Once more they were escorted to the side-door and through the room of parchments, where the stacks had visible moved and altered in many ways. Led into Gnalte's office, it turned out he was already waiting for them.

“Greetings, gentlemen. Excuses for the belated appointment – some dreadful business I'm afraid.” Gnalte seemed about ready to leave his excuses at that, had Snape not spoken up against him. “Yes, we heard. Vault 713, Branch 3A, it was, I believe?” Gnalte immediately changed, his eyes sharp and dangerous as he spoke with a sharp tongue. “And how would you know of this, Master Snape? Must I believe you the culprit, or part of the crew responsible for this most heinous act?!” Gnalte was almost screeching now, his eloquent and fluent English cracking and breaking, as strange phonemes began worming their way between and into the words.
“For 516 years, Gringotts has been unbreached! Unbreached! Every manner of Curse and Charm and Jinx and Hex employed to safeguard our Vaults, our Crypts, our Citadels! And yet! And yet- Yet some self-serving Wizard, uncaring for our faultless loyalty to our clientele, sneering at our Oath, breaks in! Breaks in and dares to steal from us! Oh, if only he had! Then we'd have him! Oh, the many – Bel'frigk PfHull-pash Nah Veagh 'Rus na Volh!" Gnalte seemed to completely lose it, ranting and raving, spitting and snapping, for a solid five minutes – before his anger was spent and tiredness replaced it.

He sank into his chair, his hands over his eyes as he heaved a sigh so deep that Harry was surprised it could've come from such a small figure. Weariness and exhaustion seemed to dominate the mood now, as Snape silently rose, took up a glass, filled it with a silent Aquamenti and handed it over to the bereaved Gnalte. Silently accepting it, Gnalte took a few minutes to compose himself, straightening his uniform and clearing his throat a few times.

“Apologies, Master Snape, for that heinous baseless accusation. I can well imagine how the rumour mill grinds already with the sparse information that has been leaked to the tabloid press and the costumers present during the investigation. My sincerest apologies – though as a representative of Gringotts, I would wish to know where you got this information, so that we may protect against any future information leaking out through the same avenue. Now, more than ever, Gringotts is very concerned about the image it projects to the Wizarding World, with this whole break-in and all.” Gnalte's apologetic tones seemed sincere, and Snape seemed to think so too, Harry remarked, as the older man politely answered to Gnalte's query.

“Ah, yes, of course it would be a Ministry agent blabbing beyond his pay-grade and rank. Rest assured, Master Snape, punitive actions will be taken against this poor gentleman. He will soon learn to take his Oath of Confidentiality much more serious in the future of his career, if he's left with a career at all.” Gnalte replied with an evil sneer on his lips, giving Snape a small bow with a tip of his head. Then, as he set before the pair two cups of tea and a few biscuits, Gnalte seated himself again, and waved over a floating stack of scrolls.

“Our preliminary investigation into the various inheritances you are owed, Mr Potter, is going well. As requested during your last visit, we have here a list of the families still extant, annotated with their affiliations during the War and whether they were suspected of being under the Imperius Curse or not. On the whole, the list of extant families is unfortunately very short, less than thirty total. And accommodating for their potential alliance with Voldemort, just bare of seven are left at all that are certainly against any of the Dark Lord's machinations. We're sure that Master Snape will be able to help you in making a decision of whether or not to return the inheritances to their relative families and clans.”

Harry took the list Gnalte handed over to him, rolling out the scroll and starting to read through the names on it. It was not too long a list, comparatively, but it held some interesting information indeed. Names, lineages, affiliations, deeds, titles, histories, … - all were there, clear and succinct, though confusing. Titles of earls, viscount, barons, baronets, … flew out of the paper at Harry's befuddled mind as he tried to make some mental calculations of the total values. But with numbers ranging from thousands of Knutts to ten-thousands of Galleons, he soon lost all track.

Properties all across England seemed to be rightfully his, if claimed in his name. But not only in England! There was France, the Isle of Iona, Scotland, … All the properties and titles held in the names of Death-eaters, gifted to Voldemort. And all those titles and names, as conquered from his enemies by Voldemort or his minions. It was simply too much. Harry looked up at Gnalte, exasperation plainly obvious upon his face as the Goblin began to chuckle. “Yes, Mr Potter, it is all quite a lot, is it not? Now, we've only given the necessary essentials to make a preliminary decision, of course. We could use our archives to give you whole books for each family
separately.” Harry shuddered at the thought – this was already too much to process calmly. “Now, hold on – Prince of the North-Sea Empire?! Are you serious?!”

At this, Snape took the scroll from Harry's hands and started reading through it himself. “Well, well, Nott, who would've thought? It seems the Notts are descended from King Cnut the Great – who would've thought, indeed. Certainly royalty has taken a plunge to the worse.” Snape drawled with a sneer on his face, quickly scanning the rest of the scroll before handing it back over to Harry. “Best to gift back the Prewett fortune to the Weasleys, Evans, as their current financial status is certainly dire – bedrock has a higher standing than they do, at the moment. Their gratitude would certainly be... eternal, if played right. In the least, you would have the kindness of Molly Weasley on your side afterwards – which is no small reward, Evans, believe me.”

Gnalte nodded his head in agreement with Snape, chuckling under his breath as he did so. “True, very true – Molly Blodwyn Prewett is a force to be reckoned with, indeed, both for better and for worse. No more loyal ally, no more vengeful nemesis. We wager it's the Scottish and Welsh blood – most definitely Pictish.” The Goblin spoke softly, sipping his water again. “Well, now, Mr Potter, we have done our research, given you your list. Now it's up to you how to handle this information. Will you claim all these inheritances – or will you only claim those which were bequeathed to the Dark Lord willingly? It's your choice...”

In Harry's opinion, the choice was simple, if daunting. Accepting it – and all the consequences it would bring, it would change his life even more. Could he handle it? Could he handle standing out even more from his peers? A thousand questions, fears, anxieties, … were fogging up his mind. He couldn't think – couldn't... So much to keep track, so many things to remember – what to do next, how to plan the next step... He couldn't keep track of it, he – the room is warm, why is it so warm? Perhaps he should drink something – yeah, water sounds good. He looked down at his hand, which he had raised, reaching for a glass of water. It was trembling – he was trembling. Why? What was wrong? He never trembled, he knew better than to tremble, to show fear...

Severus saw the rising panic in Harry's eyes, could feel the turmoil raging in the boy's mind, even without using Legilimency. He was certain he would need to intervene, make clear to Harry that he was allowed to postpone big decisions and decide them with the help of an adult. And just as he was about to interject on Harry's behalf, he saw the dark edge appear in the boy's eyes – saw the trembling hand still instantly and slowly ball into a fist, lowering to Harry's lap. “Give back to those who fought against Him what was taken from them. As for all the others, I want you to bequeath it all to me – down to the last Knutt.” And if Severus had learned anything in this past month, it was that this was most definitely not Harry's usual demeanour.

The anxiety was gone, the fear suppressed – a quiet storm now ruled, centred around his own losses, what had been taken from Harry by Him. His parents, their love, a chance for a normal life... A normal life – no, that was no longer for him. Harry instantly realized it and, possible for the first time in his young life, resigned himself to it. Where he had always fought, tooth and nail, against things being decided for him when he could make the choice – this was it. He could be nobody else, but the Boy-Who-Lived. Voldemort made certain of that – and hey, Harry thought, why not get something in return for a change? Yes, the choice was simple, they thought.

“I accept all the Inheritances belonging to those who'd been Voldemort's allies and followers. Their fortunes, properties, titles, and Wizengamot seats. All of it.” The words were spoken in a cold voice, with a hint of bitterness tinging the edges, Snape remarked as he listened to Harry positively affirm Gnalte's question. No use debating the child, he thought darkly, let him have a say in his future at least...

Gnalte simply nodded, bending to rummage in his desk-drawers. Pulling out a small box, he pulled
out a feather very similar to the one they'd used to perform the genealogy test. Gnalte tapped on the
scroll, of which the text subtly changed. Harry quietly read it through, Snape carefully observing
his every action, wary of the strange aura he had felt from his young charge mere moments ago.
The text was a simple contract, accepting the inheritances and re-directing some back to their
rightful owners. Harry handed it over to Snape, who studied it minutely for almost half an hour,
rereading it multiple times. Finally convinced it held no dubious minutia, Snape gave it back to
Harry.

Dipping the feather in a provided ink-well, Harry signed his name on the several spots as indicated
by Gnalte. Finally, Gnalte gestured to Snape, bidding him to sign as well, seeing how he was the
legal guardian of Harry for the time being. Snape gave each signature a exaggerated flourish, intent
on enjoying this at least. With this, Harry would have a head-start and some form of recompense
for his past, at last. The moment Snape put down the final stroke, Gnalte took back the scroll and
began signing it as well. Then, sifting some fine sand over the vellum and spreading it around
gently – before dipping the vellum over a small tray to catch the sand, Gnalte declared the
inheritance complete.

“Thank you for your patronage, Mr Potter. We shall handle the property rights for now, as well as
a review of all the titles you are now eligible for. The properties will be finished first, obviously,
and you can expect a full list by the end of October, together with all the Keys and Keystones to be
collected here somewhere over the Christmas holidays at your leisure. As for your Wizengamot
seats, a Representative of ours will contact you about them near the end of September I expect.
Well, as for the rest of your inheritances, they will be expected to be fully researched halfway
through September. Expect another appointment then – of course, that will be a mere formality, as
you already inherited them, of course.”

Gnalte shook Harry's hand, a victorious grin on his face and a gleeful spark in his eyes. “Oh, you're
going to take this world by storm, Mr Potter – we at Gringotts are counting on you remembering
who helped you. We shall see each other again, indeed.” Gnalte then led them out of his office and
back to the Foyer. As they exited, another Goblin momentarily halted them. “Mr Potter, please,
before you leave, do you wish to relocate the contents of all inherited Vaults to the Potter Vault?”
Harry pondered for a moment, turning to Snape as if for answer. And when Snape merely
shrugged, clearly intent on Harry deciding what to do with his new money, he turned back to the
Goblin.

“No, place it in the Peverell Vault for now. Later on, move all artefacts into the Potter Vault’s
secondary rooms – I'll inspect it later on, I think. As for gems and precious minerals not part of set-
pieces of jewellery, you can add them to the Potter Vault primary room. Thank you for asking, sir.”
Harry gave a small bow, hand to his heart as he spoke a short sentence in Gobbledygook. He had
been practising it for a while now, the book on Goblin customs and culture being a tremendous
help indeed. And it seemed as Harry had done well, as the Goblin stood as if frozen – and the other
Goblins murmur had softened audibly. “Why, of course, Mr Potter. And bravo, sir, on your
intonation. Well done.” The Goblin shook Harry's hand politely, sending him and Snape on their
way, back into Diagon Alley.

Slowly, they made their way over to the Leaky Cauldron, Harry pensive and lost in thoughts, while
Snape made a few stops at the local apothecaries. Making a few purchases, and otherwise just
chatting with the store-clerks and managers, Snape kept a watchful eye on Harry's mood – which
didn't seem to worsen, but also didn't lighten up. After an hour or two, Snape guided Harry towards
Fortescue's Parlour. Maybe some sweets would pull the child from his sulking mood, even if Snape
was not one for sweets. Florean, the manager, quickly took down their orders, after giving them a
hearty welcome to his establishment. Harry ordered a chocolate and raspberry slurry, flavoured
with chopped hazelnuts, while Snape ordered a simple single-scoop vanilla. Two Sickles for two
orders – ridiculously expensive, Snape muttered to himself as he observed Harry enjoying the sweet.

“Well, at least this proves you are very much a normal child.” Snape softly drawled to Harry as the child was close to finishing his bowl of ice cream. And when that earned him a very soft smile and a genuine spark in Harry's eyes, Snape knew he would be just fine. Shaken up and a bit out of his depth, but he would be fine in the end. “Can't help liking ice cream, okay?” Harry muttered mid-scoop, as he enjoyed the flavour of the scoop. Sure, Harry felt better now that he had some time to think things through, but he still felt a bit sick about all of this. He accepted it all, yes, but that still didn't mean he had to like it.

When they finally arrived back at Spinner's End by the end of the day, Harry was knackered and dead-tired. He shed his shoes, hung up his cloak and made directly for his bed. Even Snape's admonishments of him needing to eat before bed didn't slow him – he reasoned he'd rather take any possible punishment tomorrow, rather than stay up even one more hour. He was more than ready to close the story of the day's events and accept uneasy sleep for the night. The moment he pulled the duvet over his covers and closed his eyes, it was like someone knocked him out cold – and the next morning dawned before even a moment had passed for him. And the first thing he thought was how less than three weeks from then, he would finally be at Hogwarts!

Following is the information on the scroll Harry received from Gnalte;

Family Bones (Norman, 11th Century - 20th Century); Extant matrilinealy, to Amelia Susan Bones & Susan Bones. Extinct patrilinealy, last male heir Edgar Bones (died 1981). Vault 34, valued at 91 Galleons, 127 Sickles, 2387 Knutts. Properties are; Manor de Bohun (Coutances-sur-le-Vire, Cotentin Peninsula, Normandy, France), St. Anne Hill Castle (Midhurst, West Sussex, England), Coudreye House (Midhurst, West Sussex, England), Easebourne Priory (Easebourne, West Sussex, England), Battle Abbey (Battle, East Sussex, England). Titles held are; First Viscount Montague (by Grace of Queen Mary & King Philip of Spain, disused, eligible for renewal), Earl of Hereford (disused, eligible for renewal), Earl of Essex (disused, eligible for renewal), Earl of Newhampton (disused, eligible for renewal). Allied to the Order of the Phoenix, anti-Voldemort.


Clan Fenwick (Anglo-Saxon, 13th Century - 20th Century); Extant patrilinealy, to Mervyn Fenwick & Marcus Fenwick. Vault 599, valued at 2,000 Galleons. Properties are; Fenwick Tower (Matfen, Northumberland, England), Wallington Hall (Morpeth, Northumberland, England). Titles held are; Baronet (disused since 1697, eligible for renewal). Allied to the Order of the Phoenix, anti-Voldemort.

House Meadowes (Anglo-Saxon, 11th Century - 20th Century); Extinct matrilinealy, last female heir Dorcas Meadowes (died 1981). Extant patrilinealy, to Muggles in various countries. Vault 515, valued at 170 Galleons. Properties are; Witnesham Hall (Witnesham, Suffolk, England), Thoresby Hall (Ollerton, Notthinghamshire, England). Titles held are; Earl Manvers (disused, eligible for renewal), First Viscount Newark (disused, eligible for renewal), Baron Pierrepont (disused, eligible for renewal), Viscount Newark (disused, eligible for renewal). Allied to the Order of the Phoenix, anti-Voldemort.

Clan McKinnon (Pictish, 4th Century - 20th Century); Extinct matrilinealy, last female heir
Marlene McKinnon (died 1981). Extant patrilinealy, to Muggles in various countries. Vault 667, valued at 17,000 Galleons. Properties are; Iona Abbey (Isle of Iona, Inner Hebrides, Scotland), Strathardle Estate (currently unrecognised by Muggle authority, eligible for lawful inheritance per Muggle & Wand-bearer standards(!)). Titles held are; Knight Banneret (disused, eligible for renewal), MacKinnon Tartans (two currently extant, one actively used, one inactive).


House Black (Anglo-Saxon, 5th Century - 20th Century); Extant matrilinealy, to Bellatrix Lestrange née Black & Narcissa Malfoy née Black. Extant patrilinealy, to Sirius Black III. Vault 711, valued at 5,000 Galleons. Allied to both sides; Matrilinealy to the Dark Lord, patrilinealy to the Order of the Phoenix (formerly, suspected of having defected to the Dark Lord circa 1980-1981. Internal reviews suggest this to be questionable at worst, laughable at best – further investigations by Wand-Bearers pending, if ever to start at all). Properties are; Grimmauld Place 12 (Grimmauld Place, Islington, London, England)

House Avery (Norman, 13th Century - 20th Century); Extant patrilinealy, to Francis Avery Jr. Vault 1021, valued at 7321 Galleons, 751 Sickles, 59 Knutts. Properties are; Château Évreux (Évreux, Normandy, France), Castello Aubri (Pamplona, Navarre, Spain). Titles held are; Count of Évreux (disused, eligible for renewal), Prince of Navarre (discontinued, non-eligible for renewal).

Clan Carrow (Celtic, pre-4th Century - 20th Century); Extant patrilinealy, to Amycus Carrow. Extant matrilinealy, to Alecto Carrow & Flora Carrow & Hestia Carrow. Vault 515, valued at 2,700 Galleons. Properties are; Carew Castle (Carew, Pembrokeshire, Wales), Carew Mill (Carew, Pembrokeshire, Wales). Allied to the Dark Lord, Enemies to the Order of the Phoenix.

Family Dolohov (Russian, 18th Century - 20th Century); Extant patrilinealy, to Antonin Dolohov. Allied to the Dark Lord, Enemies to the Order of the Phoenix. Vault 98, valued at 113 Galleons, 17 Sickles, 5 Knutts.


Family Mulciber (Italian, pre-18th Century - 20th Century); Extant patrilinealy, to Alexis Mulciber. Vault 401, valued at 15 Galleons, 3 Sickles, 9 Knutts. Allied to the Dark Lord, Enemies of the Order of the Phoenix.

House Nott (Scandinavian-Anglo-Saxon, pre-7th Century - 20th Century); Extant patrilinealy, to Theodore Nott. Vault 983, valued at 12,325 Galleons, 1,700 Sickles, 599 Knutts. Properties held are; Nott Manor (Derbyshire, England). Titles held are; Prince of the North-Sea Empire (discontinued, non-eligible for renewal). Allied to the Dark Lord, Enemies of the Order of the Phoenix.

Family Pyrites (Italian, pre-18th Century - 20th Century); Extant patrilinealy, to Alonzo Pyrites. Vault 101, valued at 79 Galleons. Allied to the Dark Lord, Enemies of the Order of the Phoenix.

House Rosier (Savoy, pre-11th Century - 20th Century); Extant matrilinealy, to Vinda Rosier & Druella Black née Rosier & Minette Lestrange née Rosier. Extant patrilinealy, to Felix Rosier. Vault 197, valued at 957 Galleons. Properties are; Château d'Annecy (Annecy, Savoye, France), Palais de l'Isle (Annecy, Savoye, France), Château de Chambéry (Chambéry, Savoye, France). Titles held are; Count of Geneva (disused, eligible for renewal), Duke of Savoye (disused, eligible for renewal), Count of Savoy (disused, eligible for renewal). Allied to the Dark Lord, Enemies of the Order of the Phoenix.


House Travers (Norman, pre-10th Century - 20th Century); Extant patrilinealy, to Torquil Travers II. Vault 744, valued at 1,988 Galleons, 231 Sickles, 55 Knutts. Properties held are; Travers Mill (Unplottable, Lancashire, England), Tower Travers (Mt Travers, Lancashire, England). Allied to the Dark Lord, Enemies of the Order of the Phoenix.

Remaining are seven (7) families of various standings, who hold varying degrees of Privacy Charms upon their ancestry; Yaxley (Yaxley Hall – Yaxley, Suffolk, England), Selwyn, Lee, four (4) others.

Eligible Wizengamot seats, by Right of Blood, Right of Conquest, Right of Subjugation, are thus following, totalling fourteen (14) Seats as consolidated under the Seat of Potter upon acceptance;

Seat of Avery, Seat of Black, Seat of Carrow, Seat of Lestrange, Seat of Nott, Seat of Rosier, Seat of Rowle, Seat of Travers, Seat of Yaxley, Seat of Potter, Seat of Peverell, Seat of Fleamont, Seat of Gaunt, Seat of Sayre.

Chapter End Notes

I know that, canonically speaking, Augurey feathers only repel ink, but for a magical bird that has developed an enormously-accurate sense of knowing when it will rain (or snow), it makes more sense to me that their feathers would repel any type of liquid. Which would also place them in harms way as an efficient resource for waterproof cloaks, unfortunately, if wizards hadn't developed Waterproof Charms or the like.

Loucetios, alternatively spelled as Leucetius, is an ancient Celtic god of thunder & lightning, commonly associated with Modron, the archetypical deity that formed the basis for the romantic Morgana le Fay. Usually associated with her as either a husband-figure or a father-figure, though usually complementary to her rather than authoritative over her.

Molly Blodwyn Prewett – my semi-cannon full name for her, as Prewett is a Welsh surname. So I though, well, why wouldn't they have married with hot-blooded Scotsmen? They certainly have the temperament for it – and if they had any older-
than-Scottish roots, it would definitely be Pictish. It might not be geographically accurate, but I imagine that Wizarding families could so easily move from place to place that, in the end, only their surnames could be a hint to their actual origins.

Global ice cream prices hover around 1 to 2 pounds per scoop/50ml.
Chapter XVIII

Chapter Summary

Time to meet the Malfoys and start our game of chess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The week-and-a-half that followed after the Gringotts break-in were monotonous and routine, something Harry found relaxing to a degree. The routine of his lessons with Snape, along with their late-evening discussions about many subjects, very much ingratiated him with the older man. He came to slowly trust Snape more than anyone else in his young life. He was always patient and contemplative, always waiting for Harry to finish speaking before replying. It was such a stark difference from Harry's life with the Dursleys that, whenever Harry thought about those years with them, he felt a simpering anger at them. But he knew it wouldn't do to dwell on all of that, not when his new pre-school studies kept him busy.

Their routine was only ever disrupted by the visits of a few people. On the night of the 13th, Lucius had once more visited Spinner's End, though earlier than before. He had arrived sometime after dinner, and Snape had received Lucius with a polite hospitality. Afterwards, he had introduced Harry once more to Lucius and their lessons in etiquette had borne fruit. At the end of the evening, when Lucius departed back to Malfoy Manor, he had confessed himself satisfied with Harry's etiquette and polite demeanour, inviting the pair to Malfoy Manor before the end of August if they were able. Snape politely accepted, Harry gave a courteous goodbye, and they watched Lucius stride down the street before disappearing with a crack.

Snape had discussed the oncoming visit little with Harry, but he had impressed upon him the necessity of keeping his real identity a secret until he had ingratiated himself firmly into the Malfoy's graces – which was necessary to be done during the visit, as afterwards, his attendance at Hogwarts would out Harry either way. Harry knew it was important to get Lucius and his kin on his good side, for they had quite some control over the Wizengamot – and Harry very much wished to make as many allies as he could before he would partake in his first Wizengamot meeting. That one was scheduled for the New Year of the calendar, beginning 1992. It would be when the agenda of the next year would be decided – and Harry had a few points he wished to introduce.

Harry was no fool – he knew how much influence he now had in the Wizengamot, with fourteen Seats under his name. But on a regulatory body with almost a hundred Seats, he needed allies more than anything else. Correspondence with Gnalte and his associates had revealed a few bitter surprises – chief among them being the fact that Sirius Black had never received an official trial for his perceived treason of Harry's parents. Even if the man was guilty, Harry wanted all the facts to be known – and his first motion would be to give the man a trial and see for himself the face of a murderer.
Somehow, during all this, Fudge had started to take notice of Harry’s contact with Gringotts. A letter had arrived on the 16th, the day after Harry had his first lessons about Spell Weaving with Xenophilius Lovegood. It had been a letter from Fudge, already wishing in discrete terms to draw Harry over to his side of the political playing field. Harry had neglected to reply to the letter for now, wishing to know more about Fudge through Gnalte and Lucius, before he would even start to formulate a reply.

As for his first lesson with Xenophilius, it had been dull and invigorating at the same time. The aloof gentleman had let fall he was in contact with various Spellwright and Weavers in regards to a formal education in Spell Creation for Harry during his holidays away from Hogwarts, or potential internships after Harry’s education at Hogwarts would be completed. Sure, it was eight years in advance, but, so had Xenophilius confined to Harry, these internships could last half a lifetime if one wished to become a Master of Spell Creation. Harry didn't know for sure if he had that particular ambition, but it never hurt to keep your options open at all fronts.

And during all of this, between Gnalte's letters, Lucius' visits, Xenophilius' lessons and Snape's private education, he was still hard at work sloughing through his various schoolbooks and deciphering the Runes he had found in the Potter Vault and on the Potter Ring. And, finally, after a few weeks, he had translated both. Matters had been complicated by the age of the inscriptions, and the fact that both had been encrypted with a nasty cipher.

First off, the Runes had turned out to be a special Wizarding form of Etruscan proto-Runes, mixed with Elder Futhark Runes and Divination-based Cypher Runes. That had been a major headache, being able to identify the various separate components and their origins. Heavens be blessed, however, that the book about Runes Harry had bought was very comprehensive indeed. Even if what it had said about each form of runes was succinct, it had set him on the right track very quickly. And Snape's discreet help in identifying certain of the Cypher Runes had been a major part of solving it as well.

The cipher itself, luckily, wasn't all too complicated. It had turned out to be a simple substitution and rotation cipher, easily solved once you had assigned each rune to its correct letter. And once that had been deciphered, he had a full legible text before him – which turned out to be a riddle of sorts.

“Wear me out, from parent to child, never shall I be seen as only Potter blood can own me truly. To see our Vaults heart, wear your second skin.” Heavens knows what this meant, Harry had thought when he first read it – and no amount of riddle-solving had yet given a clear answer to this.

“We last forever, from parent to child, never it runs still -safe for Death. To open our Vaults heart, spill it upon the threshold.” Simple, this one, Harry thought as he had read it a few times. The
answer would undoubtedly be blood, his blood, spilled on something.

“Wearing that which binds our blood, poke the eyes of the eternally gazing Watcher, lest you never see yourself. To unlock our Vaults heart, blind the Watcher with your right finger.” This one had taken a bit of thinking, but Harry was now fairly sure it talked about the Heir Ring which he now wore. But how this pertained to the Vault, he would have to revisit it and observe what made up the rooms.

And now, on the morning of August 19th, Harry and Snape were on their way to visit Malfoy Manor. Snape had explained that it would be a longer trip, as the Malfoys lived quite a bit away from the town nearest to them. First came the usual trip to the nearest Floo-Point via bus, and there they took a direct Floo-Connection to Wilshire. The Wiltshire public Floo-Point was a dilapidated house located in Wilton, the county town. The house they arrived in looked like it was ready to crumble at any second. The interior was open to the outside, with the roof being nothing more than a gaping hole with a few roof-tiles, shattered and scattered, on the tiled floor around the hearth.

Harry took a look out of a grimy window and saw a small ruined church on the opposite side of the street. People were passing by the house without notice and he surmised that the building was probably charmed to repel Muggles and stop them from noticing it or anyone who entered it. The Harry took a look at the room they were standing in. Multiple hearths had been installed, evidently after the house had become a public Floo, and they were constructed from a wide variety of materials.

One hearth was made from various pieces of marble, flint-stones, and pale schists. Another was made from a solid piece of red sandstone, carved from the irregular block with great care – it looked beautifully decorated, with many runes and scenes carved from the stone. Another hearth was, paradoxically, constructed from stray pieces of wood from various origins and trees. It looked as if someone had slapped them all together, haphazardly, and then coated them in a strange concrete-like substance that had the consistency of tar. The hearth they had stepped off was the original hearth, connected with a tottering chimney and made from simple clay bricks.

Here they had to take another Floo-Connection, to Marlborough – which was the largest town nearest the Manor. Here the public Floo-Point was a bit more welcoming. It was a small but luxurious room they exited into, with nice wood panelling and half a dozen simple stone hearths. A single Witch stepped into a Floo-Fire, just as they exited. And as they exited the room itself, it became a very different environment. The room stood in the ruins of a small castle, its crumbling walls still standing with a strong breeze flowing through the structure. The room had been left intact it seemed, preserved by Wizards and, again, unseen by Muggles.

“Welcome to Marlborough Mound, Evans. A neolithic mound that has been used as an oratorium, the motte for a motte-and-bailey castle, and even as a mere ornament for the stately garden of the now-gone Marlborough Castle gardens.” Snape explained, as they exited the small ruin and began
descending the spiralling footpath down the mound. “Local Muggle believe that this mound was erected as a burial place for Merlin, the Prince of Enchanters. Of course, we Wizards know better than that. After all, Merlin's intended burial mound lies near Hogsmead.”

“If it interests you to know, Evans, this mound is part of a larger networks of mounds built in this area, all centred around the river Kent. Indeed, it was not an uncommon practice by our Neolithic fore bearers to centre their great earthworks around important local features, such as rivers and Nemetii. It has much to do with Places of Power – which will be explained at Hogwarts in great detail. Even so, it is best you pay attention to the flow of energy in places such as this.” Snape drawled as they made a fourth and last circle around the mound, finally reaching the ground-level.

They made their way to a nearby bus-stop, and after waiting for almost twenty minutes, they boarded a bus. They rode for about a quarter of an hour, before they exited in Cadley. Cadley wasn't as much a town, as just a random assortment of residential buildings clustered together in the shadows of Savernake forest, which loomed grandly over it all in the direct North-East. On the other side of the road on which they exited, they saw a small parish church hidden behind a hedge of small trees.

“Come, Evans. We only have to walk a small bit to the entrance of the grounds.” Snape began walking down the road, towards the South-East. As they walked, they passed by a number of small houses, each with a large front-garden filled with all kinds of plants, fruit trees, and vegetables. Snape noticed Harry was observing each home carefully and spoke up. “Most of the houses we’ll pass towards the entrance are owned by Wizards and Witches. The Malfoys bought up large amounts of land before the Statute of Secrecy came around. And they lease many of those lands, cheaply if I may add, to those sympathetic to Lucius' Pureblood cause.”

“Of course, that doesn't mean that all those living here want to see Muggles gone or anything like that. Most simply want to see the end of Muggle interference in Wizarding culture. And if you think that Lucius only accepts those with magical power, I can share that quite a few people living here are either Squibs or descended from Squibs. Only a very select few are actually Muggles. And that concerns most, if not all, properties that are touched by the shadows of Savernake Forest.” As Snape spoke, Harry saw a small old man exit his house, agitated at something as he was flinging a broom through the air. As Harry observed more closely, he saw he was chasing a few small creatures out of his house. They were small and a dark blue, with way too many arms and legs.

Snape noticed as well and began striding over to the property, taking a small vial from his robes and flinging it dead-centre on of the flying pests. A large blue cloud of gas immediately enveloped the small garden, only to dissipate instantly, drawn into the flying creatures. They instantly fell to the ground, breathing stopped and eyes vacant. “Oh my, lad, that was a strong dose a' Doxycide, indeed. Thanks a bunch, those buggers were drivin' me crazy. They's been invading my attic, you know, knocking about up there, keepin' me up at night. Drove me nuts.”
Snape thought nothing of it, steadfastly refusing the man's payment. “No, sir, no need. It was merely the remnants of a test-formula for a better version of Doxycide. No payment needed. Now, we really should get going. We have an appointment at Malfoy Manor.” This shut the aged codger up real quickly, and he suddenly looked at the pair with a whole different attitude. “Oh, you be goin’ to old Malfoy, he? Be it still Abraxis who be runnin' the grounds, or is it his spoilt brat, Lucius, now?”

Snape replied coolly. “Lucius is Master of the Manor nowadays, has been for over a decade, sir. Surely you'd know this?” The old man coughed and cackled. “Nat really, lad. They's been keepin' quiet e'er since the War, ya know. I dun reckon that Lucius even knows we's still here. Otherwise, I'm sure he'd 'ad kicked me off by now. I ne'er was one that agreed with his sentiments, ya know?”

“Well, be that as it may, sir, Lucius holds a very strong grip on all his assets. If you have been unaware of any changes, I reckon it is because he wishes to make none. Now, good day, sir. Come, Evans.” They turned back down the street, back towards their goal. And as they walked, Snape's mood remained sour until they had reached their destination.

Standing by the side of the road, unfettered by the passage of countless cars every day, stood an ancient and decrepit oak tree. Its trunk was absolutely massive, girdled by a broad iron band that kept the split trunk from breaking apart. Gnarled thick branches waved over it, broad as a man's waist, covered in a dense and overhanging canopy of leaves. It felt ancient and alive, as if it could stand up any moment and walk off to ancient lands long lost.

Snape took Harry by the shoulders and together they crossed the road towards it – and all at once the world changed. The oak parted ways and as they passed what was evidently a ward of some kind, the true size of the tree became clear. It was not merely ancient – it was older than the first people who had set foot upon the British Isles. It stood almost a hundred meters high, with a trunk almost ten meters across in diameter. Its bough and branches hung so far to each side that no other tree stood near it for almost fifty meters either direction. Besides it began a gravel path, lined with uncountable flowers and ferns.

In silence they walked past the behemoth oak, down the newly revealed path into the forest. And now too became known the true size of the forest. These trees were almost three times larger than the trees that were visible from outside the forest and they too were evidently ancient beyond compare. Harry wagered that he would be hard-pressed to find many trees here younger than a thousand years. And between those trees, luxuriating in the provided and ample shade and half-shade were countless plants, evidently all planted long ago with a goal in mind by the custodians of these grounds. And as they passed a few notable elderly trees, Harry saw they were populated by small twig-like impish creatures in their canopies.

“Bowtruckles. They protect trees that are old or suitable for wand-making. Think of dryads, spirits of nature – but a bit more down-to-Earth and less... approachable.” Snape explained when he saw
what had drawn Harry's attention. After a few more minutes of walking, they began to approach a real gate of iron-wrought bar-steel, with a wall stretching out towards the dark depths of the forest on either side. There, written in the curved steel of the gate, stood “Manor Malfoy” with a motto beneath it reading “Sanctimonia Vincet Semper”. Quickly translating it from Latin, Harry read it again out loud. “Sanctity will always win.”

“Indeed, Evans. Well done.” Snape confirmed the translation, giving Harry a small pat on the shoulder. Stepping forwards, Snape placed a hand on the centrally-placed weapon-shield that bore the motto. From atop the two pillars that hung the gate, two bells sounded clearly as water when Snape did this. And slowly the gate began to swing open. Stepping through together, the gate then closed again as they continued making their way down the path.

After ten minutes, the trees began clearing out, with smaller trees now dominating the scenic landscape and copses of bushed ruling between the standing trees. Flowers and ferns were slowly replaced by grass and herbs of every kind, the air laden with the mixed fragrances of blooming flower and present herbs. They crested a small earthwork that stretched towards either side, bending backwards on both side after a while. Atop the ten-meter earthwork was a gatehouse, with another high wall cresting the summit of the earthwork all the way they could see. They could make out two other gatehouses, to the North-East and the South, where the wall continued towards. They passed through the gatehouse, whose gate swung open at their approach and permitted sight of what lay beyond.

And there, in what was evidently meant to be the centre of the whole forest and Manor grounds, protected by the ring of earth and its cresting wall, stood a magnificent structure. Every inch of it screamed stately home and half a dozen period styles were visible in its many expansions and renovations. It stood at least five stories tall, elevated above them by ten metres via the mound it had been build upon. Snape and Harry passed through the gate and entered the heart of the grounds, Malfoy Manor before them.

Build like a four-towered square castle of sorts, it had two small towers on the front and two large towers on the back, each rotated 45 degrees from the square central structure of it all. Small trees, native and exotic, were dotted throughout the garden that filled the space between the earthwork and the Manor house. Herbs, flowers, fruit trees – it all filled the space in fluid patterns that hypnotized the eye and enthralled the mind with its sights of colour and shape, and its scents of oils and nectars.

Standing at a small set of stairs leading up the mound the Manor house stood upon, was a well-dressed servant. Evidently a butler or footman of some kind, Harry guessed. As they approached the servant, he greeted them politely. “Master Snape, young Master Evans. Master Malfoy welcomes you at Malfoy Manor and grounds. Please, follow me – a late lunch is provided for you.” The servant turned on his heel and ascended the stairs, Harry and Snape following close behind him.
As they climbed the stairs, Harry saw how the small terrace before the manor house was utilized as a decorative garden. Colourful flowerbeds were arranged per colour in geometric patterns, with small fruit-trees and archways hung with roses and vine between them all. Albino peacocks were scattered through it all, in some cases seemingly nesting atop the few yew hedges that dotted the garden. A large fountain stood halfway between the stairs and the house, with smaller fountains and numerous small ponds visible on the lower grounds from their elevated perspective.

They crossed the path between the stairs and the house, stopping in front of a pair of massive doors with gleaming bronze knockers and handles. As the servant knocked three times, the door swung open on its own accord, allowing them entrance into a splendid foyer of sorts. It was almost three stories high, with a wide staircase that gave entrance to the first and second story, where it broke off into two smaller staircases. A few pillars supported the staircase from the back of the room and a simple yet decorative screen divided the area under the stairs from the rest of the foyer. From where Harry stood, two sets of double doors gave entrance into unknown chambers – with one set of doors standing open on their left.

The servant took their coats and robes, as a small House Elf appeared and took the clothes. Turning to the open doors, the servant bade them follow him, taking them through. They stepped into a short hallway, which on their right opened up into another large giant room which was partitioned by a large decorative screen, but they didn't turn. Instead they entered through another set of double doors directly opposite of the ones they'd already passed through. This led them into a spacious open room with a ceiling lower than that of the others. A hearth was ablaze on their right, keeping the chill from the stone floors at bay. At their left, at a 45 degree angle following that of the forward left tower they were now evidently in, stood a large table with numerous chairs. And seated there, in a corner by the south-facing window and enjoying the midday sun in a small set of luxurious Bérgere en cabriolet, was the Malfoy family.

They certainly had the air of aristocracy, and their image as represented to the outer world most definitely emboldened that. Father and son, Lucius and Draco – so Snape had explained before they had left Spinner's End, were engaged in a game of chess. As they moved a piece, it moved on its own and struck down the enemy piece they targeted. Meanwhile, the Lady of the House, Narcissa Malfoy - “A niece of your godfather, Sirius, who married into the Malfoy family to stabilize and further the fortunes of either family”, Snape had drawled about her – she was sitting on her own, reading a novel of some kind using the sunlight. On all accounts, they seemed a normal family, as for as aristocracy went.

But Harry instinctively knew this whole set-up of meeting them like this was just another form of chess. He was an unknown piece and this was meant to set him at ease. Presumably, Draco would attempt to strike up a friendly conversation and offer his friendship – through which Lucius could figure out who Harry actually was and why he was in Snape's care. And if Draco found out, he could boost he was friends with the famous Harry Potter in Hogwarts, which would signal the start of Draco's own personal forays in the world of social politics. His success in Hogwarts would become a prelude to his success in the Ministry, as Lucius had done when he was young. Harry had done his research and Snape had explained it all into great detail too.
Well, now was the time to play his own game of chess with the Malfoys, Harry reasoned. He needed their support in the Wizengamot for later, when he would start his own foray into politics. The servant announced them, and like a well-rehearsed move, the Malfoys all turned their attention to the pair. Three heads swivelling towards them in sync, three pairs of eyes locking on with theirs simultaneously. “Severus! So you have finally arrived. Took you long enough. Must I insist once more of arranging a Floo-Connection to your house? If I pressure Maison enough, he would do it for free – it would be no effort, my friend.”

Lucius arose, courtly and coldly polite, but with a warm smile enacted upon his face as he spoke and greeted them. He crossed over to them, giving Snape a firm handshake and a harsh pat on the shoulder when they met halfway. “Ah, young Master Evans. I hope you find our not-so-humble abode not too intimidating.” Lucius turned to Harry, also giving him a firm handshake and a pat on the back. “Let me introduce my family to you, young Evans. My beautiful wife, Narcissa. Truly a flower amongst flowers, the Lady of our House for twenty wonderful years.” Narcissa gave a curt bow, holding out her hand. Harry took it and gave a polite bow in turn, his lips just shy of touching her marbled skin.

“Well met, Lady Malfoy. It's a pleasure to meet you and your family, lady.” Harry replied in measured sweet tones. All of this was an act – one to out-stage the other by the end, and Harry had the upper-hand. They didn't know who he was and that he could exploit – dangle the information at a line before them and let them bite when he wanted. Yes, let the game begin, Harry thought somewhat amusedly. Snape and he had previously discussed all of this into detail, indeed – and now the plan was afoot. Pawn forward.
Wilton was the county town of Wiltshire, until, in our world, that function has been moved to Wiltbridge. The Church that Harry notices is the St Mary's Church, Wilton, Wiltshire.

The Marlborough Mound is believed, in local folklore, to be the burial mound of famed Merlin – though in all likelihood, the mound was named after the gentian that once grew abundantly around it.

Cadley lies directly against Savernake Forest, and the church they see was sold as a residential property sometime around 1980.

I have located Malfoy Manor in Savernake Forest, as it is the largest continuous forest in Wiltshire – its history also aligns neatly with the fictional Malfoy family history. It was gifted to a local nobleman, and the forest itself became a Royal Forest for deer-hunting. In my fictional head-canon history, this land was gifted to the Malfoys by the English king (as per canon) and they slowly accrued more and more grounds through the following centuries. Eventually, when the Statute of Secrecy was enacted, they cast a Muggle-repelling charm over the entire forest and closed it off for anyone but Magicals.

The Big Belly Oak became the landmark to locate the official grounds entrance for Magicals and several additional borders and magical barriers were added over the next two centuries. All in all, those defences exist from the Wards that cover all of Savernake forest, the enchanted anti-apparition Wall that denominates the Inner Estate midway between the Manor House and the forest border, the Clay Wall earthworks-and-wall that surround the Manor House, and the Motte upon which the Manor House stands and which is topped at the edge by the Hallow'Hedge. All these features provide the Malfoys with 5 layers of protection, both mundane and Magical.

They also employ regular servants, besides House Elves. The House Elves are in
charge of the most menial tasks, such as cleaning up fowl faeces in the gardens, maintaining and cleaning all plumbing, bathrooms and toilets, and so on... Specific tasks, such as the cooking and the cleaning of linen, clothes, boots, … are done by the human servants (with or without the aid of magic). All to instil an even grander sense of decorum and power.
Chapter XIX

Chapter Summary

The Game has a new Player and looses a Pawn. Enter Harry, picking black as his side to play in the Game of Chess that is Life.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your kind messages in the deleted previous chapter 19, where I asked all of you if you wanted to continue reading this story. It inspired me to at least finished the half-written chapter I had lying around before my muse took an extended holiday. But, dare I say it has returned from that holiday? Maybe - who knows ;)

Don't forget to leave a comment with your thoughts and speculations ;)D

Introductions took a while, with Lucius drawling on and on about his connections, while Narcissa occasionally threw in a non-committal supportive reply to her husband's words. And all the while, Draco kept looking at Harry. The kid was obviously curious, and probably so spoiled that not knowing something would be a rare occurrence. Snape had explained how the aristocratic families made it a tradition to teach their young heirs all about etiquette, politics and lineage as soon as they could read. It was something, Snape punctuated a few times, that almost every single old-blood family did, no matter how wealthy or poor they were.

So Harry focussed on Draco, whilst keeping a fair share of his attention on Lucius' words. Draco, at no point, seemed to notice that Harry was watching him in turn – and numerous times did Draco's eyes glance up at Harry's forehead. “So, he suspects. Clever or pre-informed?” Harry thought. Maybe Lucius had figured out his true identity after all, and was withholding his knowing the truth as to play the game in his favour. Multiple scenarios raced through Harry's mind – when he accidentally locked gaze with Lucius. And all at once, that all-too-familiar mental breeze could be felt.

Harry had prepared, however, and he instantly threw up the full force of his mental defence. There, in his mind-scape, swiftly arose a landscape of moats, ha-ha's, thorned rose-hedges, walls and pitfalls. Not for nothing had Snape taken him aside half an hour a day to practice Occlumency – and this was the first time he used it against anyone but Snape. Instantly, Lucius recoiled, twitching slightly in his seat as his own mind had hit the walls around Harry's. Evidently, he hadn't expected Snape to train his young charge in being able to protect his own mind. A fool's presumption, in more ways than one, Harry thought.

After a while, a few servants brought in their lunch, a few plates floating behind them in a row. They were swiftly placed before Harry and Snape, as they and the family had seated themselves at a large dining-table central to the room. As far as Harry knew, it was only a few sandwiches to fill their grumbling stomachs, but they certainly didn't smell like any sandwiches he ever had. Taking a careful nibble, Harry found the taste utterly alien to his young palette of experiences. Alien, but
not unmanageable. He had eaten worse, after all. So remembering his dinner-lessons, he followed
suit with Snape and began slowly devouring the sandwich. It was good, Harry later thought, once
he had some time to get used to the flavours and textures.

“Cookie has certainly done her usual best, I have to say, Lucius. These sandwiches are certainly
more palatable than the sometimes rather drab stuff we get at Hogwarts.” Snape said, half a sneer,
half a drawl, all compliment. Lucius gave a self-satisfied grin, as if it could not be conceived to be
so otherwise. “Yes, Loretta's Pesto-Artichoke sandwiches with Harvati-cheese grilled is a delight.
Like an angel pissing on your tongue, Severus.” Narcissa mock-gasped, hitting her husband on the
arm with a half-hearted pat of her book. “Lucius! Language, dear. We need to set an example for
our children, darling.” She chastised him, motioning towards Harry and Draco.

Draco, in the meanwhile, began inching closer and closer to Harry, who was busy with eating his
sandwich – yet had kept an eye on the Malfoy spawn. Finally, as lunch was finished, Snape rose
up. “Perhaps, Lucius, we should let Narcissa and the children make a tour of the estate. We have
several things to discuss, between us two.” Lucius agreed, whispering a few things to Narcissa –
before he and Snape moved away from the table and left the room.

Narcissa, rose herself, placing her book on a small table to the side and called Draco to her. “Come,
Draco, let's show young Evans the gardens. After that, maybe you two can play some Quidditch on
the gazon.” Draco skipped over excitedly, noticeably more informal now that his father had left the
room, hanging on his mother's arm as Harry followed them. They exited the room through the
same door Harry and Snape had entered it through, following Lucius' and Snape's exit. Stepping
back into the grand Foyer, Narcissa led them to the left, going towards the Grand Staircase.

The screen, that divided the area beneath the Staircase from the rest of the Foyer, swung open at
their approach, revealing a carpeted area separate from the bare tile-floors of the Foyer itself. A
few chaise-lounge stood to the sides, with a few coat-racks in one corner. Another set of double-
doors stood parallel to the screen-door that had swung open, with a smaller set of doors to their left.
A small plaque thereupon read “Service” - and Harry guessed that this was probably the entrance
to the servant's quarters and all service rooms, such as the kitchens.

The doors opposite of them, likewise, swung open upon approach – and revealed an enormous
chamber! Fully forty feet high, with a dozen enormous chandeliers suspended from the ceiling,
enormous tapestries hung from gleaming handles upon the walls. An impressive fireplace stood to
a slanting wall on their far right, large enough to hold a carriage if you wanted. And an equally
impressive massive Organ dominated a slanting wall to their far left. Four smaller hearths were
spread against the walls of the room, though only the Grand Hearth was actually lighted, with a
few logs currently burning up, looking like matches thrown into a marble box, so ludicrously big
was the hearth..

Several sets of fauteuills and small salons stood dotted around the chamber, identifying this as a
place of social meetings, of forging political ties and contracts. But Narcissa did not stop to allow
Harry any further looks at the room, striding across to a enormous set of glass doors central to the
opposite wall. High Gothic windows let in copious amounts of light besides the glass doors,
casting the room currently on a half-light as the sun shone on the opposite side of the House now.
Narcissa opened the glass doors manually, and a breath of warm humid air blew past Harry, who
followed her and Draco inside.

They had entered an Orangery, its glass dome thirty feet above them, with all manners of exotic
plants and fruit trees filling the space. Three large ponds filled the central area, with small paths
and bridges weaving between and over. Cacti stood on a separate plot of sand and gravel, with
succulents lining the border of that plot on large mossy boulders. A few small birds were flitting
to and fro, between tree and bush, making soft twitterings and occasionally loud screeches. Benches were littered throughout, half-hidden behind bushes and small rockeries.

Large sets of baubles and glass spheres were suspended from the ceiling, and smaller sets of such could also be found hanging in the largest trees and hidden underneath the many bushes. Harry pondered their use, as Narcissa came to a stop. “Well, Evans, this is our Orangery. I am sure that Snape has explained the long history of the proud Malfoy family in this country, and how our fortune was a careful cultivation of properties and investments over the many centuries since they established this Manor.”

“As such, this Orangery was a later addition, mid-17th Century. And ever since, the Malfoys have made it a point of pride to always acquire new species of plant and animal to add to their sizeable collection. Most of the plants are collected here, on the Estate, either in this Orangery or on the garden grounds. As for the animals, the Malfoys have a private wildlife-park centred around Pendennis Keep, established around 1889. I’m sure we can expect you again sometimes in the holidays or summer, so perhaps then we could visit it, if you would like that.”

She spoke little more, occasionally pointing out some rare plants, magical and non-magical. She gave each plant a curt synopsis, of its history, properties, and value – monetary and otherwise. This went on for fifteen minutes, before they exited the Orangery and entered the Gardens proper. There, Narcissa took Harry through a small section of the garden, guiding him past a few ornate flowerbeds and beautifully decorated fountains. All the while, Draco had begun to lag behind, each moment inching closer towards Harry, until they were walking besides each-other at the same pace. Still the child kept silent, even as Draco's pale eyes occasionally bore into Harry, as if he were a puzzle to figure out from afar.

It wasn't until Narcissa had led them to a small gazon, surrounded by tall yew-hedges, that Draco finally spoke up towards Harry. “Have you ever flown a broom before, Evans?” Harry responded truthfully, no sense in manoeuvring into lies for possible political gains in this case, best to build up a bit of trust. Yes, act as the child he couldn't really be. “No, my previous guardians weren't the kind that would allow... freakishness – into their house.” Harry looked away from Draco's gaze, his jaw tense, voice clipped yet steady. From the corner of his eye, he could see the cogs turn in Draco's mind. Not even Narcissa seemed to hold her cool poise, momentarily straightening her stance in mild alarm or curiosity – before correcting her mask and portraying the perfect Lady of the House again. There was the bait – now to see if they would bite.

“Evans, dear, whatever do you mean? Lucius shared Severus' revelation bout your... unfortunate youth, true, but surely those Muggles wouldn't dare deny you your magical heritage?” Narcissa spoke, her voice sweet and motherly, a Siren tempting more information from her prey. Harry turned lightly away from the pair, eyes half-lidded, lips in a thin line, his voice terse and clipped yet shaking with emotion. “My guardians were of the opinion that magic didn't – or rather, shouldn't exist...”

If Narcissa was angry, she didn't show it – her face was a stoic mask, still and emotionless, as if hewn from lifeless alabaster. But Draco obviously hadn't mastered their Pure-blood-tactics of control and subterfuge yet, as his face was a mask of livid fury and unabashed hatred. And if it weren't for Narcissa's hand on Draco's shoulder, her fingers gripping tightly unto his expensive vest, Harry was sure the Malfoy whelp would've started spewing uncontrolled vitriol and unabashed disgust at this revelation.

Narcissa waited a few moments, until she was evidently sure Draco had managed to control himself, and moved over to Harry in a few elegant strides, her dress flowing across the strands of grass. She half-kneed, to lock unto Harry's eyes with her own at his level, speaking softly. “My
dear child, we are Magic, chosen to stand above the filth that is Muggles. We can summon summer storms, halt death in its tracks with our brews, and, the strongest among us, not tethered by Muggle-sympathetic morality, can summon up the very dead we buried before. We are the pinnacle, young Evans – we stand above all others.”

“It pains me to hear you had to spend your youth with such filth, for years on end, as they filled your mind with such lies, obviously bourne from jealousy and fear.” She spoke softly, standing back up and taking his hand in hers, clasping it between them. “I can only be glad that Severus has taken charge of your education now. He, like us, is a paragon of pure blood, even if he isn't a Pureblood. Like you will undoubtedly do, he too shed his shackles, cut off his ties to his Muggle-heritage, and rose up to embrace our superiority.”

She put her hand to his face and brushed a few hairs out of it, tucking them behind his ears. “Now, forget about those ugly Muggles and their jealousy. This is a day to enjoy. Go play with Draco a bit- I'm sure he can splendidly teach you how to use a broom.” She let go of Harry's hands, and guided him back to Draco – who was still a bit red-faced, but seemingly had managed to suppress his immediate feelings. “Draco, darling, why don't you show Evans how to fly a broom? I'm sure he'll get the hang of it in no time, if you taught him.”

Draco didn't waste a moment, as a large grin broke out on his face and that typical childish exuberance led him to grab Harry by the hand and towards the broom-shed. An hour later, Snape and Lucius joined the group in the gardens, the two men watching their young children zoom around on their small brooms above the perfectly-manicured gazon. A few House-Elves were watching the pair of boys from the four corners of the field, attentively watching and ready to immediately intervene should the need arise. A butler stood besides Narcissa, with a small trolley besides her bearing a pot of tea, five cups-and-saucers, with a modest display of appetizers and cakes besides.

Narcissa was enjoying her Earl Grey and a small biscuit, side-eying her husband and Snape, while keeping most of her attention on the boys. Eventually, Lucius and Snape joined her side, seating themselves in a pair of chairs they transfigured from a few granite boulders. Snape's chair was quite basic, whilst Lucius' chair was intricately decorated and even had some soft cushions. Together, the three adults enjoyed the children playing a simple game of Quidditch, though with the bludgers or the snitch. It seemed that one of the servants had conjured a soft quaffle for them to play with.

As they watched Draco and Evans fly circles around each-other, Lucius was surprised how easily Evans could keep up with Draco's manoeuvres and tactics. “Severus, has the boy already been taught how to fly a broom before today?” Severus denied this, equally surprised by Evans proficiency on a broom, though perhaps it was less surprising for him, considering he knew the truth behind Evans' lineage. No, it didn't surprise Severus at all that young Harry would be as proficient in Quidditch as James had been.

Eventually, Draco and Harry touched down on the grass, eagerly leaving the brooms behind as they joined the adults. “Now, Draco,” Lucius held up his son before Draco could grab one of the biscuits, “What did I tell you about hygiene?” Lucius' tone was cold but his eyes were not unkind as he spoke to him. Instantly, regret tinged Draco's youthful visage, and he took out his wand. He traced his wand through the air, slicing a clean S-shape through it, and chanting with a clear voice. “Scourgify.” Instantly, the trace amounts of sweat, dirt and grass-stains vanished from Draco's attire, face and hands. Lucius gave a small smile, evidently pleased with Draco's command of the spell. Meanwhile, Harry followed the example – seeing as he had too had already learned the spell a few weeks prior.

The following conversation was mainly between the adults, Snape and Lucius discussing all
manner of things concerning the Ministry, whilst Narcissa discussed with Harry and Draco, answering the few questions that Harry had for her – questions he had already discussed and cleared with Snape. Eventually, it was time to snap the trap. The Malfoys were fairly relaxed now, at ease with the imago that Harry and Snape had created for him.

“Lucius.” Snape began, voice soft and flat. “We have recently gotten word that young Evans here had quite an extensive heritage.” He left the words hanging, letting Lucius work through the implications those words could bear. “Really now, Severus? What kind of inheritance are we talking about?” Lucius drawled in response after a second or two, trying to tease more information from Snape. Narcissa spoke softer with Harry and Draco now, her attention split between the boys and the two men. “Well, we know of several properties, in several countries, along with a few Titles, both Muggle and Magical. And seats in the Wizengamot.”

Lucius perked up at that last bit, instantly all attention riveted to Snape's words. “Seats, Severus? As in multiple? My, what a... surprise,” Severus nodded. “Indeed. And seeing how I only have the single seat and am not wholly at ease in the webs that you politicians weave, I was wondering if you would, perhaps, take young Evans under your wing. Teach him how to, ah, play the game, sort to say.” Severus drawled in return, sipping his sweet tea a few times, waiting for Lucius to consider the proposal.

“Hm. Well – it certainly wouldn't be any skin of my back, Severus. I would gladly teach young Evans about it all. But, ah, do forgive my curiosity, how many... seats, are we talking about?” Severus waited a few seconds, prolonging the small pause for dramatic effect before answering. “Ah, not too many, Lucius. Just fourteen.”

Draco abruptly choked on his tea, as Lucius nearly spit his tea out, while Narcissa actually let her cup fall upon the soft grass beneath their feet. “F-Fourteen? Ye gods, Severus, surely you jest!” Lucius croaked almost indignantly, as if it was a joke in poor taste. Narcissa stood stock-still, eyes wide open, not moving a single muscle – while Draco was coughing violently, a House-Elf trying desperately to make it stop. Eventually, Draco stopped coughing, with a rather rough hiccup taking its place – as Narcissa finally moved and began moving a hand over Draco's back, soothing the pain of the violent cough.

Evans and Snape continued to sip their tea calmly, before Severus eventually replied to Lucius' accusation of jesting. “Have you ever known me to jest, Lucius? If I recall correctly, you often accuse me of being drier of humour than kindle-wood.” Snape took another sip, his eyes boring into Lucius' to drive home the point he was making. “W-Well, no, Severus, indeed. But still – fourteen seats? How is that even possible, my old friend? I know of no one who could possibly hold so many claims to a seat on the Wizengamot.”

“Do you not, Lucius?” Severus responded curtly, placing down his cup, Harry going to stand by his side. Severus steepled his hands before his face, eyes looking over towards Lucius. Lucius, seemingly racking his memory to find a clue, any clue, but apparently being unsuccessful – until...

His eyes grew wide, his shocked expression became a hateful sneer, and he abruptly rose from his seat, grabbing at his wand – before it was knocked out of his hand by a quick Expelliarmus from Harry. Shocked and enraged, Lucius turned his attention back to Harry, for the first time really seeing the resemblances. “You!” Rage and fury foamed at the corners of his mouth, before those baleful eyes fell upon the still-seated Snape and he began directing his ire upon the Potions Master.

“You would dare to fraternize with the killer of our Lord, Severus?!” Narcissa too had now risen from her seat, taking Draco with her and stepping away from the tense confrontation. The butler was still near, as were the House-Elves – and they all watched warily how the confrontation
unfolded. Evidently they could easily intervene, yet had for now refrained from doing so, merely by absence of an order to do so.

“No, Lucius. I would fraternize with another helpless pawn in the game that Albus has long ago concocted. A game between Albus and the Dark Lord, whereby I and young Evans are simple pawns to be shuffled around on the board, as if our lives, in the end, were worthless. Albus would call out sacrifices a painful yet necessary collateral damage for the Greater Good.”

The words were meaningless in themselves, Harry knew, but they seemed to harmonize with something in Lucius' mind, as his fury and hatred became less pronounced, though not absent. “You Harry had been cast as a player in a game he didn't know he was playing when he was barely a year old. I trust you remember that fateful night, Lucius, when the Dark Lord first declared the Potters to be his greatest obstacle to his immediate victory. But I do not know whether the Dark Lord ever told you why this was so. Did he enlighten you of that fact, my old friend?”

Harry expected Lucius to lash out, because he could see that the Malfoy patriarch hadn't been informed at all – there had been a flash of shame, anger and uncertainty. “No, Severus, I was not.” Lucius seemed to regain his composure and sat back down, signalling to the butler to refill his cup. “Care to enlighten me, old friend?” Narcissa understood the shift in mood and she too took back her place on the seat, directing Draco to go stand besides her, away from Harry and Snape.

“A little over ten years ago, several months before the untimely demise of the Dark Lord, I had been tasked by Him – to shadow Albus Dumbledore, in order to gain a perfect understanding of his contacts, allies, routine, etcetera... As it happened, this was also the period wherein Albus was actively looking for and interviewing potential candidates for the position of teacher for Divination. You, more than anyone else here, Lucius, should know why this was.” Snape turned his gaze to Lucius, with obvious intent – and it didn't take Harry long to figure out that Lucius was probably responsible for the vacancy in some manner.

“Thus, so I found myself in the Three Broomsticks on a snowy evening, late October, shadowing Albus as he was interviewing another candidate for that vacant post. Of course, none of the previous candidates had impressed Albus – and at this point it was obvious he considered Divination a Lost Art, with no real Seers left in the world. At least, that was his opinion – until he was ready to dismiss the last candidate and call it a day. Just then, the candidate veritably entered an actual trance, Lucius. Can you imagine the shock on Albus' face, when Sybil Trelawney, of all people, actually entered a trance and gave to him, in a back-room of the Three Broomsticks, a True Prophecy?” Severus gave a soft laugh, Lucius with a curious look and a sneer at the thought of a stunned Dumbledore.

“As it was, this Prophecy was in regards to the Dark Lord -” To this, Lucius flinched mildly as Narcissa gave an almost inaudible gasp. “Telling of a child, born at the end of the seventh month, to parents who had thrice defied the Dark Lord and lived to tell. A child, which would hold a power that the Dark Lord could not or consciously would not comprehend, much less oppose. Of course, neither you or I would've been inclined to take any prophecy uttered by Sybil seriously, seeing how she has fared since. But the Dark Lord obviously took stock in it. I think that he had his suspicions about something like it happening for a long time. We have all heard the mythological tales of Lady Magic and Her desire for Balance. And while most people would rationally decline to place any stock in such myths, the Dark Lord had seen much – and was readily eager to accept the possibility of the Prophecy being true.”

Snape took his cup of tea, drained it of the last dregs and politely requested another one from the butler. When he had a full cup again, he took another small sip and continued on. “We more or less all know the story from that point onwards, don't we, Lucius. The Potters became an obsession for
the Dark Lord – searching for them fruitlessly for months, until their Secretkeeper betrayed them. And so he went to Godric's Hollow, forced his way in, killed Harry's parents – and then died.” Snape evaded Lucius' curious stare. “Don't ask how, Lucius – I don't know. I wager Albus has more than an inkling, but he, so far, has not been forthright with that information.” The group all took a sip from their cups, before Snape continued.

“Ah, and now we come to the interesting part, don't we, Evans?” Harry nodded his head, moving his seat a bit closer to Snape. “You are, of course, well familiar with the Rites of Right, Lucius.” Lucius nodded wordlessly, a stoic mask now firmly in place, for the time being. “Wager to explain towards young Draco? Young Harry already got the full explanation, more or less, from our liaison at Gringotts.” Lucius sneered at Snape's dare, turning towards his son nonetheless.

“We have the Rite of Blood – you know that one, Draco. Then there is the Rite of Conquest – and the Rite of Subjugation. Conquest means you become an Heir by magically defeating the previous heir of a family – through which defeat the right of inheritance are transferred upon you. The Rite of Subjugation does, more or less, the same thing – but on a voluntary base, without the need for a fight. You bind yourself to a magical contract, through which you transfer your right as heir to your master.” Draco nodded along, Narcissa's hand on his shoulder, as Lucius turned back to Snape.

“I can see what you are steering towards, Severus, yet I have questions still. By all means, this should not mean that Potter has fourteen seats.” Severus gave a half-sardonic sneer, before he replied. “No, indeed – if it weren't for the curious fact that, apparently, the Rite of Subjugation can become coterminous with the Rite of Conquest.” Lucius paled once the implication sank in fully, and he almost stuttered, lost for words, when he next spoke. “B-But... th-that would mean – that would mean our Lord is-” Severus interjected coldly. “That the Dark Lord, by all intents and purposes, in the eyes of Lady Magic and her desires, is dead.”
Chapter XX - Tempus Fugit/Tempus Edax Rerum.

Chapter Summary

The die is cast, the Malfoys know - how will they respond? Only time can tell.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Harry could swear that Lucius had almost fainted, right there and then. Narcissa, certainly, didn't seem regretful or sad about hearing that the Dark Lord, with certainty, was dead. Obviously, Lucius had held a sliver of belief that, maybe, someday, Voldemort would return somehow and pick up where he had left off when he had been undone by Harry. No matter now, as Lucius reorientated himself quite quickly indeed. After just half a minute or so, during which a preternatural silence reigned, occasionally broken by the wail of a peacock in the neighbourhood, Lucius righted himself quite regally and spoke up.

“Which seats does Potter have a right to?” A matter-of-fact question, practical through and through, almost beyond belief. And Harry sure doesn't want to belief that Lucius would so easily set aside what, in more ways than one, had defined his whole life. Oh, Harry wouldn't make the mistake of thinking that Lucius Malfoy would be anything but practical, ready to take advantage of a situation that could further the reputation and wealth of his bloodline – but to naïvely think that Lucius would so readily abandon the ideals Voldemort had propagated? No – Harry would never be that naïve again. He had too many scars that had imprinted that lesson...

Snape replied softly, listing all the seats Harry had gained the rights of. “Avery, Carrow, Fleamont, Gaunt, LeStrange, Nott, Potter, Peverell, Rosier, Rowle, Sayre, Travers, Yaxley. There may be others, but these are the ones that Gringotts has been able to verify so soon.” Lucius' posture sagged minutely, his eyes flicking back and forth, his mind obviously racing to calculate the angles through which he could exploit this new situation.

“This can prove troublesome. Nott and Avery are very much still two potent political pawns. They will soon either learn of this change, or be notified via other sources. Has your contact at Gringotts said how this will be arranged?” Lucius spoke as much to Snape as to Harry now, his eyes moving between the two. “Yes. Harry has already signed the contract through which the Seats, estates, titles, etcetera... will be transferred to him – though our contact arranged for this only to become public and official two days from now. After that, those who still habituate the properties will be evicted, rather forcefully I reckon. The contact was quite... looking forward to that.” Snape drawled, and if the sneer he threw at that last statement was both sardonic and sadistic to a degree, Harry didn't blame him. After all, this was all recompense for a youth wasted and a heritage lost.

“Well then, I think it best we secure your standing as the newest political power as soon as possible then, Mr Potter.” Lucius spoke decidedly, his eyes boring into Harry's, without any sign of rage left in them. Instead, they now blazed with a fervour Harry had only seldom seen – most often in his own eyes, at that. It was a fervour to play the game, to toe the lines and beat self-proclaimed masters with their own moves. It was a fervour he had always felt when he subtly manipulated the Dursleys into either leaving him alone or granting him favours. He could work with that, since he knew how to use that.
“Firstly, Severus, Mr Potter, I think it most prudent that we make sure none of this can be directly traced back to either of you. Can I assume you have taken one or more of the titular surnames you were granted by the Rights?” Harry nodded, in sync with Snape. “Well, which one have you taken up besides your original one?” Lucius asked, with a half-drawl half-sneer mixed through the question. “Peverell.” Harry replied, with a haughty air that bordered on boredom, in obvious imitation of Lucius' demeanour. A soft smirk graced Lucius' lips, somewhat pleased apparently by Harry's taunt.

“Perhaps a bit too obvious – too easily traceable to the Potters. What about the Gaunt surname? I can't remember ever having met someone bearing it, and I know for a fact that they were descendants of Slytherin, directly. Perhaps that one would be, ah, less on the nose, so to say. It would keep your opponents guessing about your true identity – until you reveal yourself of course, and it would lent you no small modicum of credibility amongst the Pureblood families. They would all recognize your lineage, immediately.”

“However, it would skew your credibility favourably towards the Dark families, and unfavourably away from the Light families. The Neutral parties wouldn't care, not really, but it is very much worth considering. On the other hand, if you would choose the Peverell surname, it would skew your favours towards the Light families. Either way, you would get credibility with one side and immediate suspicions with the others. Now, my choice, obviously, would be biased, towards the Dark, but I can perhaps offer the middle-ground.” Lucius was now talking more to himself than to Snape and Harry, almost thinking aloud instead.

“You could, publicly, assume the surname Peverell, using its favourable reputation amongst the Light to garner their trust – while I represent you under the name of Gaunt, which would garner favour with the Dark. Thus we can represent you in two different lights, under two names – until you step forward under your real identity, a time by when we have hopefully created strong alliances with families on both sides. Through this, we can make you the most influential person on the Wizengamot, a political powerhouse that none, not even Albus Dumbledore or Fudge, can oppose.”

Harry smiled, laying a hand on Snape's shoulder, speaking with a breath of excitement. “That sounds like a perfect plan to me, Mr Malfoy.” Check – now to wait the next move.

They spoke about various things for the hours afterwards, going inside the house again when dusk began to approach. They partook in an elaborate supper-meal, after which Harry and Draco explored the house, whilst Narcissa, Lucius and Snape discussed many details of their new alliance. Harry found that he actually liked Draco, by the end of the day. At first he had assumed that Draco was spoilt rotten, too dim to understand the intricacies of life due to his sheltered upbringing- but the boy surprised him a few times, with his witty banter, quick thinking and extensive knowledge of things Harry hadn't begun to study yet.

Yes, in a way, he could consider Draco a friend now – or at least an amicable acquaintance. By the time Snape and Harry departed the Malfoy estate via Floo, Harry and Draco had promised to write each-other throughout the next weeks. Lucius and Narcissa gave Snape a hearty farewell, by their standards, and Snape explained then to Harry how they would travel back home tonight. Apparently they were going to Apparate, Snape thinking it best only to do now it now instead of when they came here. “It is a rather violent method of travelling, which may leave you nauseated and disoriented – which you can best recover from by a good night's rest.”

So walking just outside of the protections of the manor and grabbing Snape tightly by the arm, they Apparated out of Malfoy estate and appeared just outside of Spinner's End. Immediately Harry collapsed to his knees, stomach upheaving and relieving itself of all its contents in a desperate
effort to banish the painfully nauseating disorientation that racked Harry's body and head. Snape softly patted Harry's back, waiting until he more-or-less stopped dry-heaving and could get to his feet. Silently Banishing the vile effluvia Harry had expelled upon the cobble stones, Snape guided Harry into the house – and towards his bed.

Harry couldn't fully remember anything that happened after that – and only when his bleary eyes opened the next morning, awoken by the bright sun streaming into his bedroom, did he really he had fallen asleep. The door was slightly ajar and he could hear Philly pottering about in the kitchen downstairs, all kinds of scents and sounds wafting up through the stairwell and into his bedroom. As Harry tried to sit himself upright, he felt a sudden wave of nausea coming up, barely suppressing the bile that rose up into his oesophagus. He swallowed the bitter filth and stumbled his way towards the bathroom, filling a cup with some tap-water and rinsing his mouth from the disgusting aftertastes from the evening before and the fresh wave of nausea.

Eventually, carefully grasping the railing of the stairs and shovelling by the walls of the rooms, Harry arrived in the kitchen – where Snape was enjoying a cup of tea, seated besides a half-decked table obviously awaiting Harry to eat breakfast. "Well, well, seems you finally joined us. Of course, if you had simply called for us, we could've come up and you wouldn't have had to deal with the disorientation and nausea that came with every. Single. Step." The way Severus punctuated those last words made Harry more ashamed of himself than any furious tirade would have. As he sat down at the table, he wordlessly accepted a small vial that Snape handed to him.

"Drink, idiot child, half now, half after breakfast. It will help suppress the nausea and restore your appetite. The dizziness will fade on its own once you've gotten some food in your system. You're evidently dehydrated and half-starved now. Had you not fallen asleep when I brought you up to your room, I would have given it yesternight, along with some food then." Harry almost managed to look abashed at that – it wasn't like he could help prevent himself from fainting after that horrible way of travelling. "How do people get used to it, Severus? It's horrible – like getting pulled inside-out through a straw and then pulled back right again."

Severus chuckled, tapping the vial with a finger, encouraging Harry to swallow half the potion. "Well, Side-Apparition is always worse – way worse. Especially the first time, and even more so when one is as young as you are. You can understand now why I didn't perform this way of travelling before with you – and why I waited until we travelled back home. At least here, you can recover from the side-effects."

Absent-mindedly, Harry took up the vial and swallowed the half-dose. It tasted both bitter and sweet – with an oddly sour aftertaste. If he wouldn't be able to drink something right afterwards, he very much doubted he could stomach the second half as easily later on. Breakfast was hearty and tasty, as usual per Philly's excellent cooking. And as he downed the second dose of the vial, Harry followed it up with a good cup of coffee with a dash of milk and three cubes of sugar. He wasn't usually a coffee-person, but this warranted a change of pace – tea wouldn't do to get rid of the aftertaste.

As the day wore on, they continued with their normal routine. They'd had to make a few exceptions in the past weeks, but overall Snape was more than pleased with Harry's progress, all things considered. As evening neared, an owl dropped off a letter – which Snape read through several times, before handing it over to him. It was from Lucius, and at first glance seemed to be merely a simple recount of the events of yesterday, with a few things unmentioned but implied. He wasn't sure why Lucius would sent this, and was about to ask – when his mind suddenly hedged upon a few odd things. Certain letters being uncapitalised when they should've been capitalized, a few
mis-spellings, some letters written backwards – it was a code. Yes, it was rather obvious when Harry knew what he was looking for, so he doubted this was what he should be paying attention to.

So he held the letter to the light of the fire in the hearth, noticing a few Runes hidden behind letters that they became later on – very subtly hidden and difficult to notice. And then he also noticed the code hidden in the first letters of each paragraph, his attention drawn to it by the hidden Runes. Several layers of code, some to confuse, others to distract. He put down the letter, took a small parchment from the table and started writing down the small fragments of the code he had managed to find. Then, as he racked his brain about other types of code he had ever learned, he took the letter back up and went over to the fire. Holding it high above the flames for a few seconds, Harry noticed with satisfaction how new letters became visible, sandwiched between plainly legible letters and words – another piece of the code.

As he wrote it all down, and began using several substitution-cyphers and refraction-cyphers, he cracked the code. And laughed out loud. It read thus, simply, “ASK SVRS”. Simple, succinct, ultimately pointless to decipher indeed. He turned to Snape, who had simply watched Harry figure it out with a small smile on his lips. “Well done, Harry – though a simple spell would have revealed as much, and far sooner. I shall teach it tomorrow. For now, however, you did well.”

“Well, Severus, what is the message then?” Harry queried with a smirk in his own face. Snape smiled softly, gesturing Harry to sit down as he took a seat in the chair nearest the fire. “Lucius has made contact with several of the Dark families on your behalf, with a few exceptions of course – such as Nott. Of course, Lucius hasn't divulged much, but most got the message quickly – and several notable families would wish to make your acquaintance personally sometime before the next Wizengamot meeting. As such, Lucius and I deemed it necessary to ask you what you want to do.”

Harry thought for a while, thinking about all he knew about the political landscape in the Wizarding world – and he found his knowledge woefully small. “I am not sure, Severus. At the moment, above anything else, I want to know this world. What are the current politics? What are divisive issues, what are not? What does each side actively promote for and against? I don't know any of these things, though I know a bit. There is a clear dichotomy, between the Dark and the Light, with a third party between them, the Gray or Neutral. This much is clear from all I heard until known.”

“But I don't know what each party wants! I understand that the Dark is very much a group of Pureblood families – and from what I gathered, they wager that a Wizard is not a true Wizard if there is a Muggle-ancestor anywhere in their family-history. Which is obvious hogwash, as this belief would dictate you to inbreed within a population of less than two thousand – even less if you'd eliminate any family with Muggle-heritage, effectively reducing that number to a statistic zero. So where do they draw the line practically?”

“And the Light, what do they fight for? Do they fight against the Dark, merely for the sake of fighting against it? Is there a larger goal they strife towards – such as Muggle-born protections, or ways to introduce children raised by Muggles in ways that allow them to understand their Wizarding heritage and culture? Like what you have done for me? What is it that they really want? If Dumbledore is the paragon of the Light, then I have no high hopes as to what to expect...”

Harry gave a heavy sigh, to which Snape gave him a soft pat on the arm. “And that is why Lucius and I are here, Evans. Lucius knows the going-ons behind the Dark families like nobody else – and through Dumbledore, I have more than an inkling of the threads he pulls. Speaking of which...” Snape drawled, pulling another letter from a pocket on the inside of his robes. It was scrabbled with Xenophilius' telltale hand. “Xenophilius has some good contacts as well, it seems. For all his
fanciful tales, apparently he has always maintained the careful relations with other families that his late wife made during their all-too-short marriage.”

Harry nodded, taking the letter and quickly reading through it. Amicable contact with the Longbottoms, Prewetts, Ollivander, Shacklebolt, … Yes, Harry could see how this would be useful. Most of these families belonged to the Sacred Twenty-Eight – which Harry had read much about in the books Snape had bought for him before. With these combined contacts, Harry and Snape could make a good headway before January. But now he had to focus on what exactly he wanted to change in the political landscape – and he also knew better than to blunt-force a change. It would only lead to open animosity and distrust. If anything, Harry could already sense that the Dark families were very much traditionalists – changing the world overnight would very much be their worst nightmare, in a sense.

“Do you know who the Laws advantage most, Severus? Is there an obvious precedent that favours Pure-Bloods on all accounts – or is it all a lot fairer than I feared?” Harry asked, Snape listening to the question with an intense look of curiosity, scrutiny, and mild confusion. There was so much behind the question, but Harry knew it was the most important one that should be asked. If Harry could level the playing field first, make sure the Laws didn't favour one group over the other, he could proceed much faster. It wouldn't do if the Dark families had an obvious advantage over the Light families – or the Pure-Bloods over the Half-Bloods and Muggle-Bourne.

“In general,” Snape began, eyes closed as he tried to remember to the best of his ability, “no single side is obviously favoured above any other. However, in practice, those who wield the most money can get their views best pushed through. After all, bribes can be disguised as anonymous donations – even if everybody knows who paid the bribe. Still, the general framework is relatively... fair and equal. Unfortunately, the bureaucratic engine has unfavourably burdened our Laws with infinite number of addenda and adjectives. Where once the core Laws were simple and clear, there have been so many additions to them that to navigate them now is like walking through a maze in the dark of the night.”

“So, eliminate the option of possible bribery, clear guidelines on the anonymity of donations, trim the fat from the oxen that is our bloated Law-system. Oh, that's not much – sooo easy...” Harry drawled with a sarcastic sneer. Still, it was a beginning – but to see where they could start, he would need Lucius' guidance. Harry was sure that the Malfoy patriarch would try to bend Harry's words in his favour, but Harry could deal with that hurdle when it came around.

Harry spend much of the evening's remainder writing down all the questions he could come up with. And began writing out a simple ground-work for a new Law – which would ensure limitations on donations and briberies. After that,well, first he needed a good night's rest. Saying good night to Severus and Philly, Harry laid down in his bed and let his mind wander – until, after a while, everything slowly went dark...

If only it had stayed dark – instead he was plunged in several nightmares. The worst of which was one where he was nothing but a shadow, writhing in pain as it wandered aimlessly through and endless forest. It very much felt like a memory, rather than a dream – it had none of that hazy quality that dreams usually had for him. Rather, it was full of minute details he'd rather not notice. And the dream only ended when the shade he was, resting in its filthy den of corpses of mice, rats, snakes – was suddenly startled by the arrival of a strange figure, dressed in purple robes and wearing some strange headdress...

Harry almost woke up screaming, covered in a sheen of sweat and fear, the whole room reeking of...
fear and anger and prepubescent hormones. Throwing the blankets off, Harry walked over to the window and opened it wide, letting a breeze of fresh air into the stuffy chamber. Desperately he tried to hold on to the memory of the dream, but already most of it had faded away. Quickly grabbing a paper, he wrote down the few details he still remembered – before they too would be forgotten. He had forgotten almost everything – but the figure still stood out in his mind, maybe because it was the last thing he had seen before he had awoken so abruptly. And as he wrote down a description, he thought he knew something, that he had seen the mystery stranger. But he couldn't readily remember – or make any immediate connections. Perhaps in Diagon Alley somewhere? That seemed the most likely, he thought with a designated sigh.

He used the state of his bed to practice his Scourge Charm, cleaning it off the sweat and grime from the night, before making up the bed and going to take a quick shower. And as he undressed, he caught a glimpse of himself in the bathroom mirror. His hair had grown out quite a bit – usually, Aunt Petunia waged war with it every four weeks, often to no avail, with her only victory being a manageable length. Now, Harry's hair nearly reached his shoulders – and for the first time ever, it looked less wild than ever before. The weight of the added length seemed to tame the unruly mess somewhat and now, at least, it looked more wild than unkempt. Small victories, Harry guessed as he took in the rest.

His stay with Snape had added weight on his lithe frame – and seemingly a few inches too. Somehow, he grown quite a bit ever since Snape had taken him in. And Harry guessed it all had to do with Snape's insistence that Harry followed a strict course of Nutrient Potions and a balanced diet as prepared by Philly. And Harry really couldn't fault Severus for it – for the first time in his life, Harry found he actually looked his age, rather than three years younger than he actually was. He let his hands wander over the new curves his age-appropriate weight granted him and didn't dislike how it looked or felt. He really should remember to thank Severus, for this, for everything.

Shaking himself from the reverie and stepping away from the mirror, Harry let the water of the shower run till it was warm. And when he arrived in the kitchen, hair slicked back still wet and dressed in a form-fitting dress-robe, Harry strode over to Severus who had just stood up. And as Severus was about to ask what was wrong, Harry swung his arms around Severus' waist and hugged him tightly. Severus, obviously surprised and somewhat shocked, stood still for a moment, before letting his arms land on Harry's shoulders as he returned the embrace.

"Thanks for everything, Severus." Harry said, with a small voice, wavering with emotion, as Severus merely hugged him a bit tighter and hushed the child. "Hush now, idiot child. You are very welcome.” Philly stood gazing at the sight for a few seconds, before she remembered her duties and began cooking a hearty, heavy, English breakfast for young master Harry. And as Harry attacked the English breakfast before him, ten minutes later, Philly could only be glad to see how Severus, for the first time in years, smiled softly as he watched another human being. She had never seen him quite so... relaxed...

The morning was filled with a comprehensive re-orientation of all that Harry had learned from Potions in the past weeks – and after lunch, Snape took him down to the lab to prepare his first really intricate Potion. It would be a simple Antidote – and Snape would oversee the whole process, testing the end-result himself once it was finished. Harry felt somewhat nervous, yet tried his best to follow the steps to the letter. Occasionally, Snape intervened, showing Harry an alternative method for certain steps, always intended to gain a better result or to speed up the process. In the end, the Antidote looked exactly as the book had specified, finished two hours earlier than should've been the case normally.

Snape took the vial of Antidote and strode over to a workbench in the corner of the lab, where a small moving plant stood beneath a Victorian ventilation-unit. Setting the vial aside, Snape picked
up another vial, carefully handling it with gloves on and dripping three small drops from it with a pipet. The effect was quite instantaneous – the plant slowly began to grow brown where the droplets had hit it, shrivelling up at a moderate rate. Quickly setting aside the Poison, Snape took the Antidote and let fall six small droplets in various parts of the plant.

Harry watched as the plant slowly stopped shrivelling up, its brown spots and decayed leaves slowly halting in their degradation – before new chlorophylls began greening up the plant once more, and a fresh breath of life seemed to pulse through the decayed branches and leaves. Snape gave a small smile, watching as the plant became a perfect example of health once more before their eyes. Eventually, once the plant stopped regrowing and there was no indication of any change for a few minutes, Snape cast a few diagnostic charms – before, finally, turning to Harry.

“Well done, Evans. A perfect Antidote to Wither-Death, I would say. I do believe that you've mastered the basics of Potioneering, for now.” Harry's smile, at that proclamation, was almost blinding – and they left the lab together, after Snape Vanished the small plant and locked away both the Poison and Antidote. Going up to the kitchen, Snape desired Philly to cook up a nice ice-coupe for Harry, leaving the child and elf for a few minutes as he went to his study to retrieve a few thesis’ he had yet to grade before the new school-year would begin. Seated at the table, Harry eating his ice-cream, Philly enjoying a cup of cacao, and Snape grading the papers, they spent the next few hours in a comfortable silence together.

Dinner followed soon afterwards, followed by the accustomed summary of the lessons Harry had learned the past weeks – before a knock on the door interrupted their lesson. Rising to open the door, Snape gestured to Harry to stay seated while he would admit their visitor. Opening the door revealed Lucius and Xenophilius, looking at each-other in muted disdain – as if it were expected to dislike one another but the drive to make that dislike genuine was curiously absent. Probably more politics, Harry thought, as the two visitors made their way inside and got seated between Harry and Snape on the sofa. Introductions were made, the usual polite greetings and such, before Lucius pushed forward the first item of the agenda they were to discuss.

“Firstly, Mr Potter, it seems the decision to utilize the Gaunt surname was a brilliant strategy. Several Dark families well remember the name, even if their opinion of the last holders of that surname is less than ideal. It seems that the last Gaunts to be really known were a pitiful family, thoroughly afflicted and practically undone by generations of inbreeding between cousins and siblings. Let us summarize it to the point that the last Gaunt alive was imprisoned in Azkaban for the murder of a family of Muggles, and only cared, for the last years of his life, about a ring he had lost.”

“Thus, if we want to utilize the Gaunt surname to its fullest potential, we shall need to employ some propaganda, to show outwardly that your sanity is very grounded and untarnished by any possibility of inbreeding and the likes. Not a too difficult task, not for me at least, but the faster we begin, the better the results will be. As for alliances, it so turns out that the Gaunt still have several... betrothal-contracts extant, from better times, so to say. Notable, for your purposes, to the families Greengrass, Nott, and this was very much a surprise for me, I assure you, the Malfoys. Of course, how you want to... use these contracts, is very much up to you – and I very much doubt you would actually honour any of these betrothal-contracts so soon. Such matters are more for when one has come of age, obviously.”

“Anyway, there is a possibility for several alliances to be made in the name of Gaunt, certainly, with a rather large number of families, larger than I had anticipated. Though I guess I should not have been surprised, really – after all, Pure-Blood families place enormous importance on title and lineage.” Lucius finished, taking a cup of tea from Philly, as she'd entered the room with a small trolley. Xenophilius graciously accepted a cup as well, whilst Snape asked Philly for a small glass
of cherry with his tea. Harry couldn't really remember having seen Snape drink cherry before – it
struck him as odd, so he kept an eye on his guardian.

As Lucius fell silent and began sipping his cup of tea, Xenophilius spoke up his his stead. “Yes,
indeed, much the same can be said from my end, Harry. I have relayed your message to the Prewett
heiress, about your decision to re-instate her inheritance. She was quite overcome, I can assure you,
with joy – but also with suspicion and distrust. Though she is very much a perfectly wonderful
woman, Molly Prewett has suffered much heartbreak in her life, especially with the death of her
brothers. So the renewal, or rather reinstation, of her position as Heiress to the Prewett fortune, was
bound to make her suspicious. However, considering it has already been cleared by Gringotts in
advance, per your request – in difference to the inheritance you have decided to keep, she will soon
find out all is order, legal and just indeed. So I expect her to become a focal ally amongst the Light
families.”

“Of course,” Xenophilius continued, “It could not be expected for things to go smoothly on both
sides. Unfortunately, though the name Peverell would certainly hold respect amongst many Light
and Neutral families, not too many hold stock with the claim that, suddenly, after hundreds of years
of no Peverells being known, the name would once more become valid and legal. As such, there is
a massive amount of suspicion behind the fact you have taken up the surname. Some believe,
rather fantastical, that you are either a fool, a madman, or the very Dark Lord come back under a
pseudonym to hoodwink them all, somehow. Rather fantastical, of course.” Xenophilius almost
cackled, somewhat maniacally, as he told this.

When Snape gave an amused snort, Harry took immediate notice, again. That simple action, too,
was not right. Harry looked away from Xenophilius and focussed on Snape, watching his subtle
gestures – then turning to Lucius, and observing the Malfoy patriarch for a few minutes. And then,
finally, something clicked – seems he was being played for a fool.

“Father, what are your thoughts?” Harry asked nonchalantly, looking at 'Snape', seeing the man
perk up and readily responding. “Why, I can't really see what my opinion would say here, Harry.
Politics aren't my speciality.” And if the previous clues hadn't betrayed the truth, that did it. “Of
course not, father, that would Mr Malfoy's, wouldn't it?” And Harry turned to 'Lucius', eyes hard
and with a raised brow, waiting for the man to admit defeat and realize Harry had seen through the
charade.

Certainly, 'Lucius' quickly realised the game was up, chuckling softly as his demeanour quite
suddenly became very familiar. His posture, expression, the way he held himself, it all instantly
changed and became very familiar. “Well done, Evans. It took you a bit longer than I'd have liked,
but not bad for a first time, especially considering you don't know the methods we utilized.”
Taking out his wand, 'Lucius' aimed it at 'Snape', chanting a clear 'Finite Incantatem' as he waved
the wand. Instantly, 'Snape' began morphing, almost dissolving and changing, into the figure of a
Lucius Malfoy wearing a pair of dark dress-robes that were just a size too small, evidently loaned
by Snape for this exercise. Then 'Lucius' cast the same spell at himself, revealing himself to be
Snape, wearing Lucius' all too extravagant robes that were a size too large and hung comically
from Snape's slender frame.

“Do you understand why we undertook this charade, Evans?” Snape drawled, gesturing at Lucius
and himself, while the Malfoy patriarch was shifting uncomfortably in the too-small clothes –
Harry could even swear he heard something rip as Lucius squirmed. Snape, apparently, heard it as
well, as he rolled his eyes, cast a non-verbal spell, and instantly changed their outfits back as well.
Casting a silent Reparo on the ripped sleeve, Snape watched Harry connect the dots on his mind.
“To understand that appearances can be deceiving, to learn to know the small details that make up
people's behaviours, to memorize all the little details that can distinguish friend from foe?” Harry
wagered, quite certain yet unsure of his train of thinking. Either way, he was sure they did it so he could learn a vital lesson.

“Quite correct, Mr Potter. Though perhaps a rather drastic, and at the same time timid, example, it is an attempt to teach you to look beyond the immediate facades your political opponents will employ in any public setting. Once you enter the game of politics, you are playing at theatre, taking up a role that is to be played on the stage that is government. If you fail to pick up the subtle cues in the masks that all politicians wear, you place yourself open to exploitation and abuse. And if we wish your influence to become a solid rock in any party, then we need you to understand the game. Of course, you'll ever be present in the actual meetings – or at the Ministry, for that matter. But it is essential, nonetheless. All lessons learned here, for this purpose, you can also employ elsewhere – such as at Hogwarts, to make political connections with the parents of certain children, by becoming their fast friends or by taking up the role of leadership or advisor.”

Harry nodded, he could easily see why all this could be useful. And so he listened through the long discussion the adults began to have between themselves. Occasionally interjecting with a question, Harry otherwise contended himself with merely listening and learning. And after another hour had passed, when Snape casually mentioned the late hour, they wrapped up their discussion and prepared to leave each to their own. Harry rose with the adults, quickly speaking up before Lucius left as well.

“Mr. Malfoy, a moment please, if I may?” Harry queried, as the Malfoy patriarch rose. Nodding to Snape, Malfoy turned to Harry, as Snape led Xenophilius outside, half-closing the door behind them as Snape and Xenophilius talked a bit outside. Philly cleared off the table, taking away the empty cups, as Lucius fully faced Harry. “Yes, Mr Potter, how can I help you?” Harry bit his lip, a tad nervous now that he faced the Malfoy patriarch fully, and alone. “Why are you helping me?” Harry asked, because he truly couldn't comprehend why Lucius would be doing this for him. “Ah,” Lucius drawled, “I wondered when you'd ask.” Seating himself again, momentarily, Lucius responded with an air of merriment. “True, Mr Potter, you undid the Dark Lord, the one person I was prepared to follow to the end of this world, ten years ago. But, also, maybe you need to understand why I followed him.” Gesturing Harry to sit down, for the moment, Lucius continued. “I followed the Dark Lord because he was not only the epitome of all my Pure-Blood beliefs, but also because He was an immensely powerful Sorcerer. True, we're all Wizards and Witches, in our little community – even those... tainted branches of families, loath as I am to admit it.”

“Yet... There are few paragons among us – those avatars of power and prowess which elevates them above the regular rabble, and nobility, alike. Those we call Sorcerers. Merlin, surely, was the most well-known Sorcerer of Western history. And The Dark Lord, Lord Voldemort, was the strongest since Grindelwald, yes, even since Merlin. At least, so was my belief. And then – then you proved me wrong.” Lucius’ tone became hard as steel, cold as ice. “Do you know what it did to me, boy, to see my plans, my hopes, my... beliefs? So casually upended? Undone?! To hear how a babe, scanty a year old, undid the greatest Sorcerer since Merlin and Morgana?!?” Lucius was almost raving, definitely ranting. His gaze was filled with hatred, pain, anger. But just as suddenly as he became so heated, he cooled down again.

“But I am not a stupid man, Mr Potter. I clawed my way out of the mire the Dark Lord's defeat threw me in. I managed to evade Azkaban – because I had power, still, and money. I had the right connections – and it saved me. If just barely” Lucius gave such a heavy sigh, as if a lifetime of burdens oppressed him, all at once. “I have had ten years to settle the consequences. To re-orient my beliefs, and my priorities. And now, Mr Potter, my family comes first. I had no son yet, when I first joined the Dark Lord – and having children of your own has a way of forcing you to consider other things than you previously would have.”
“So here I am, fully capable to recognize in you the better Sorcerer. And what I have seen until now confirms my suspicions. There you stand, raised by Muggles these past ten years – and already you can grasp the basics of Magic that takes others the better part of their lives to understand, let alone master. Yes, Mr Potter, I believe it no accident that the Dark Lord failed to kill you. And Malfoys are, if nothing else, practical. Supporting you is clearly the best course of action. You have a vision, even if you don't realize it yet – already you engage yourself with politics on a scale that most Heirs do not tangle with until long after they have come of age. And Severus had told me of your remarkable wand. Yes, indeed, Mr Potter, I can foresee that we can expect marvellous things from you.”

“So, Mr Potter, does that satisfy your curiosity?” Lucius drawled, at last, concluding his rambling monologue. Harry gazed at the elder man, locking eyes with him for what seemed minutes on end, before slowly nodding. Lucius nodded back, slowly rising, and holding out a hand towards Harry. “I look forward to working with you, Mr Potter.” Harry rose as well, taking the offered hand and shaking it with vigour. “As do I, Mr Malfoy.” Lucius gave a small laugh. “Please, Mr Potter, call me Lucius.” Harry smiled, responding in kind. “Well then, Lucius, call me Harry.” The answer made Lucius give a knowing smirk, still shaking Harry's hand. After that, Lucius let go of Harry's hand, opened the door and stepped into the night's cool breeze. Xenophilius and Snape halted their whispered conversation, stepping aside to let Lucius pass, who gave a polite goodbye to Severus and a curt nod to Xenophilius – before disappearing with a loud crack. Not a minute later, Xenophilius too Disapparated and left Snape alone in the night.

“So, Evans, what did you think of tonight's meeting?” Snape finally asked, when he had closed the door and guided Harry into the dimly-lit kitchen, where Philly was busy cleaning the cups, pot and kettle in the sink, waving her small hands like a conductor, guiding the floating dishes through the soap and rinse-water. Harry sat down opposite Snape, hands clasped together on the table. “It was certainly informative – it's just all a bit much. I mean, I'm still a kid, ya know. It's gonna take a while to really really wrap my head around it all.” Snape gave a small smile, knowing all too well what Harry meant – it all was rather much, especially for an eleven-year-old kid who had never had to deal with politics or magic of any kind before.

“Well, anyway, Evans, I suggest you drink some warm milk and head to bed afterwards. Tomorrow, your new status will be announced, as Holder of fourteen Seats. Lucius, in the meanwhile, will do some damage control, by supporting the Dark families you just bereaved of their heritage, in the name of Gaunt. Eventually, and of this I am dead certain, he will sway them to support the Seat of Gaunt in all its decisions. But that's neither here or now.” Snape waved the remark away, as Philly set a warm mug of milk before Harry, after which she returned to her dishes – which were merrily scrubbing themselves in the soap-filled sink.

And so the pair went to bed, Harry standing in his bedroom doorway uncertainly – before he turned around and hugged Severus again, with a beautiful ache in his heart, for the first time ever. “Good night, Severus.” Snape simply hugged back, once more, before Harry detached himself, closed the bedroom door and prepared for a good night's sleep. Snape stared at the closed door for a few minutes, before retreating to his own bedroom and settling in for the night as well.

Once more, Harry was plunged into dreams of memories and nightmares. Once more, he was that shapeless presence, that ghost of a presence, haunting a dark forest populated only by spiders, snakes, and rats. It was the same forest as before, but it felt strangely older now, as if more time had passed since. And somehow, though he knew not how, Harry knew that it was not a matter of hours or days, but months and years.
Again, he slunk between bare trees and rotten trunks, hunting half-dead prey, subsisting on what scant remains of life-force was left in these bodies where the soul was already moving on to the great unknown. A prospect of existence that filled Harry – no, not Harry, but whatever thing's eyes he was looking through – it was something that terrified it, filled it with such dread that it could not bear to even contemplate mortal existence any longer. No, it longed to remain, to linger, to stay relevant and known and not forgotten.

It had such a sad way of thinking, Harry realized. The thing saw death in every shadow, non-recognition in that final end all things have.

And then the dream ended again, similarly to the previous one. A figure, again, approached, much smaller than the previous one. The figure, hunched and balding, with scratching fingers and twitchy movements, smelled of man and rat alike. It was both prey and servant, somehow – and the ghost-presence knew this. It readily leaped towards the bald rat-man, screaming for sustenance and -

And Harry awoke, once more, almost screaming, drenched again in sweat and fear. Oh Merlin, he thought, he really wished this wasn't going to become a routine nightmare. Harry wasn't sure he would be able to cope with waking up every morning in fear. Leaping from his bed, Harry scrambled for the paper he had written the previous dream on. Finding it quickly, he frantically tried writing down whatever he remembered, not caring if his handwriting was messy or not. He knew, instinctively realized, that these dreams were important somehow. He remembered more now, or at least he remembered it longer before it started to fade.

He wrote down the forest, the time-difference, a description of the rat-man – all of it. Or, at least, he tried. When he stopped, he had written several paragraphs, substantially more than the previous time. It was more coherent too, there were many less leaps between flashes of remembrance, and what he had felt or realized rather than only seen. Maybe he should show this to Severus, he idly thought – but a small part of him feared he would seem pedantic, or even childish, coming crying to Severus because of a few bad dreams.

No, for now he wouldn't bother Snape with it. But if it continued, if the dreams kept happening and changing, he would bring it to Severus. If not for his own sanity, than to see if it meant anything. Harry dearly hoped he wasn't going mental – he could really miss going insane, on top of everything else. Wiping his damp hair from his face, Harry drugged to the bathroom, determined to get rid of the angst-sweat from clinging on him.

As Harry stepped from the shower, he looked in the mirror-glass. Staring back at him was an eleven-year old child, just growing into puberty. His hair, raven-black and long, unruly like a nest of snakes that longed for freedom, but less wild now that it was longer and brushed his shoulders. He liked it now, he had realized this yesterday. Before, he had always hated how it made him an object of disdain for his Aunt – whenever she had wrestled with it, trying to cut it back, nagging how even his hair couldn't abide to normalcy and had to be freakish. How he loathed that word, now. Freak.

Any mother would have called Harry a beautiful child, even if he was a bit of runt. He was an inch or so smaller than even the smallest children his age – a direct consequence of how... happy the Dursleys had been with his presence, and his biological need for sustenance. Less was more, they reasoned – but only when it came to Harry. Dudley, at the other end of the extreme, not only stood a full inch or two higher than most children his age – he also could easily fit two children his age in his rotund corpulence.

Harry's skin was well-toned, a hazelnut brown, partly due his genetics, partly due his countless
hours tending the yard. His father had been a tone or-so darker, Harry could vaguely recall from snatches of conversation at the Dursleys – Aunt Petunia had always complained how Harry's mother had married a 'filthy immigrant'. And the papers Gnalte had given to Harry had mentioned that the Potters, though the name was very much from England, eventually had married into a family of Indian descent. So Harry really was the least likely example of someone able to be counted as Pure-Blood. Sure, his mother had been Muggle-Bourne, but Gnalte had said that it wasn't uncommon for Muggle-Bourne families to have a Wizard or Witch a few generations back – usually a Squib, a non-Magical Wizard or Witch. And even if Harry was technically Half-Blood, Gnalte had said that Harry could always lay claim on the popular adage that, somewhere in the Evans lineage, hidden due to obscurity, lay some Squib ancestor waiting to be discovered.

Lilly had been pale, with eyes as green as spring grass, and auburn hair that flared a brilliant ruby-red in the full light of the sun – and those had been Snape's words. A bit poetic and melodramatic, but Harry had gotten the point. Her fair skin was probably the reason that Harry could pass for someone of Anglo-Saxon descent, as if he was just fairly toned because of being out in the sun. And she had given him one thing that was all hers, unmarred by James' characteristics – her eyes. Harry's eyes were as vibrant green as hers had been – though in a very different way. Snape had said that, where Lilly's eyes reminded him of spring grass, Harry's eyes reminded him the luminous brilliance that usually accompanied the Curse that had given Harry his scar. But Harry had already had this particular colour of eyes when he was born – so Snape had mused that it was probably some perverse twist of fate.

Harry inspected his skin, observing the numerous small scars that were memento's to the years he had spent with the Dursleys. A fat-burn on his left arm from frying bacon, a small scar on the back of his right hand where Dudley had cut him 'accidentally' with his toy-knife, a discolouration on his left leg where Petunia had once disinfected a cut with bleach “because we're not gonna waste the good rubbing alcohol on a freak like you”. Mostly memento's from the years before Harry had learned the various tells of the Dursleys – before he knew how to... control their violent and abusive tendencies. Once Harry had learned, studied them, new scars became less frequent. And eventually, no new scars were added.

His fingers ghosted the pale blotch on his leg, remembering how badly the bleach had stung when Petunia had poured it on a rag and roughly wiped the rag across the cut Harry had suffered whilst mowing the grass. She had rubbed and rubbed, almost tearing the cut open into a three-inch wide abrasion. Finally, when it had finally stopped bleeding, the cut vascular veins burned closed by the bleach, she had thrown the rag into Harry's hands – warning him he better wash it separately from the good clothes, or he would suffer the consequences. Yeah, Harry thought bitterly, such motherly love she had given to him, her orphaned nephew. And though, somewhere deep down inside, he was glad they at least didn't drop him off at an orphanage, for some fucking reason – he was still pretty sure that, at the very least, in the orphanage they wouldn't have cleaned his wounds with bleach...

Harry didn't realize he was crying bitter tears, until they landed, in irregular pattern, on the skin of the marked leg. He wiped them hastily away with the back of his hand, trying to reign in his emotions. He had always done so, whenever they came close to the surface. The Dursley household had no room for the meaningless tears from a freak like Harry. Petunia had certainly never bothered noticing them – and Uncle Vernon only ever responded by berating Harry for being a weak-willed waste of space, for being soft and useless.

Harry tried his tears, forcing down the nasty memories that came with them – and took a few deep, shuddering breaths. Composing himself for a few minutes, he finally dressed himself and exited the bathroom. Descending the stairs, Harry could hear the soft chatter between Severus and Philly, unintelligible yet comforting all the same. Spinner's End had come to fill every expectation Harry
ever had of what a real household looked like.

He had a guardian who cared for him, for the first time in his conscious memory, and a female figure who was as close to a mother as Harry would ever allow anyone to come. He very much liked Philly – her general presence was a comfort, with her energetic buzzing about the house, fulfilling the household-chores. She really made the house come alive, with warmth and a caring touch. It was no wonder that Snape had held her in employment for so long – Harry very much doubted if the man would've been so open as he was without her presence by his side those long years.

“Good morning, Evans. Slept well?” Snape asked rather uncommittedly, as he paged through the Morning Edition of the Daily Prophet. “Could've been better – had a nightmare.” Snape looked up, a small amount of worry in his eyes. “Do you have nightmares often, Evans?” Harry replied, speaking through the cereal he was chewing – not exactly appetizing, but he knew Snape wouldn't care if it was about something like this. “Not often, had a few lately – but not really sure what to make of them.” Snape spoke gruffly, lost in thought. “What's a Mind-healer?” Harry asked, as he shovelled another spoon of cereal into his mouth.

“Mind-healers are the Wizarding equivalent of psychologists and psychiatrists, though, of course, with a Magical twist. They, like their Muggle equivalent, have been trained to help you sort through the unconscious troubles that the conscious mind often wishes to ignore in favour of feeling good in the present moment. Of course, like a physical wound, let a mental trauma fester too long and it'll become all the worse and difficult to treat.” Snape answered, in a half-hearted attempt at drawling but evidently a bit concerned with Harry's mental state. Sighing inwardly, Harry had expected a conversation like this to prop up eventually. “Do you think you should see a Mind-healer, Evans? No one would think less of you, considering what happened before...” Snape let the question hang in the air, waiting for Harry to respond on his own pace.

“I dunno – maybe. I mean, it happened and I survived. Isn't that enough?” The wobble in his voice betrayed the emotional turmoil that raged through Harry's mind, Snape could notice. The child desperately wanted affirmation, but Severus couldn't readily attain what Harry wanted him to affirm. “Yes, you survived, Evans, but that does not mean it did not scar you. Child, to live in a household like that...” Here Snape fell silent for a second. “It is something I know too well.” And now Harry could see in Severus' eyes that same tiredness he had glimpsed before. “t-They hurt you too? Your... parents?”

Snape simply nodded, leaving Harry to make the conclusion himself. Even now, decades later, it still formed a painful memory for Severus. Harry fell silent for a while, as each ate their breakfast, Snape picking the Daily Prophet back up and resuming his reading. Eventually, Harry spoke up, voice soft and demure. “I – I think I do want to see a Mind-healer...” Snape merely nodded. “Then I shall arrange an appointment before the end of the month. Afterwards, I'll see if the Mind-healer can come to Hogwarts instead, to continue the appointments – if you want that.” Harry nodded, think it might be best...

They ate their breakfast in silence, until Snape began chuckling with a mirth Harry hadn't seen before. “My, my – seems the news reached thé person who could blow it out of proportion beyond belief and make it seem like the return of the Dark lord.” Harry's interest was immediately piqued and he held out his hand towards Snape, who handed over the page of the Prophet that he had just read.

“WIZENGAMOT OVERTURNED – PURE-BLOOD FAMILIES OUSTED FROM
ANCESTRAL HOMES. HAS A NEW LORD RISEN?"

“Early this morning, the 22th of August 1991, delivered via an internal communique at the Ministry – and through official Ministry missives to the families affected, nine (9) Pure-Blood families were ousted from their ancestral homes and stripped of their ancestral heritages by Decree of the Minister of Magic, fuelled by the Claimance of Heritage through the Rites of Conquest, Subjugation, and Heritage. As a direct result of this claimance, which was verified a month ago by the Head-Goblin of the Wizarding Bank of Gringott's, new investigations were initiated for a yet unknown reason – though inside-information as gained by the illustrious Rita Skeeter, implies that the claimance occurred, among others, through the family of Gaunt, of which the last Heir extant was none other than Tom Marvolo Riddle, better known in the Wizarding World as the Dark Lord Voldemort.”

“Has the Dark Lord returned then? If so, why did He strip so many Pure-Blood families of their status and power? Many questions remain unanswered, and several of the families have already written to the Ministry and the Daily Prophet, publicly proclaiming they will not sit by idly and will actively oppose thus decision – which in their eyes was biased and unfounded, and therefore illegal. More information will be available in an extended article in tomorrow's Evening Edition of the Daily Prophet.”

Harry read the article through a few time, as he was surprised that for some reason new investigations were opened into the families that had been stripped of their wealth. Why? Because they had Subjugated to Voldemort? Why hadn't they been investigated before? Maybe he should ask Lucius about this, as Harry doubted Snape would know much about this. Harry was about to discuss this with Severus, when a small owl suddenly swooped into the kitchen, dropped an envelope and immediately darted back out through the open kitchen window. Harry was about to pick up the blood-red letter, when Snape swatted away his hand, took out his wand and began chanting a spell.

Harry was about to ask why Snape had done that – when his attention was returned to the letter, which began trembling and a small panic began to build in Harry's chest when the corners of the letter began to smoke. Harry ducked beneath the table, as Snape finished the spell – and a small bang instantly rendered the smoking letter inert. The smoke stopped billowing from the corners and it fall completely silent and still. Snape tapped the letter with his wand a few times, before picking it up and slowly opening it. Slowly reading through it, he eventually closed the letter again and placed it down on the table. Tapping it a few times, it became encapsulated in a small bubble – which Snape handed over to Philly. “Place it in the Vault, Philly, you know which one.”

“What was that?” Harry asked, as he crawled out from underneath the table. Severus gave a sigh, as he sat back down and resumed his reading. “That, Evans, was a Howler – a way of communicating one's displeasure towards someone that is about as subtle as shooting down a mosquito with a triple-barrel canon.” The way Severus sneered at the explanation was more than ample to show exactly what the man thought of Howlers. “Of course, since they are merely enchanted letters, there is an effective Counter-Charm that can be used to render them inert once more. If you're quick enough to react before the Howler fully activates, of course. No matter – though its contents do demonstrate that you have made an enemy by accepting your inheritance, Evans. Remind me to send a letter later today to Lucius – I think it best that lord Nott is reminded of his place in the political picture, especially since he is no longer a Lord.”

Harry sat back down, silently eating his eggs and ham, thinking about what had just happened. Of course, he hadn't expected that all would be well. He was bound to make some enemies with his
actions, after all. Not even ten minutes later, another owl swooped in and out, dropping another Howler. Snape rolled his eyes, standing up, was about to cast the Counter-Charm – which had the unfortunate effect of suddenly rebounding and flinging the man against the wall behind him. This Howler, obviously, was very attentive at delivering its message.

Snape had barely recovered from the shock when the Howler finally opened and began broadcasting its contents – in a loud booming voice that reverberated across the walls of the small kitchen.

“YOU FOUL CRETIN! TWENTY GENERATIONS OF MY FAMILY UNSEATED! HOW DARE YOU! IF I FIND YOU, I WILL GUT YOU LIKE A FISH AND-”

Snape had recovered his wits, having put the Howler in a bubble similar to the one before. Waving his wand a few times and silencing the angry Howler. Harry was positively shaking now, deeply disturbed by the sheer amount of hatred and loathing that had been present in the booming voice. Snape knocked the bubbled letter unto the table, as Philly popped back into the kitchen - swiftly taking in the situation, she instantly began babbling to Harry.

“Oh my's! Poor young Master! Don't worries – Phillies will puts away the nasty letters. Out of sights, out of sounds! Oh, poor Masters – don't despairs. Lets Phillies make yous two cups of good drinks, yes. Phillies will be rights back!” She hastily grabbed the second bubbled Howler and disappeared once more, with a soft pop, to place the letter safely away for later examination and usage. Snape straightened his robes, immediately crossed over to Harry's side, and gently lowered the child back upon his seat. Taking a small vial from his robes, he gave it to Harry. “Here, Evans, two small sips now, the rest after you drink whatever Philly will make you in a second. It's a diluted Calming Draught, it will help settle your nerves.”

Hands shaking with fear and disorientation, Harry accepted the small vial, raised it to his trembling lips and took two small sips from it – before handing it back to Snape, hands still shaking but less obviously than mere seconds ago. This was going to be a long day, Snape bitterly thought, as a third owl took that moment to arrive in the kitchen...

Chapter End Notes

Please, don't forget to leave a comment. It's quickly done and it gives me some measure of seeing how well received the chapters are and that there is still interest in the story.

Sometimes it feels like I'm throwing pasta at a wall - with the lack of input, etcetera - and it makes me wonder why I even bother to continue writing?

Anyway, enjoy the chapter! 5 More have already been written ;)

Chapter XXI

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the Howlers is dealt with, Snape contacts Dumbledore, Gnalte is consulted and a family's heritage is bought back.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The following hours of the morning brought no fewer than four Howlers and five very pointedly-written yet passive-aggressive letters, most from various solicitors who represented several of the families whose sole surviving Heir was currently serving an Azkaban-sentence. Snape dutifully neutralized each Howler as soon as he could, and made several copies of each letter, to be sent to Lucius, Xenophilius and Gnalte respectively. Lucius would be able to handle the responses from the Dark families from his end, probably with no small amount of bribery and subtle death-threats. Harry knew that was how the Dark families usually settled moderate issues between themselves, but it didn't settle right in him. As for Xenophilius, Harry had no idea how he would settle this problem – probably he would try to appeal to their better nature, which Harry thought was probably not gonna be a very fruitful endeavour. Of course, he wasn't gonna stop him – never tried is always lost, after all.

And Gnalte, well... Gnalte would probably manage to financially ruin anyone who would dare to represent a client who would so foolishly and threaten the Heir to multiple Houses with a method so easily traceable. And Harry felt more pity to those who would be facing Gnalte, than those would be threatened by Lucius. Lucius understood the art of subtlety – Goblins, on the other hand, found subtlety a waste of time when other... methods work just as well and much more quickly. Their history of fondness for de-kneecapping their financial enemies was, after all, extensively discussed in one of Harry's books concerning the History of Magic in the British Isles.

Snape now was extremely concerned with Harry's state of mind. It had been one thing to plan all of this, to usurp the power so long held by those so willing to throw into oblivion so many Light families by exterminating them as if they were mere pests – and it was another thing to having to deal with the direct fall-out of such a decision.

Harry had retreated to his room, for the time being, obviously intend on gathering his thoughts and process all what had happened. And Snape would not stand in his way. Ordering Philly to keep an eye out on his young charge, Snape began penning half a dozen letters to several people. And he still had to deal with Dumbledore's insatiable and every increasing curiosity with even the smallest minutia of everyday life for Snape and Harry. Soon, Dumbledore would figure out about Harry's new Seats – and then Snape would get the other end of the stick, for not divulging that information earlier. No, Dumbledore would need to be misled – until the truth would become a public secret. The longer Dumbledore was kept out of the loop, the more Snape and Lucius could ensure that whatever alliances they would be forging in Harry's name would be stable and not easily undone by Albus' meddling.

“Albus,
I apologize for the late reply to your last missive – Potter's lessons take up most my free time. As to his progress, he improved remarkably. As said before, his grasp of magic is impressive, though not too uncommon. Certain areas still elude him, as could be expected with most children his age.

Furthermore, I can now say with certainty that he is quite adept on a broom – occasion allowed him a small lesson and he quite intuitively mastered the basics swiftly. No doubt a legacy of his late father, loathe as I am to say it.

A new situation has arisen, you no doubt will have read by now, of the mystery Heir that has shaken up our small community. Communications are underway to ensure Harry is still in full control of his Vault – an action that I know too well goes beyond your back, but the situation demands I fully ensure Harry's rights. Of course, you still hold the Potter Regency – though I ask you to refrain from utilizing it until this bureaucratic nightmare has settled one way or another.

Luckily, we were forewarned by Lucius – who thought the situation prudent to my status as Heir Prince. Had we not known, we would not have been able to secure a solid investigation as ordered under Potter's name, rather than in the name of the Ministry. For now, all Vaults under Potter and I's command are secure – for now.

As to Potter's Inheritance, our liaison at Gringott's has unfortunately restricted all requests to Harry and I for now, out of precaution of course. Apparently, we are not the only Family to ensure their Inheritance would be safe – though, of course, we are on the very first. I am sorry, but if you thus wish to know something concerning Harry's presence at Gringott's or in the Wizengamot, you shall have to go through me from now on. Our contacts were quite adamant therein.

Potter has also expressed a cautious desire to see a Mind-Healer, or at least another similar type of professional - to deal with the years of 'abuse' he endured at the Dursleys. Of course, I cannot refer this decision to you – and if you do not reply soon, I logically cannot see how to deny the child of this wish to heal. After all, I have various legal obligations towards his well-being now – and your choice to entrust Potter into my care, after all, came with several caveat's (such as meddlesome Ministry oversight, due my 'questionable' past).

Cordially,

Severus Tobias Snape,

Heir Prince.”

An hour later, Harry came down for lunch, his eyes puffy and red – which told all too much about his mental state. Resolved to at least improve the mood somewhat, Snape had ordered Philly to prepare a 'holiday'-meal – in this case, she decided on pancakes, hot cocoa, and lots of syrup-filled sweets. And judging from the hungry look Harry got when he surveyed the table, and the small smile that quickly replaced his sodden frown, it was a good choice.
And thus, as Harry enjoyed his pancakes with a zeal Snape had yet to become acquainted with, he thought how to move forward with all of this. “Harry,” Snape began quietly, waiting for the boy to finish the mouthful of syrup-drenched pancakes, “Tomorrow we have an appointment with an Optometrist in Diagon Alley, to fetch you a new pair of glasses - ones better suited to your current prescriptions. And we also have to visit Gringott's, to discuss a few things with Gnalte concerning the situation. Are there any shops you wish to visit besides, or someone you wish to wish to meet up with?”

Harry chewed another piece of pancake as he thought, before thickly swallowing the sweet food. “I’d like to meet up with Luna again, if I may. Maybe we can visit her house?” Harry’s eyes were filled with wishful thinking, and Snape, for the first time in his life, couldn't bring himself to denying a child some hope.

“Very well – I’ll contact Xenophilius to arrange a visit to his property tomorrow. Luckily, the visit with the Optometrist shouldn't take long – but I do not know how long our meeting with Gnalte will take. Thus, I can not promise we’ll be visiting the Lovegoods for very long. Understood, Evans?” Harry took in the answer, nodding feverishly. “Very well. Now, finish your pancakes. I heard tell that there is also a slice of blueberry pie awaiting us three.” And Severus refused to accept that the bright smile Harry gave to that made his bitter cold heart twinge with positive emotion.

An afternoon of teaching Transfiguration left Snape with a noticeable headache – and trying to get to grips with one of the most difficult branches of practical Magic left Harry worn-out and dead-tired. As a result, dinner was a quiet affair – broken with the arrival of two letters, addressed to Snape. Putting them aside, Snape gave Harry some time off – considering that an evening of further review would do neither much good now. And as Harry bounded up to his room, saying he was gonna read some of his interesting books, Snape steeled himself for the letters. As expected, one was from Albus – the other was from Xenophilius. Xenophilius' letter was a simple one, telling how eager Luna was to receive Harry over at their house – and so on. No reply needed for this one – no news was good news. Albus' letter, however, was not quite as light – and Snape found his headache grow steadily worse with each new paragraph he read.

“Severus,

The situation is more dire than feared – the investigations have spilled over into the Ministry, apparently a while ago already. Consider my surprise when I was barred at almost every turn when I visited the Ministry to discover who is responsible for this all. I fear the worst.

Evidently this can only point towards Riddle – though I can not yet understand the angle of disowning the very families that supported him. I have many theories, yet no solid proof. And I am loathe to share my thoughts till I am certain.

Furthermore, it seems I can not rely on my position in the Wizengamot to gain access to the information we need to stay atop this situation – all Wizengamot members are forbidden from interfering with the investigations. Though we both know this shall not stop members such as Lucius – yet I shall not stoop to their level. For now, we shall wait.

I understand your concern for young Harry, yet I think that his claims of abuse, though founded in some part in fact, are grossly over-exaggerated. I do not think a Mind-healer is prudent or necessary – rather it would leave the boy open to be influenced by the enemy should they be able to place an agent of theirs in the position of Mind-healer you choose. Refrain from this course.
A staff-meeting will be called the last Monday of August, ten o'clock AM. Certain precautions must be taken – considering Gringott's apparently can no longer be regarded as a secure bastion for those things we have been entrusted to safeguard. You shall know of what I speak when I explain during the meeting. Design a measure of security that relies on wit and your expertise – it shall be central to the meeting. All staff are told to perform this task.

Several staff-changes have also been decided upon – these as well will be explained.

As ever,

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore,

Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,

Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot,

Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards.”

Gods, Snape thought with a sneer as he finished the letter, the fool was always both so tight-lipped and melodramatic. He definitely wasn't going to write back – no need for that. And he was also definitely not going to follow his command of not bringing Harry to a Mind healer. After all, if Albus made a scene of it, it would definitely reach the ears of the Ministry – and how would that make him look? No, Snape knew that he could ignore the command and mitigate the consequences of disobeying it. He just had to be pragmatic about and not too overt.

Evening came, evening went, replaced by the deep of night – when Snape finally retreated to his chambers. Looking in on Harry before he went to his bedroom, he was content to see the boy sleep peacefully, a small stuffed bear in his arms, facing towards the door of his room. Quietly closing it, Snape retreated to his own chambers and laid down for the night.

They arrived in Diagon Alley early the next morning, Harry daring to give Apparition another try. And when they arrived in the small courtyard behind the Leaky Cauldron, Snape was glad to see Harry didn't immediately throw up but rather was only dizzy and unsteady on his legs. A much better result, all in all – even if Harry's complaining was no less than before.

“Shush now, you idiot brat – you're still standing, aren't you? You'll grow used to it – you just have to though out the side-effects for now.” Fishing out a small vial of Antinausicum, Snape handed it over to Harry – who gratefully and quickly knocked it back and swallowed it without complaint. Soon, Harry felt much better – and they continued on their way towards the Optometrist.

Again, Diagon Alley was much busier than before – only slightly more than a week was left till the school-year began. And the claustrophobic avenue was jam-packed with dozens of families, parents and children, flitting from shop to shop, like a veritable Dance of the Bumblebees. Eventually they made their way to the shop-entrance, not too far from Ollivander's. Stepping inside, the loud hubbub of Diagon Alley immediately fell silent the moment the door closed behind them. Not a sound came through, none. They seated themselves in the small waiting room at the top of a small
stairway and patiently waited for the hour of their appointment.

Ten minutes later, an elderly witch exited the office, closing the door behind her, giving a small nod to the pair and descended the rickety creaking stairs. For a few precious seconds, the oppressive silence of the waiting room was broken by the loudness of Diagon Alley – before it fell deathly silent again. Eventually the door opened once more, with a young Wizard calling Harry's name. Standing up, they entered the office. The wizard had seated himself at his desk, gesturing the pair to get seated before him. Finally looking up from his papers, the man spoke.

“Good morning, gentlemen. Master Snape, Mr Evans.” The man greeted them, nodding at both as he spoke their names. “So, Mr Evans, when was the last time you had your eyes checked, magical or otherwise?” The young doctor queried – Harry read his small name-plaque, identifying him as Oliver C. Ulahr. “Euhm, at least four years ago, sir.” Truth be told, Harry was sure it had been even longer than that. He could barely remember when he had first been given a pair of glasses, so...

“Hm, way too long. It's a miracle this pair still serves you well then. I assume they still provide you with clear and sharp sight. Do they?” As Dr Oliver asked this, his eyebrows shot up way across his forehead, almost disappearing in his hairline. Harry really didn't know what to think of that – or him, for that matter. “Euhm, well, everything's a bit fuzzy. I have to get really close to see something clearly, even with my glasses, sir.”

Snape rolled his eyes – why could the child not have mentioned this earlier? He would certainly have made an appointment in the very first week. “Why didn't you say so earlier, Evans?” Snape asked, and Harry actually blushed. “I guess I'm used to it, sir...” Of course the boy would be – and wouldn't think to mention it. It was a miracle he had done so well on his lessons so far, if his eyesight was so poor even with glasses on. The good doctor, however, didn't seem fazed.

“No matter, it's a matter easily corrected. Now, Mr Evans, if you'd please go sit in the chair over there.” Harry followed the instructions and seated himself. Dr Oliver followed, carefully taking off Harry's glasses and placing a pair of Muggle measurement-glasses on Harry's nose. “Now, Mr Evans, I will flash a few images on the wall opposite of him and I want you to say when you can identify the small picture hidden centrally in the larger images. Okay?” Harry nodded.

Half an hour later, Harry walked out with a pair of new glasses – Spell-O-Specs, Dr Oliver had called them. Able to adjust to Harry's eyesight, should it improve or deteriorate, as Harry would grow up. Able to darken on command, such as when Harry wanted to use them as sunglasses – or able to improve his night-sight a bit, if the need arose. They were surprisingly versatile and Harry spent a few minutes cycling through the various commands, getting a hang of it all.

Eventually, they'd made their way to Gringott's, where many small groups of wizards and witches filled the Atrium, each worried about their Vaults and Inheritances. Luckily they were spared a wait in the queue because they already had a personal solicitor and Gnalte knew they were coming. Led into the back-room, and to Gnalte's office, the Goblin greeted them jovially.

“Master Snape, Master Peverell, a delight to see you again. What a time, what a time!” Gnalte exalted, gesturing them to get seated, pouring out refreshments for all three of them. “Well, sir, you certainly seem happy!” Harry smiled, accepting the glass of lemonade he was offered by Gnalte. “Why, Master Peverell, of course, of course! So many clients who wish to ascertain the security of their possessions! So much profit to be made from a job already half-finished! We have not been idle, Master Peverell, we have not! Our regular meetings and correspondence made us check many of those Vaults laying long abandoned and unchecked. Of course, we regularly check all our Vaults – but this was merely an excuse to do an in-depth review of all our Vaults and the accompanying
“Of course, the horde of scared wand-bearers outside do not know this – and thus we are charging quite lucrative service-costs for the 'extra' work we're being 'saddled' with!” Gnalte chuckled darkly at this, taking a sip from his ruby-red wine, seating himself in his small chair, after having handed a glass of water to Snape. “Of course, Gringott's will not forget who is, ultimately, responsible for these additional profits. Why, Master Peverell, half our personnel quite regards you as one of us now.” Gnalte gave a small wink, before draining his glass and composing himself more professionally.

“Now, concerning the items mentioned in our last communication, Master Snape, rest assured – Albus Dumbledore will be hard-pressed ever to find an opening in our records ever again. We don't take kindly to being misled – and the information so graciously shared by Madame Bones regarding her current investigation into the potential wrong-doings of Dumbledore, has been well received by our Directors. Of course, we can not deny him the basic services – but considering the freedom of information he can request concerning any Vault other than his, he will be... unimpressed, I fear.”

“As for the possible re-tracing of the paperwork to Master Peverell concerning the parties now so heavily invested in deducing the true identity of the Mystery Heir, as they have come to call him, they too will find themselves lost in our system. Everything was done per code – each Inheritance was dealt with in accordance to the Laws, and they are all considered separate and apart. If they wish to deduce the common factor, they will only discover that Gringott's takes the privacy of our clients very seriously.”

“And, of course, as such, we are pleased to inform you that all relevant Vault have been inspected, decontaminated, cleared out and redistributed. Per your instructions, many of the Families you re-instated have also been given reimbursements, depending on the emotional losses sustained in the circumstances that led to their former disinheritances. And we have received several solicitations from those families, with most being very grateful for the courtesy they were shown – even if they were very paranoid and wondered if it were a poisoned gift...”

“Nonetheless, a few have expressed a wish to contact you. Of course, they could've sent a message personally – as I have heard your detractors have already done. Dreadful business that, sending a Howler to anyone – shows such a distinct lack of decorum and self-control. Rest assured, however, that from our end, all is well. Now...” Gnalte finished his monologue, taking out several stacks of papers, placing them on his desk and fishing out a few out of the selection.

“This list,” Gnalte pushed forward a paper filled with minute handwriting, line after line of numbers and short-hand. “This list shows all the Vault that you can claim under the Titles you have inherited. Most are simply secondary Vaults to the primary Family Vaults you already control. Think back-ups where they could put away what they either didn't want to be found or what could no longer be placed in any of the primary Vaults. It's a form of overflow-management.”

Gnalte set aside the paper, replacing it with another in one smooth movement. “This list shows the yearly dividends current investments under your various Titles yield you. What we want you to decide is how to further utilize these annual dividends. Do you wish to re-invest them even further? Or should we simply place them in your Vaults for later usage as you see fit? That is for you to decide – and it is not an immediate concern, of course. Just another thing you must keep in mind. Until you have made a decision, any new dividends will be placed in a placeholder Vault, to be used as requested once you have come to a decision.”

Gnalte placed the papers with the other ones, taking another new one from the stack. “And this,
well, this was a very interesting find.” Gnalte spoke, voice soft and conspiratorial. “As said before, many people Subjugated their Inheritance to the Dark Lord. And while we were double-checking those Subjugation contracts, we found... an interesting one.” Gnalte tapped the name on the top of the paper, drawing their attention to it. And Snape almost took a double-take, nearly swallowing his tongue in surprise as Harry and he read the name. “Peter Pettigrew”

“But that's – that's impossible.” Snape spoke with mild disbelief. “Pettigrew is supposed to be dead.” And then Snape fell silent in thought, waiting a few minutes before speaking up again. Meanwhile, Harry too was lost in though. Gnalte silently refilled their drinks, sorting a few more papers to show later – whilst placing the papers he'd already shown in a small folder. Finally Snape spoke up, more or less voicing what Harry had already suspected him to think. “Of course, many had their suspicions about the whole business... Black had always been so adamantly pro-Light, turning against the Dark Lord at every turn. Indeed, his whole life was painted by this demeanour – so many did find it odd he would've been the one to betray the Potters.”

Snape straightened up in his seat, fingers tapping on the armrest of his chair. “Have you shared this with the Ministry?” Gnalte shook his head. “Not yet, Master Snape – we found it prudent to share this information with you first. After all, some measure of transparency would be needed for this information to be taken seriously and as truth. It could potentially bring to light Master Peverell's identity as the Mystery Heir.” Snape nodded in agreement, speaking softly. He looked at Harry – obviously Harry's word would be what decided the next step.

Harry kept silent for a while, thinking of all possible consequences – of his identity being confirmed, Pettigrew being investigated, Black being cleared, Dumbledore realizing their plans, ... There were so many unknowns and Harry really wasn't sure what to do. Looking up and Snape and locking eyes, Harry lowered his mental shields – and for a few minutes, they conversed through their mental connection.

Finally they broke eye-contact – and Snape answered Gnalte's question. “For now, relay all information to Madame Bones – she's our prime contact within the Ministry and will use this information to the best of her ability whilst safeguarding the identity of the Mystery Heir. Though she will undoubtedly make contact with us and chew us out at a private meeting – but that is a hurdle we can easily accept. It would all further aid in undermining Albus' wilful abuse of his powers.” Gnalte merely nodded his head, placing the paper away in a separate folder. Pushing forward another few papers, he continued.

“Now, Master Peverell, here is another curious list. As you know, the Potters are famous across Wizarding history for their invention of a no-small number of Potions that are considered staples of personal care nowadays. This concerns certain brews, such as Skele-Grog, Pepper-Up Potion, etcetera... Now, the formulae of these potions were legally bought for further production and distribution decades ago – some even centuries ago. And indeed the Potter Family was paid handsomely for these rights. However, as with all things Wizarding, concerning rights, these buy-outs have, ah... finite dates. And it seems that the recent generations of the Potters had quite... forgotten this little fact.” Gnalte chuckled darkly, evidently mildly amused at the expense of Harry's parents and grandparents.

“So now, Master Peverell, you have the option of buying back those rights – indeed, you have the legal leverage to forcibly buy those rights back, in exchange for a small recompense of lost revenue. Or... you could buy back the rights, but keep the previous owners of the rights in employment as the producers and distributors of the products, in exchange for a nominal fee on the profits. Now, I'm not saying one way is better than the other, but... one way is better than the other.” Gnalte explained, picking an empty paper and his Self-Inking Quill. “If you buy back the rights and cut out the current owners from the deal, you shall have to deal with finding a new
producer and distributor. An expense you can definitely bear, considering your nigh-infinite resources – but why waste the money and the time?” Gnalte began writing down the figures that distribution, production, new contracts, … would all cost – and Harry never saw so many zeroes used in a practical equation outside of his maths lessons. He swallowed thickly. “Or, you can simply buy back the rights, as said before, but keep the current owners as your producers etcetera. Of course, long term, the profits you can gain would be less… pronounced, but considering that this wouldn't be your main source of income but rather a profitable side-business, it would still enlarge your yearly dividends quite substantially.”

“Of course,” Gnalte spoke up, writing down a few other numbers and examples of distribution etcetera. “You can opt for a hybrid-approach, a sort of middle-ground between these two methods – whereby you can put out a contract to the public, promising the most enterprising producer or distributor the exclusive rights to work for you. This would, obviously, put you in the spotlight, but it might land you a contract that is less expensive on your end and may translate in a small increase of dividends in the end. How this is regulated and who can be eligible for this approach, Gringott's can explain all of this – and even take up the executive role, if you find it too confusing.” Gnalte put away his quill, letting Harry mull over the information for a few minutes. As Gnalte got up and refilled each of their drinks again, Harry considered the different approaches.

Eventually he came to a decision – accepting that he couldn't know how it would got until he really committed to a single approach. “I – I think it's best to buy back the rights, but the leave the current owners as producers. But I do want to see if there's the possibility of finding someone who can distribute it for a smaller fee. And I want Gringott's to hire a solicitor who can arrange all of this and keeps in weekly contact with Severus and I. If that's possible, of course, sir.” Gnalte nodded his head, understanding all too well. “Very well, Master Peverell, I shall arrange for a solicitor to be hired. Expect a few applications to be approved by the end of next week, Master Snape. Now, a toast, gentlemen, to profit and good health.” And Harry couldn't help but smile at that, as they raised their glasses and clinked them together over the desk.

Chapter End Notes

Potter family invented following potions;
-Skele-Grog
-Tooth-Malt
-Bone-Bourbon
-Bone-Begone
-Pepper-Up Potion
-Tropical Topical
-Hold-It-Up Potion
-Pepper Pill
-Sleak-Eazy's Hair Potion
-Sleazy Slime
-Ne'er-Hair
-Pot'Oui Poultice

Tooth-Malt is a restorative, intended to re-grow the teeth by the same biological functions that serve to grow adult teeth after the loss of baby teeth. To be carefully measured during administration, overdosing can result in anomolous growths of tooth-like structure along the entire jaw - thus needing extensive surgery and spell-management to remove the growths and ease the pain, as this often causes horrific
inflammations due to the rupturing of muscles due to their grating across the often excessively sharp growths. Imagine the way a shark grows teeth, on the whole jawbone...

Bone-Bourbon is a restorative supplement, intended to strengthen the bones by speeding up the normal biological process which heals and re-calcifies bones after breaking them. Again, to be carefully measured during administration, as overdosing can cause Hyperostosis - and the only effective treatment for this is a cure of daily Bone-Begone ingestions that are to be carefully monitored and counter-acted with Skele-Grog if the overdose-treatment dosage was incorrect.

Bone-Begone is the antithesis of Skele-Grog, intended to cause the rapid dissolution of bone into calcium and other components, a complete reversal of the process intended to create bone. It is only used in individuals who have accute cases of hyperostosis and similar skeletal disorders.

The Tropical-Topical is a simple ointment, intended to encourage rapid restoration and immune response on areas afflicted by various disorders and diseases - such as seasonal rashes, grave abrasions, and so forth... Considered to have no real overdosages resulting in fatal or long-term lethal effects, it can still cause an overstimulation of the immune response - which can lead to a host of disorders that can become fatal, if left untreated.

The Hold-It-Up Potion is a vigorative, intended to aid a poor gentleman whose biological functions of reproduction have left him... underwhelmed. Overdosing can cause extreme testosteron production, heart palpitations, complete disfunction of the cognitive mind, hamperment of logical reasoning and the respect of other people's autonomy, etcetera... The easiest treatment, and often most effective, is a VERY COLD shower! Or a kick in the balls - whichever works...

The Pepper-Pill is a vigorative, intended to restore a shortened attention-span and improve cognitive responses when under stress. However, it is merely a short-term solution - and long-term ingestion may lead to substance-abuse, after which the patient will no longer be able to feel any physical or emotional stimuli unless under the influence of this product. Overdosage can lead to accute mental dissolution, the loss of recognizing fact from fiction, accute hysteria, ... Only treatment is a long-term weaning off the substance, by carefully reducing the daily ingested amounts of this substance over the course of many months. Accute withdrawal will often result in death.

Sleazy Slime is a simple hair-gel, though it acts more like a quick-hardening concrete than a hair-gel. It dries within minutes and can be easily dissolved in warm water.

Ne'er-Hair is a hair-removal creme and potion. The creme is applied wherever hair must disappear and the potion responds with the topical creme to keep the hair away for an indefinite amount of time. Overdosage or incorrect application can result in permanent full-body hairloss and baldness.

Pot'Oui Poultice is a creme, to be applied where one wishes hair to return. Normally applied once a month, overdosage and incorrect application can result in hypertrichosis - which can become permanent, if not resolved within a week.
Chapter XXII

Chapter Summary

A visit to the Lovegoods, an article in the Daily Prophet's Morning Edition, and a patronage struck between like-minded Wizards.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The toast lasted about half an hour, during which several minutia were discussed concerning all other aspects of Harry's new financial burdens. And by the end, after agreeing an annual stipend for services rendered, including a generous tip to all Goblins who had aided Gnalte in fully preparing Harry's finances, the trio parted ways – with Harry and Snape exiting unto Diagon Alley, and Gnalte returning to his triangular little office-room.

Making their way back to the Leak Cauldron, Snape temporarily halted Harry when they neared the Apothecary. “A moment, Evans – I ordered fresh ingredients for your lessons, so we have to pick them up, now that we're here.” Nodding, Harry followed Snape into the dimly-lit shop. Pleasantries were exchanged, money was given, and Snape walked out with a few small boxes wrapped in wax-paper. Walking into the Leaky Cauldron, Snape handed the boxes over to Tom, with a small fee of two Sickles to deliver the ingredients to Spinner's End per owl.

“Why didn't you just had them ordered home directly, sir?” Harry asked, finding it a bit convoluted the way Snape had gotten the stuff back home. “Because Neill charges a Galleon per separate parcel to get your orders home-delivered. And as such, he has the annoying tendency to send most ingredients separately, one per parcel. Oh, sure, he will mutter an excuse of 'freshly plucked' ingredients or 'unfavourable contaminations' when packaged together in a single parcel – but it just boils down to maximizing the amount of Galleons he can squeeze out of you. Of course, I hardly blame him – Diagon Alley is notoriously expensive to settle as a shop-owner – even those who have inherited the plot their shop is located in, still have to pay exuberant taxes. The Ministry has to get its funding from somewhere, after all...”

Once freed of their purchases, the pair made their way to the Floo-Hearth. Throwing the powder into the fire, they exclaimed in clear voice their destination. “Lovegood Rookery!”

The well-known imagery of hundreds of hearths passing before their eyes was almost a comfort to Harry, after their earlier Apparition trip. And when they exited from the hearth at their destination, they were immediately greeted with jovial smiles and enthusiasm. “Harry!” Luna almost knocked Harry off his feet, throwing herself in a hug around his shoulders. Xenophilius and Snape immediately engaged in witty banter, Snape with his usual sarcastic drawls and Xenophilius with his aloof air of merriment and superstition. It made for quite a funny conversation, Harry thought.

Luna dragged Harry outside, whilst the adults talked over tea. Luna showed Harry their little orchard of Dirigible Plums, Moon Pears, Horklumps, and a whole variety of other magical plants. Nearby, a small stream with clear water bisected their patch of property, with little minnows and diminutive trout traversing the cold water. In the distance, between a few small hills, Harry could see another house, which looked so crooked as to amaze him that it was still standing. “That's the Burrow – it's where the Weasleys live. Mrs Weasley always brings us a pie, every Sunday, since
Mommy died. I think she takes pity on Daddy, seeing how he doesn't want to re-marry.”

The name sounded familiar to Harry, somehow, and he remembered suddenly when he began thinking about where he'd heard it. “Mrs Weasley – as in, Molly Weasley?” Luna nodded happily, her fingers idly trailing through the water as she watched the furtive minnows dart away. “Yes, Molly. She was a childhood friend of my mother – I think they were in the same year, but of course Mommy was in Ravenclaw while Mrs Weasley was in Griffyndor. But they were fast friends, Daddy told me – it's why we live so near the Weasleys as well. They couldn't bear the thought of being distantly separated. Mrs Weasley was very sad when Mommy died…”

Luna’s voice trailed into solemn silence, though Harry noticed she didn't appear sad or grieving. Rather she seemed a lazy kind of happy. Luna noticed his staring and gave a small chuckle. “It's okay – Mommy told me she was gonna die doing what she liked doing best. I had nightmares for several months after it happened, of course, but I wasn't sad. Those who pass on never really leave us, you know.” She gave him a sad smile as she turned to sit down on the grass besides the small stream.

“I can still see her sometimes. She appears in my dreams and gives me advice. So I never really miss her, cuz she's always visiting me.” And Harry almost felt a deep ache in his chest – if only his parents visited him in his dreams. At least then he'd see them and have a conscious memory of their faces. But, no, all he had were a few moving pictures and that didn't feel the same. A sudden anger flared up in his chest, a jealousy at the small gift Luna had – but he tried his best to suppress it. Closing his eyes and breathing in and out in regular manner, he imagined the turmoil he felt to look like a storm in his mind. And as he breathed in and out, he imagined the storm being slowly eroded by a calming breeze. And when he opened his eyes, finally feeling calmer, it was to see Luna smiling at him.

“Don't be angry, Harry – your parents are still with you.” Harry almost gave a sad sob. “As if. They're long dead, Luna. I can't even remember them – not really.” Luna placed her hand on his wrist, her thumb slowly rubbing against his skin. “That's not true. Every time you feel sad, that's when they are with you – because it's also their sadness for being separated from you. Sometimes the dead don't move on, not immediately anyway – sometimes they linger around those they loved, trying to protect you from harm.” Harry really wanted to believe that, but he couldn't. He looked up, gazed into Luna's eyes – and instantly startled backwards, away from her!

What had he seen in her eyes? He wasn't sure, when he thought about it later – but he could swear for a moment that he saw his own eyes there, that vibrant green of his mother rather than the crystal blue that Luna really had. And then there'd been the flash of imagery, of a woman calling out to Harry, calling to him that he was not alone - of a seedling shaded by the rotting stumps of the trees that came before it, of the dead supporting the living. But, of course, he couldn't be sure. It might as well have been his imagination running wild with him – it tended to do that sometimes.

He took a moment to regain his calm and composure – berating himself for his stupid reaction, apologizing to Luna and returned to his spot in the grassy riverbank. Luna merely giggled. “It's okay – most people are afraid when I tell them this. People are so used to their beliefs that they're afraid when someone challenges those beliefs. Anyway, let's go back inside – there's really too many Wrackspurts here.” She rose, took Harry's hand and took him back to the house.

As they approached it, a large flock of owls began streaming out of the top windows, each carrying a small rolled-up package – though Harry couldn't be sure. He tried out the Magnifying Command on his glasses, but was a bit too late as the last owl had disappeared into the half-clouded sky. “Luna, why so many owls?” He asked her, as they ascended the small set of steps leading up to the backdoor. “Oh, those are the owls that Dad uses to deliver the Quibbler to our subscribers.” Harry
followed her inside, the door-chimes twinkling merrily as they entered. “The Quibbler? Your father has his own gazette?”

“Oh yes. Daddy wanted to write for the Daily Prophet, but they never returned his letters – or they laughed at him. They aren't very nice people. So Daddy began his own newspaper. We have a new edition every week, sent out each Friday. Do you want to read it?” Luna asked, looking at Harry as they passed through the messy kitchen. Dirty pots and empty pans stood stacked everywhere, though several were being washed as Harry saw – not too unsimilar as to when Philly cleaned their dishes, and Harry wondered why the Lovegoods didn't have a House-Elf.

“Yeah, sure, I'd love to.” Harry responded, interested to see what kind of gazette such a peculiar duo would write. Inwardly he had the impression it would be a very interesting read indeed. They entered the living room, where Snape and Xenophilius were still talking over a pot of tea, each holding a cup as they spoke. “Ah, Luna, dear, have you shown Harry the stream?” Xenophilius asked with such a jovial smile that Harry felt compelled to smile as well. Even Snape seemed to be sporting a strained and small smile – apparently much to his chagrin. Seemed not even he could resist the aura of joviality that the Lovegood patriarch exuded.

“Yes, Daddy – and the minnows and the Horklumps and the Wrackspurts...” Luna laughed, smiling brightly at her father. As they seated themselves, each taking a cup of tea as well, the two children listened silently to the conversation between their parents. After a while, Xenophilius stood up, went to kitchen and began to prepare a simple lunch for the four of them – whilst Luna set the table, after providing Harry and Snape with another cup of warm tea. Lunch was soon served, eaten in silence, and followed by another jovial conversation.

Eventually it all fell into a comfortable lull, which Harry used to speak up. “Mr Lovegood, Luna mentioned you run a gazette?” Snape arched a brow at the question, while Xenophilius merely laughed. “Why, yes, young master. Have been publishing and delivering it for the past ten years, matter of fact – began writing it shortly after Luna was born, on advice of my Pandora.”

Harry nodded along, as Xenophilius began expounding on the moment he had the brilliant idea to publish his own gazette, and when his late wife actively helped by writing some of the articles – which had granted the Quibbler a fair reputation, considering the rarity of regular gazettes through which Spell-weavers could communicate their newest findings and inventions. Indeed, those years of good repute had earned the Lovegoods a substantial fortune, something which they still benefited from after several years of bad press and poor sales...

Eventually, the elder Lovegood talked himself more-or-less out on the subject, allowing Harry to interject once more. “Well, I was thinking, Mr Lovegood, of perhaps becoming a patron of your gazette – in exchange for some exclusive interviews, of course. Severus and I realize that, sooner or later, people will want to hear from the Mystery Heir – at least, until they know it's really me. So I was thinking, that perhaps we can publish two or three interviews in the Quibbler. It would definitely boost your sales up – and it would, probably, turn the staff at the Daily Prophet green with envy in no small amount...”

Harry let the further implications hang in the air, watching the Lovegood patriarch connect the dots – after which a self-serving glee appeared to twinkle in his eyes. “Why, Mr Potter, how can one turn down such a marvellous opportunity. Do you wish to see the press? Perhaps we can do the interview now? And how much would you wish to sponsor us with?”

Two hours later, in which Xenophilius had shown his base of press operations - and Harry had given a quick interview to him, they rounded up their conversation. Promising a fifty Galleon stipend annually, they'd drafted a simple contract between themselves that would have to be
verified at Gringott's later on. As they stood on the threshold of the house, Snape was still discussing the final draft of the interview with Xenophilius. “No worries, Master Snape – I shall send a preliminary example of the interview to you before we print it, so you and Mr Potter can owl us any modifications you'd wish us to make to the final text. Now, good evening and I hope you'll find yourselves home safely.” Luna gave a last bone-crushing hug – after which Snape Disapparated them back to Spinner's End.

When they finally sat down in the kitchen in Spinner's End, Harry was dead-tired but also very happy. He liked being around Luna and her beautiful sense of wonder and innocence of the world. Snape had set a kettle, as Philly went to light the hearth in the kitchen. A small stack of letters, parcels and the Night Edition of the Daily Prophet lay on the table. Picking it up, Harry was very much surprised by the full-page header that was the front-page.

“MYSTERY HEIR – FACTS, SPECULATIONS & QUESTIONS! A RITA SKEETER EXCLUSIVE!”

“As reported on yesterday's Morning Edition, half a dozen and more Noble Families quite suddenly found themselves completely destitute and without Titles, all because of the sudden verification of a hitherto unknown Inheritance that had been Claimed less than a month before – with the effects of the Inheritance delayed by the Ministry's glacial bureaucracy. As such, this news did indeed come as a complete surprise to most of these Families – though not necessarily all, though this remains unconfirmed.”

“Now, I, Rita Skeeter, have the humble opportunity to present to you all the facts, my humble speculations and the questions that now so thoroughly captivate our lovely readers.”

Harry put down the paper at that point, finding himself way too tired to even try and read through it all- he probably wouldn't remember anything of it after all, once he'd awaken. His bed beckoned, despite the early hour – and Harry was more than ready to blindly follow the siren's call of his silk sheets and cotton comforter for an hour or two. He'd do his lesson reviews afterwards. Accepting a mug of warm milk from Snape, Harry carefully drunk it whilst Snape read through the Prophet and the various letters. Eventually Harry finished the mug and went to bed. Evening passed quickly, after Harry had gotten up again, reviewed his lessons and took to bed around nine o'clock PM. A dreamless sleep was his reward...

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Next morning, when Harry joined Severus at breakfast at a quite early hour, his guardian placed the Skeeter article from the day before near Harry. “That abominable Skeeter has been snooping around beyond her pay-grade.” Snap drawled with such venom in his voice that it made Harry swallow thickly. Picking up the Daily Prophet and reading through the article as he ate, Harry was startled to see just how much she had managed to find out. Of course, most of it was publicly available information – but the number of Seats, the Families disinherited, …

She had so much right and Harry suspected that either she had bribed a veritable mass of people or threatened them into supplying her with the info. Of course, certain families could've notified her of their situation, in a vain effort of gaining some public pittance – but Harry doubted all families would've done so. Certainly the Dark Families would've treated that option with a great amount of caution – Skeeter was not a reliable ally.

Giving a sigh, Harry looked at Snape and resigned himself to a day of discussion – to figure out how to thread next. Several letters were written, sent out and answered. And by the end of the day, Narcissa Malfoy and Augusta Longbottom were invited for tea at a small nondescript Muggle-café
Harry and Snape had decided that Harry couldn't come publicly forward as the Heir, not even once January would arrive. They needed a Regent, for the Peverell Seat and for the Gaunt Seat.

Snape had raked his memory to find a Family suitable for Harry's plans – and Augusta Longbottom, Dowager of the Longbottom Estate and Properties, became the obvious choice. The long-widowed Matriarch had never been a die-hard supporter of Dumbledore, especially not after the near-death of her son. She had blamed it squarely on Dumbledore's folly of publicly founding an Order to oppose the Dark Lord during the War – and in her eyes, Dumbledore was just as responsible for the insanity of her children as were the brothers LeStrange who had tortured him and his wife.

Snape would meet her on Sunday the 1st of September, 1 o'clock PM – Narcissa would stop by on Saturday the 31st of August, also around 1 o'clock PM. Of course, Lucius would accompany her – and their first thought had been to appoint Lucius as Regent. But considering that Lucius already was Regent of the Malfoy Seat, ruling in stead of Draco until his son came of age, Narcissa was the next logical choice.

The Daily Prophet was having a field-day – or rather, field-week. Every day, new articles were published about the investigations, both of Gringott's and of Dumbledore. And almost every edition of the paper, be it Morning or Evening, had several Legacy articles – articles from several years back that were being re-published to keep people up-to-date with the history behind recent occurrences. Of course, it also incentivised people to buy each edition, instead of one of the two – Harry was sure that by the end of this whole ordeal, the Daily Prophet would've been ensured of hefty profits of the additional sales.

And too had the Daily Prophet found its perfect scapegoat in Albus Dumbledore. Almost every single edition had an article about the man or his family, often painted in a negative light. Seemed that Rita Skeeter had been keeping her biography of the man back for a long time, obviously waiting for the right opportunity. And this had been the right opportunity. Harry almost felt sorry for the man – almost...

Beyond that, the days of the last week of August became a blur to Harry – Snape did his best to properly conclude their various lessons, hoping to round off Harry's basic lessons in a satisfactory manner. Almost every waking moment was spent studying, reviewing, and sending letters to various people in order to prepare Harry's financial estate so that it needed minimal oversight whilst he was in Hogwarts. Gnalte had found a few decent solicitors, curiously all Goblins - “You need Goblins for Goblin matters – and all money matters are Goblin matters, Master Peverell.”, that was his only defence. And, to be honest, Harry could see the logic. They had approved the solicitations, selecting two to represent the separate seats. By this point, Snape had realized it might serve Harry's interests best if he could keep the two Seats separate as often as possible, in all manners.

Narcissa gladly accepted the position of Regentess for the Gaunt Seat, and she was incredibly knowledgable of the ins and outs of common Wizengamot procedures – probably in no small way due to her husbands passion for politics. She had evidently paid attention whenever Lucius spoke of Wizengamot business – and Harry was sure she'd do just fine as his Regentess. And, of course, it was another way to ingratiate the Malfoys – he was giving them the extraordinary privilege of voting in his stead, at least partially. Snape had explained how important a gesture this way for Pure-Blood Families. It was like donating a kidney to a complete stranger.

Augusta Longbottom had been a very different tale. When she had found Snape seated in the little café, she had almost walked back through the door – until curiosity had driven her on. And from
what Severus had told Harry, the whole conversation had been... strained, and very interesting. Initially she had adamantly refused to accept that Snape was speaking for Heir Peverell – until he had given her an Oath of Truth (after properly warding their small corner against the possibility of being noticed, of course). Only once the Oath had taken effect and proven his truthfulness, had she acquiesced and did she listen to his proposal in all honesty.

To say she was surprised, would be to downplay her reactions. Distrust, disbelief, paranoia – it all tinted her responses heavily, and it took the better part of two hours before she began letting up. Eventually she became more incensed, more interested to the prospects of serving as Regentess. But then she'd brought up the issue of her Heir, Neville Longbottom, her grandson. He wasn't fully versed in the procedures of the Wizengamot yet – and Augusta served as the de-facto Regentess for him, for the time being. She hadn't taken on the official capacity yet – since Neville wasn't of age yet and this thus made her Heiress still.

But, since she wasn't Regentess for Neville yet, she could simply decide not to vote. By forgoing the single vote that Seat Longbottom had, and picking up the Seat Peverell as Regentess, she could cast five votes instead.

Snape arrived back home around seven o'clock PM, after nearly six hours of negotiating with Augusta. They'd eventually struck a mutually beneficial middle-ground – and the contract had been drafted up and signed. And with that issue finally solved, Harry and Snape finally went to sleep. The morrow would finally see Harry leave for Hogwarts...

The nightmare was different, yet the same – but now Harry looked out through eyes unclouded by the haze that was incorporeality. The presence was speaking to someone, heavily in discussion, some half-audible rant about “the useless dregs who had not only abandoned him, but had now managed to lose their Seats and wealth”. How they were useless to him now, no longer worth the trouble of even killing. It went on and on, all the while a weak stuttering voice agreeing with every utterance in deep devotion tinged with fear and exhaustion.

The viewpoint through which the eyes looked was shifting unsteadily constantly, as if they were moving – or rather, being moved by something beyond their control. Harry saw stone walls, wooden parquet floors, a desk, several taxidermied animals, … he got the impression this was the room of a scholar, a teacher maybe. But he couldn't be sure – the room was devoid of any really personal effects. No photographs, no decorations beyond those of educational purpose – it was all minimalistically decorated.

And the presence grew steadily weaker and weaker, as it ranted and ranted, with fury and hatred and indignation... And then the prostrate voice spoke up. “Master, you need rest. You are exhausted – please rest until we can feed again. Tomorrow, Master!” And the presence reluctantly agreed, closing its eyes – which is when Harry's viewpoint shifted. Now, he looked through different eyes – though it was certainly in the same room. And the figure shifted towards a mirror – but Harry couldn't see, not properly. Only small glimpses of the figure were recognisable in the looking glass – a purple dress-robe, a scarf of sorts hanging from the shoulder, … And as the figure took up the scarf, it began carefully wrapping it about its head and -

Harry awoke – shards of the dream passed his memory and he desperately tried to hold on to them. But when he got to his dream-journal, he could only write down a vague description of the figure. No matter, he thought.

And then he startled fully awake – today he would leave for Hogwarts! And a huge smile appeared on his face...
The next chapter, Chapter 23, will be all articles from the Daily prophet. It will be posted together with Chapter 24 - so that those who just want to continue on with the story, can skip the articles as they're technically just background-information.
Chapter XXIII - Daily Prophet Articles, Week 32 of 1991

Chapter Summary

Rita Skeeter has a field-week, and is on a writing-spree!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes


“MYSTERY HEIR – FACTS, SPECULATIONS & QUESTIONS! A RITA SKEETER EXCLUSIVE!”

“As reported on yesterday's Morning Edition, half a dozen and more Noble Families quite suddenly found themselves completely destitute and without Titles, all because of the sudden verification of a hitherto unknown Inheritance that had been Claimed less than a month before – with the effects of the Inheritance delayed by the Ministry's glacial bureaucracy. As such, this news did indeed come as a complete surprise to most of these Families – though not necessarily all, though this remains unconfirmed.”

“Now, I, Rita Skeeter, have the humble opportunity to present to you all the facts, my humble speculations and the questions that now so thoroughly captivate our lovely readers. Using my fabled skills of deduction and web of informants through our Community, I was able to deduce a sizeable selection of facts pertaining to this Mystery Heir.”

“Firstly, our Mystery Heirs is actually multiple people – we are talking of at least two separate entities, indeed! One claimed their Inheritances under the Title of Gaunt – a Family that only few people will recognize and know as one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight! But, dear reader, what would shock you more is that the last known Heir Gaunt had died no less than fifteen years ago! So, where then, did this anonymous Heir Gaunt come from? My dear readers, the answer would shock you!”

“During my investigation, I uncovered a previously unknown descendant of the Gaunt Family, one that all will know all too well indeed. None other than Tom Marvolo Riddle – who we all know as You-Know-Who! Now, my dear readers, I do not wish to spread undue paranoia as to the true nature of the facts – but this is information available to all those who know where to search. And to explain the whole circumstances behind this bombshell of a fact, an exclusive article will be printed in tomorrow's Evening Edition of the Prophet – under the title of 'You-Know-Who; The Monster behind the Man'.”

“Our second Mystery Heir claimed their Inheritance under the Title of Peverell – a name
unseen for hundreds of years! Indeed, all were under the impression that the Peverell line had died out centuries ago! Yet, somehow, our Mystery Heir managed to apply for the Title and gained it.”

“Most people will recognize the name Peverell as a historical Pure-Blood Family, most often associated with the legendary Deathly Hallows – a collection of mythical artefacts usually dismissed as mere children's fairy-tales, but taken remarkable serious in certain less serious circle (most notably our colleagues at the Quibbler). As such, those who can claim this Title could very well use its enormous heritage as leverage in many situations!”

“Thus, my dear readers, here we have two Heirs; One possibly the Darkest Wizard this side of the globe had see since the fabled Morgana – and the other possibly a Paragon of the Light, of a family so deeply steeped in Light that their name almost became synonymous with it, before their eventual disappearance.”

“Secondly, our Mystery Heirs apparently used the Rites of Right in their various forms to claim the various Titles and Inheritances. Most notably, the Gaunt Heir almost exclusively usurped the Titles through the Rite of Subjugation – a lesser used Rite, but most notoriously utilized by You-Know-Who during the height of his Reign. Notably, He achieved this more often than not through the abuse of the Imperius Curse – a fact heavily contested by the Goblins of Gringott's after the War had ended. For these exact facts, I kindly refer you to our Morning Edition of tomorrow, which shall re-publish the relevant articles the Daily Prophet had published when they were first opinionated.”

“The Peverell Heir gained most Inheritances through the Rite of Conquest, with several supplements to claim via the Rite of Heritage – once more placing our second Heir in direct contrast with the first. Of course, this in itself says several things – such as the fact that the Peverell Heir had to have been active during the War, effectively opposing several Dark Families and evidently being responsible for their defeat in the later part of the War. Who exactly they bested to make the Rite of Conquest take effect, however, is quite uncertain – even to me, dear readers.”

“Why then did the Peverell Heir wait so long to Claim their Inheritances? Where they delayed? Had they left the British Isles, not being able to Claim the Titles until they returned? If so, why did they return only after a decade had passed? So many question – some of which we shall try to answer on pages 7 to 20.”

“As a result of these Mystery Heirs coming forth, with not too much time between their Claims, Gringott’s initiated several investigations as to verify the Claims submitted to them – apparently not all Claims are yet sufficiently proven – and our firmest belief is that we can possibly expect more Families to suddenly find themselves destitute. Dear readers, we humbly implore you not to overwhelm the Goblins of Gringott's with your fears – already a massive investigation is underway, to secure your Rights from possible usurpation. Our sources have also shared that the Ministry is actively guiding Gringott's in this.”

“Using the facts that I, Rita Skeeter, have thus managed to verify beyond my own expectations, I can share this; Fourteen Family Seats have now been consolidated under two Seats. And for a definite confirmation of the real identity of the Mystery Heirs, we shall have to await the Wizengamot's next Meeting – which is scheduled for January 1th, the day of the
New Year. However, we can expect an Emergency Meeting to take place soon, according to multiple sources within the Ministry. The Daily Prophet will keep you updated on this via our regular Wizengamot Column, on page 7.”

“The full list of these Seats is not completely confirmed – yet we can share of the misfortune of the Families Avery, LeStrange, Nott, Rosier, and Yaxley. And though we are loath to say it, few will mourn their losses. None of these Families had made themselves very popular after the War (especially during their Hearings), but influence and wealth saved their necks from the chopping block indeed.”

“Furthermore, there have been rumours that certain Families have been reinstated – though no immediate evidence has been found to prove this. But do not fret, dear readers, our investigative teams are busy with verifying these claims! More will be known soon!”

“At the same time, we have caught wind of another unusual circumstance – one which would seemingly be wholly separate from the Mystery Heir, but whose timing can not be a mere coincidence. According to a singular source, Headmaster Dumbledore of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation, and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, is currently being investigated for the very serious charges of Abuse of Power, Abuse of Regency, Fraud, and Lying under Oath. Effective from today, his duties as Chief Warlock and Supreme Mugwump have thus been put on hold, until the investigation reaches a fair and unimpeded conclusion.”

“Is this another angle of the mystery? Is our veritable Lord of Light being undermined by the Heir Gaunt? Or is there truth to the accusations? Do not fret, dear readers – for I have done my homework. Read my exclusive article over the life and mystery of Albus Dumbledore in the Evening Edition next Monday! For, as you might not have known, dear reader, I, Rita Skeeter, have been writing an unofficial biography of our most famous Light Lord for the past two years now! And my exclusive article shall be but a sneak preview of the first chapter of my book. Expect the public release of “The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore – Hero or Fraud?” this winter! Available for pre-order at all Ministry-funded book-stores and gazetteers, for a mere 5 Galleons – 7 Galleons if you buy it together with my other unofficial biography on the Boy-Who-Lived, “Harry Potter – The Boy-Who-Lived” (also available for separate purchase in previously-mentioned locations).”

“Furthermore, now that investigations have once more re-opened on several Dark Families who had previously been cleared of any wrong-doings during the War (when they were openly accused of being willing followers of You-Know-Who), we at the Daily Prophet found it prudent to re-publish the facts concerning these infamous hearings in Sunday's Morning Edition. Together with these re-published articles, you can enjoy several new articles on the Families disinherited on pages 5 to 20 of that Edition. If you wish to add your own take on these articles with information you think prudent to be shared with the public at large, do not hesitate to contact our public solicitors – so that we may include all the information relevant to the situation in those articles. We love to hear from you, dear reader.”

“Then, of course, there are the hundreds of questions that widely circulated the rumour mill of our subscribers. In the next 7 pages, we will share the 50 most asked questions and answer them to the best of our ability! For now, dear readers, stay calm – stay curious. More shall be revealed as we find out more facts. Yours truly, Rita Skeeter!”
“YOU-KNOW-WHO; THE MONSTER BEHIND THE MAN!”

Lord Voldemort, the Dark Lord, You-Know-Who, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named – a myriad of titles for the selfsame man. Yet none would dare call Him a man – no, not even His most loyal followers, wherever they have hidden. Responsible for the greatest massacre of Wizarding blood since the Witch-Hunts of the Middle Ages, dwindling our numbers even lower than before. A tyrant, sadist, a cold-blooded killer who raised those He murdered from the dead into an army of Inferi – an army which was never found after His defeat.

We all know off the tragic deaths of the Prewett brothers, who had been first tortured into insanity and then 'culled' like mere cattle. A fate, unfortunately, not too unsimilar to that of the Longbottoms. And who can forget the tragedies of the McKinnons, the Bones, etcetera... Our losses are myriad and deep, still remembered all these long years past...

To understand the monster behind the man, we must delve back into the past of the most brutal Sorcerer since Morgana. Born to Meriope Gaunt, daughter of Marvolo Gaunt, Patriarch of the House of Gaunt, last descendants of the House of Slytherin. She birthed him on December 31st in 1926, in a poorhouse that functioned as orphanage, dying that same day from complications that arose during the birth.

The son of a clueless Muggle Lord known as Tom Riddle, who had been enchanted into submission by Meriope's illegal use of Amortentia, the Most Potente Love Potion™. For six months, the enchanted Tom and the lovesick Meriope lived together, until he finally broke free from the Amortentia enchantment – whether this was by force or accident, we shall never know, for Riddle died scant 16 years later. Meriope, alone and penniless, eventually arrived at a poorhouse in London three months later, swiftly expiring there after speaking her final words in the name of her new-born son.

For ten years, her unremarkable son, Tom Marvolo Riddle, named after his maternal grandfather and father, spent those dreary years alone and unloved – but evidence already points to a psychopathic nature, even then. Incidents with children at the orphanage, terrified beyond belief, psychological trauma, 'accidents', ... Yet never did any evidence stick to implicate the child with these circumstances.

Eventually, the letter to Hogwarts arrived – for the child was very evidently magical. The obscure details of the 'accidents' proved this easily enough. And this child, scarred, warped, maybe even evil, was taken under the wing of nobody less than... Albus Dumbledore. Then still Professor of Transfiguration, he guided the child into our Wizarding community and into 7 years of education under his watchful eye. Did Albus' meddling worsen those traits evidently present before? Or did something else worsen them? We don't know.
For in the 7 years after that, all accounts paint young Tom as a studious pupil, kind, friendly, charismatic. Bonds were made with many of the people who would later become his most loyal Death-Eaters. Prefect, Head Boy, Herald of Slytherin – Tom garnered many awards and achievements in those busy 7 years. Most notably, he was awarded for uncovering the true identity of the assailant who terrorized the school for a full year by opening the mysterious Chamber of Secrets (for the full story, see the re-published article 'Chamber of Secrets Terrorist Identified – Student Awarded For Uncovering Truth' in tomorrow’s Morning Edition). Of course, later actions would cast doubt on the truth of these findings – though they were never officially redacted or otherwise changed.

It was not long after the Chamber of Secrets situation was resolved, by the end of June 1943, the mysterious death of 3 Muggles at Riddle Manor, in Little Hangleton was reported in local Muggle gazettes – an event that alerted the regional Auror Division for it's telltale signs of the usage of the Killing Curse for the despicable deed. One suspect was identified, Morfin Gaunt, maternal uncle to young Tom, who readily confessed the heinous crime. Morfin gaunt was sentenced to imprisonment for life in Azkaban, where he died a few years back.

Two years later, not long after Tom graduated from Hogwarts with stellar marks, he stunned everyone by becoming employed at the notorious Dark store Borgin & Burke's. Here, he worked for several years, visiting client at their homes for the assessment of heirlooms for purchase and pawning. Then, as suddenly as he became employed at the store, he took leave and vanished.

For ten years, no one saw or heard from the young man – until he returned, quite publicly, to our fair shores. But the young polite man, so well-liked before, was no more. Thoroughly changed, for the worse, he was now publicly identifying himself as Lord Voldemort for the first time – though he was apparently known under this name in more select circles long before this. And after a failed appeal for work at Hogwarts and the Ministry, for reasons unknown and untold, he was seemingly doomed to slide into relative obscurity.

But why was young Riddle absent for the better part of those ten years? Where had he gone? Rumours answer this question by stating that he was actively hunting down Dark artefacts and forbidden knowledge. But for what end? For personal research? Did he wish to use them to grow his power? Or did he finally bite off more than he could chew? Was he cursed by one of these artefacts, his personality twisted into that of the psychopathic tyrant we know all too well? Was he perhaps finally done in by his desire to learn? We shall never know – for only the Dark Lord could tell, and he never was privy to sharing his knowledge except with his most trusted advisors (who were few).

At any rate, we all believed that life would go its merry way – that young Riddle would never be more than a footnote in the annals of Hogwarts' bureaucracy and the employment ledgers of an obscure shop. How wrong we were! For alike a summer's thunder-storm, He took our community by surprise just a few years later. Riddle had been amassing power, recruiting those like-minded to his philosophies and as brutal in his executions! Death-Eaters began to attack their political opponents publicly, the Dark Mark was seen for the first time above a murder-scene – and the Wizarding War had begun.

For eleven long years, we lived in fear and anger. No one needs to be remembered of that dreadful time, and I shall not torture you, dear reader, by saying more than needed. Many
died, more disappeared – and countless were tortured, bearing the scars forever. And no one saw the light at the end of the tunnel – many were prepared for life to be this way for the foreseeable future.

Until October 31\(^{st}\) 1981, when the Dark Lord was suddenly undone! For the Dark Lord had gone after the Potter Family, who were protected by a Fidelius Charm but were betrayed by their Secret-Keeper, Sirius Black. Poor Lilly and James Potter were slain, brutally yet efficiently snuffed out with the Killing Curse – the same Curse which the Dark Lord then cast upon the Potter Heir, young Harry. Just shy of a year old, the baby was obviously doomed to die – yet, the Boy-Who-Lived lived. And instead, the Dark Lord was obliterated! The how and why were never fully understood – but that the Dark Lord had been undone was evident immediately! For Death-Eaters in custody of the Ministry experienced an epileptic fit, each and every one, all branded with the Dark Mark. For days, these criminals were practically insane, howling and jabbering, their minds nearly undone by some unknown backlash originating from the tattoo that had linked them to their Master.

Aurors arrived at the scene shortly after, as the Dark Lord's demise had nearly completely reduced the Potter home to rubble. Only by a miracle was the young Potter heir saved from the rubble, by none other than Albus Dumbledore himself.

We all believe the Dark Lord dead – there is indeed no evidence to say differently. Yet rumours linger – of dark shades in anonymous forests, of illegal Death-Eater meetings still happening in seedy pubs none wished to identify for fear of reprisal. Evidently, some of the Dark Lord's followers believe him alive still – or at least wish to continue His work.

And now we have the Mystery Heir Gaunt, a name so intricately woven into the life's story of a young wizard turned Dark Lord. Has the Dark Lord returned, under a new name? If so, why pick a name which would so readily identify his true identity? I do not yet have the answers, dear reader, but I shall have them soon – for I, Rita Skeeter, shall ever hunt for the truth! For you, for your children – and for the truth itself!

**THE LIFE AND LIES OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE - FOREWORD.**

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation, and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. Born to Percival and Kendra Dumbledore, a Pureblood Wizard native to our Isles and a Muggle-Bourne Witch native to the United States of America – the latter obviously having Native American ancestry down the line. Oldest of three children, he is the elder brother of Aberforth Dumbledore (notorious for his incident with Charms Abuse towards goats) and Ariana Dumbledore (a sister who was seen so little outside of their house
that finding people who remember her is nigh impossible – though not for me, dear readers!)

One of the most respected and gifted wizards to ever live, numerous and varied accolades have been handed out to him throughout the course of our Community's recent history. He is, as is stated on the back of his very own Chocolate Frog Card (which he claimed was his greatest accomplishment), the discoverer of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and it is claimed by multitudes that no wizard's duel could have matched the one between him and Gellert Grindelwald, a Dark wizard from Germany in 1945. He is, it seems, the epitome of all that is good in magic and non-magic folks alike. Yet how much do we really know about him?

There has been, undoubtedly, a lot of secrecy regarding this beloved figure-head of the Light. I myself, dear readers, have had to place severe Anti-Theft Charms on all of my notes and my interview transcripts, for what would this book be without the evidence behind all the claims made? Undoubtedly, there are claims that will displease some, while appealing to others – most notably his opponents amongst the Dark Families.

After an interview earlier this year with the illustrious Headmaster himself, during which I managed to secure a few startling details (for more information, read the re-published article in tomorrow's Morning Edition), I started screening all incoming mail for various curses and poisons. It was not easy spending the better part of 2 weeks after the interview lying in bed with tree trunks for arms, believe me, dear reader – but for you, I would brave the road to Hell and back!

Thus, the quest for the truth, as always, spurred me on. The quiet voices of distress that are silenced quickly when they claim that Albus Dumbledore is not as great as he seems, I felt, deserved a chance to make their views heard, dear readers. And what voices they were! Had they been allowed to speak out, their very words could rent the heavens apart, toppled our government and alter the course of our world forever. These voices, I know, are not to be treated lightly, nor are they to be scoffed at, for there is such a magnificent store of information available there that, when pieced together, allows for a picture to be painted, which would force many of us, noble peasants as we are, to question our unwavering faith in Albus Dumbledore, our self-proclaimed Light Lord.

As many of you have already seen in my exclusive interview with Dumbledore earlier this year, there were many questions that needed to be answered. Where did the Dumbledores really come from? Except the facts that we know where Albus' parents were born, little is known of their earlier lives. How had they got there – and why? In all accounts, the USA was definitely the better place for a middle-class family to raise their children – opportunities were better, work easier to find – but the UK offered greater opportunities to build a noble legacy. Was this why?

What was Dumbledore's early life like? Was he popular in school? These are matters easier to answer – as Ministry records are extensive and open to the public. Indeed, the man himself often expounds upon his Hogwarts school-years – yet he ever remains curiously tight-lipped about his personal life beyond school.

And yet, these are trivial affairs compared to the really big fish still swimming out there. What exactly was the relationship between Albus Dumbledore and Gellert Grindelwald?
What off the rumours that persist, claiming of a clandestine and secretive relationship between a young Albus and Gellert? Had Albus, young and foolish, lost his heart to the young man who later proclaimed himself a Dark Lord? And what about the other rumours, that claim off an affair between Albus' brother, Aberforth, and Gellert's sister, Miska? Or off Aberforth's arrest concerning the abuse of Charms on goats? (see the re-published article in tomorrow's Evening Edition!) And what off the pregnancy supposed to stem from this affair? And let us not forget the unceremonious behaviour at the funeral of Ariane Dumbledore, sister to the two brothers, who died in suspicious circumstances – when Aberforth and Albus veritably began a boxing match in the chapel! How did Ariana die? Who was responsible? (see the re-published article in Wednesday's Morning edition!)

And what finally compelled Albus at last to confront Grindelwald? And what precisely did occur that night, when Gellert was struck down by his childhood lover? And why did Albus Dumbledore, afterwards, refuse the post of Minister of Magic, not once, but thrice? Certainly he would have been beloved as Minister – obviously to a much greater degree than any Ministers that have come and gone between now and then. Why was he content to merely remain a Headmaster? Was it because he feared his secrets would inevitably come to light?

All these questions, and so many more, dear reader, I shall endeavour to finally answer in the coming chapters!

Daily Prophet Article Timeline


24/08/91, Mo.Ed.; Several Legacy Articles Republished.

“15 DARK FAMILIES ARRESTED – DEATH-EATER EVIDENCE UNCOVERED!”

“MALFOY PATRIARCH RELEASED – IMPERIUS CLAIM ACCEPTED!”

“NOTT PATRIARCH ON BAIL – EVIDENCE RULED INCONCLUSIVE!”

“TRAGEDY IN THE LIGHT – CROUCH JR ARRESTED ON DEATH-EATER TESTIMONY!”

“CALLS FOR ARREST OF ALL DARK FAMILIES – WIZENGAMOT CHAOS!”


25/08/91, Mo.Ed.; Several Legacy Articles republished.

“DARK LORD HEARINGS – MALFOY”
“DARK LORD HEARINGS – NOTT”

“DARK LORD HEARINGS – ROSIER”

“CHAMBER OF SECRETS TERRORIST IDENTIFIED – STUDENT AWARDED FOR UNCOVERING THE TRUTH!”


Chapter End Notes

This chapter has no real plot-developments, but might be necessary later on to explain certain facts. Consider it fluff-text for the lore-behind-the-plot!
Chapter XXIV

Chapter Summary

Harry finally enters aboard the Hogwarts Express and they start their journey!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“DUMBLEDORE UNDER REVIEW – BOARD OF GOVERNORS CONCERNED WITH RECENT RUMOURS, INVESTIGATION STARTED.”

Harry saw very surprised when he read that front-page headline as he hurriedly ate his breakfast, not having the time to properly read the article. Finishing his breakfast, he resolved to read it on the train, pocketing the paper in the Extendable Pouch that hung form his belt. Placing the dirty dishes in the sink and finishing his cup of tea, Harry raced back up to his room to finish packing his clothes into the travel-trunk.

Philly was going nuts, flitting from room to room to ensure Harry hadn't forgotten anything. The Wardrobe and Trunk had already been sent to Hogwarts by Snape, as Harry had received the official permission to have them at school yesterday. They'd sent in a request for it, as they were official Family Heirlooms now – and school regulation allowed for Heirs to bring in a single wardrobe and a single trunk in place of the standard school-supplied ones, all in exchange for a small fee for the paperwork and additional warding that needed to be done.

And, okay, maybe Harry had gone a bit overboard by sending over 20 Galleons instead of the standard 17 Galleons for such a move. Harry tried to kid himself that he was just a little bit OCD, and just disliked uneven numbers – but he really just wanted to make sure nobody would interfere with these two pieces of furniture. He loved the Wardrobe, for the connection it gave him with his ancestors – and he loved the Trunk for the show of affection that it was from Severus. He wasn't sure what he'd do would either get damaged somehow – and he'd rather not think about that worst-case scenario...

Eventually, all was packed – and Harry took hold of Snape's arm, just outside of Spinner's End, at a quarter before nine. Disapparating from Spinner's End and Apparating in a shadowed alcove within King's Cross Station. Nobody noticed their arrival. Having dressed in Muggle attire, the pair strode out of the alcove and towards the platform between lines nine and ten. Snape had explained that the Hogwarts Express was to be boarded on Platform 9 3/4 and Harry had given a ridiculous snort at that, remarking how fake that sounded. Snape has simply explained the history of the Hogwarts Express in rebuke, a two hour monotony on historical record, technical details, and useless facts. Harry had learned to hold his tongue about the probability of all things magical after that – he still thought in very Muggle ways after all...

When they arrived at the platform, Harry failed to see where their Platform was, looking around and subtly craning his neck. Snape merely shook his head, placing a hand on Harry's shoulder. “Patience, Evans. Observe and learn.” Since they still had a good ten minutes before the train would prepare to leave, Harry agreed. So there they stood for a while, watching troves of Muggles pass by – until a gaggle of redheads captured Harry's attention. A middle-aged mother, obviously,
surrounded five children of various ages. Two twin boys, two other boys – one younger, one older, and a girl younger than Harry by a few years.

They didn't seem like anything special, until Harry overheard the woman speak. “Oh, it's always packed with Muggles, of course! Every year! You'd think the Ministry would do something about, for those two times a year...” The rest of the phrase became inaudible, as the small group passed beyond Harry's hearing. They walked to the back of the platform, stopping before a blind wall with no discernible features that'd make it stand out in any way. They stood there for a few moments, the mother talking to the boys rather animately – before the oldest boy took his trolley, stepped back a ways and ran straight into the wall! No, not into – through!

Harry blinked his eyes a few times – it didn't look like Apparition or Floo. Was the wall simply walk-through, perhaps? He looked at Snape, who merely nodded – and they approached the small group together. The pair of twins had just passed through the wall, when Snape addressed the woman. “Mrs Weasley, good morning.” The woman swiftly turned about, her eyes quickly fixing on Harry and Snape. “Oh, Severus! What a surprise. I'd have thought you already at Hogwarts by now?” Snape nodded. “Normally, yes, I would be. But this year is different – as will the next years be, I think. I have come to drop off my new charge, young Mr Evans.” At this, he nodded his head towards Harry, who gave her a polite bow and greeted her cordially. “Good morning, Mrs Weasley.”

It was nice to finally meet someone who'd have benefited directly from Harry's decision to reinstate certain fortunes back to its rightful owners. Her clothes were a bit threadbare, but those that the young boy and girl were wearing were evidently new – of greater quality fabric, with a higher thread-count, not faded with years of sun-damage and washing, … Seems she had priorities – and the happiness of her children obviously came before her own.

Mrs Weasley was obviously pleased with Harry's polite greeting, smiling so brightly that motherly love almost visibly radiated of her. “Such a polite young man. Have you been teaching him etiquette, Severus?” Snape nodded his head softly, placing his hands behind his back as he spoke. “Indeed, Molly. Evans comes from a Muggle upbringing – his parents were magical, but unfortunately expired a year after he was born. So he was placed with his aunt. However, her manner of upbringing was rather... lacking.” The icy tone of those last words more than made clear just exactly what Snape thought of Aunt Petunia – and clearly Molly Weasley was adept at reading between the lines. She came from a noble family, after all.

“Oh dear, how dreadful.” She said, her hand at her chest, before she looked at Harry. “I hope you're okay now, dear. Is Severus not too hard on the rules? He has a reputation of working his students at Hogwarts to the bone – no offense, Severus.” She added, with afterthought. Harry simply chuckled. “Well, he did try to bring me up to speed on the basics of Transfiguration, Herbology, Charms, Runes, and Potions as best he could – but two months really is too short a time for that. I almost feel like going to Hogwarts would be holiday in comparison!” He laughed, Molly laughing with him.

Her son and daughter, however, were being very quiet. They'd gone to stand behind their mother, and looked at Harry and Snape like they were a curious zoo-exhibit. “Oh my, how could I forget? Severus, this is Ron and this is Ginny. Ron's starting his first year today – and Ginny will start next year.” Severus bowed his head lightly at the children. “Miss Ginevra. Mr Ronald. Pleased to meet you.” Ginny gave a small smile, waving her hand at Snape in reply – whilst Ron gave Snape a dark look and didn't respond. “Ron, be polite. Severus said hello.” Shuffling on his feet, the boy mumbled a barely audible half-arsed greeting. “Hello, sir.”

Oh joy, Harry thought, this one is gonna be fun to have around, rolling his eyes internally. Snape,
apparently, thought this the perfect moment to cut their conversation short, giving a well-acted small gasp. “Oh, it seems it’s almost time. Five to nine. Best go through, Evans, I’ll see you at Hogwarts tonight.” Giving Harry a small smile, Snape clapped him the shoulder. Harry gave a smile back, hugging the man around the waist before turning to grab his trolley. Molly gave Ron a few last pieces of advice, before taking out a handkerchief and rubbing away some dirt on the boy’s nose. Tearing away from her affection, Ron came to stand besides Harry, their trolleys facing the wall. “You first.” Ron said, and Harry nodded.

He started pushing the trolley, faster, faster, … The wall came nearer, and nearer, … Harry half-expected to crash against it – he closed his eyes… and kept going. When he opened his eyes a few seconds later, he was through and unto the Platform. Coming to a stop besides the path to the entrance, Harry took in the sight that stretched before him!

The Platform stretched for fully 300 meters, packed with dozens upon dozens of groups of parents, children, siblings, … Trunks were being loaded at several points into the train. And, oh, the train! Harry had never been a fan of locomotives or other vehicles, but this one almost spoke to his soul! Livery on the side of the locomotive itself identified it as a “GWR 4900 CLASS 5972 OLTON HALL”, with a small additional livery beneath it proclaiming “HOGWARTS CASTLE”, and the eighteen carriages it towed each bore livery identifying them as “MK 1 TK”. Harry had no idea what all this meant, but he dutifully filed it away in his Occluded memory anyway. He had found that Occlumency allowed for near-photographic memory – useful indeed.

The steam engine was painted a brilliant crimson red, shining and gleaming as if just polished, looking as new as the day it had rolled out of the factory it came from so long ago. Not surprising, Harry thought, when you have Reparation and Cleaning Charms. The obsidian paint was black as night, and though gleaming as brightly as the crimson, it also seemed to fully absorb whatever light fell upon it. It was a curious contradiction which, when Harry tried to focus on it, made his head hurt – so he left it alone, knowing better than torture himself out of curiosity. He could probably look up any information that might answer it in the Hogwarts library anyway. Two exhaust-chimneys stood out on the front of the engine, with a steam-whistle behind it, closer to the driver's cabin.

Puffs of steam whistled out of the numerous hydraulic joints every minute, making it seem as if the engine was calmly breathing, waiting for its passengers to finish boarding and the bell toll nine. The dissipating steam gave the Platform a subtle haze, which caught the rays of golden sunlight in a dazzling scene of refraction and hypnotic beauty. Miniature mite-particles from the chimneys drifted lazily through the air, occasionally passing a beam of light and casting pillars of shadow in those little oceans of illumination. Three pairs of enormous wheels bore the sleek engine upon the rails, with two smaller pairs supporting the engine's tapering snout.

The coal-box behind the driver's cabin was heavily modified, however – this Harry could readily recognize from examples of steam-locomotives he had seen in books before. It looked as if another smaller steam-engine had been placed there, but small windows allowed one to look inside and see it was illuminated from within by a blinding light. Harry guessed that this was the magical reactor Snape had told him about, when he had explained how the Hogwarts Express worked.

It definitely seemed like it belonged, anyway – its exterior was lovingly created to match that of the original engine, though subtly different. Harry idly wondered how the driver was able to go between the cabin and the carriages. Another question he idly pushed away for later.

The carriages looked gorgeous, with their Victorian exterior, lovingly polished to a brilliant gleam. Doors could be entered on either ends of each carriage, and a baggage-carriage was visible after every fifth carriage. So fifteen passenger-carriages and three baggage-carriages. Which meant that
you could walk between most carriages, but not the whole train. And judging from how the families were organized, Harry wagered that the youngest children were seated near the front and the eldest near the back. That was good, he thought – it encouraged for interaction between age-groups up to a few years above and below yours. Snape had mentioned Prefects and Head Boys and Girls – and Harry had correctly guessed they were kinda like hall monitors in Muggle schools. So they'd probably patrol between all the carriages during the ride.

Handing over his trolley to one of the Handlers at the nearest baggage-carriage, Harry turned to Ron and his family. The oldest brother, Percy, said something about Prefects having two compartments near the front of the train and him having to go join them. The twins loudly teased Percy for it, before their mother told them off, gave him a last hug and saw him off. One by one, the remaining three sons handed over their trolleys to the Handlers – whilst the daughter was not so subtly gawking at Harry, who was waiting and observing. He didn't really know what to do next – Snape had merely said that Harry should use the occasion to observe and make decisions based on what he saw. It wasn't too difficult and he understood why, but it still was a bit of a bother.

“Do you want to sit in a compartment with us?” Harry startled slightly – he hadn't noticed Ron's approach. The twins were discussing with their mother, who was plainly telling them off and not to break any school-rules this year. It was a comment that made Harry smile – he guessed they'd be loads of fun to be around, or at least have as allies or friends. Turning his attention back to Ron, Harry contemplated his answer. “Sure, but I think someone else will probably joins us eventually. I made a friend over the summer and he'll probably search me out once the train leaves.” Ron gave a shy smile. “That's okay – as long as your friend ain't a pompous git.” Oh dear, Harry thought, this is gonna be interesting... With the way Ron had spoken and acted till now, he was sure the redhead would quickly be at odds with the Malfoy kid.

“Let's go then.” Harry said, with a smile of his own. Waving a last goodbye to his mother – which Harry repeated as it paid to be polite, they entered the third carriage on the front. They'd soon found an empty compartment and were just seated when a clock on the Platform loudly tolled nine. “All aboard!” A male voice loudly warned, as the steam-whistle underscored his warning with a loud screech. The last children quickly hurried aboard the train – and at exactly two past nine, the final doors closed. Children hung from the windows of their compartments, waving goodbye to their parents. Harry could immediately recognize those who had a noble upbringing – as they kept to merely waving to their parents from behind the glass, neatly seated, which he had observed when they were walking from the entrance of the carriage to an empty compartment half-way through.

As they waited for the train to move, the compartment-door opened, showing a girl their age with extremely dishevelled hair. It looked like she had been electrocuted, the way her hair stood out like a lion's mane. It was even wilder than even Harry's – something he hadn't thought possible. And standing behind the girl was Luna! “Luna? Why are you here? I thought you didn't go to Hogwarts till next year?” Harry spoke the question before the lion-maned girl before Luna could even speak up, which evidently threw the stranger completely off-guard. “Hi, Harry. Oh no, we thought it best if I began this year. So we changed things.” Harry was completely surprised by this, blinking his eyes a few times. “You... changed things? How do you even change your age, Luna? Is it even legal?!”

Luna simply giggled, hiding her small behind the back of her hand. “No, you silly – I just changed what I was, since I began. It isn't that difficult.” And with that she turned to the empty corridor running through the carriage, finally allowing the new girl to speak up. “Ah – well, okay. Euhm, you two didn't happen to see a toad, did you? It listens to the name Trevor. It's the familiar of a boy in the first carriage.” Harry looked at Ron, who looked as confused as he did. “No, not that we can remember. Have you tried a Summoning Charm?” The girl blinked sheepishly, blushing a bit.
“Euhm, no – I don't know that one yet. Can you demonstrate?” She asked.

“Sure, but it doesn't always work on living things. It's fairly limited, by size and vitality – I don't remember correctly at the moment, there is very complicated magical theory behind the reason.” Harry brandished his wand, for a second having to assert his dominance over it as it sensed the people in the vicinity. It was the first time he showed and used it near anyone else but Snape – and it was curious about these new people so nearby. But Harry quietly bore down his magical core on the connection between them and the wand quickly acquiesced. “Accio Trevor the Toad.” Waving the wand, harry felt the magic take and successfully cast. For a few seconds, nothing happened – until a fat swarthy toad suddenly floated into their compartment through the window, ever so gently. It plopped down between Ron and Harry, on the table between them, with a loud wet pop and a croaking indignified ribbit that sounded very stern and cross.

The girl quickly stepped forward, carefully grasping Trevor between her hands – something the familiar obviously didn't like as he immediately began squirming in her grip. “Oh, thank you! That was well done. What's your name? Mine's Hermione Granger!” She exclaimed happily, obviously impressed by Harry's successful charm. “Henry Evans.” Harry said, following Snape's advise to make friends under the pseudonym whilst on the train. If he'd reveal his true name, people would probably start fawning over him out of ignorance, believing the mythical tales told about the Boy-Who-Lived. And if his new friends took offense to his desire to stay anonymous when possible, they probably wouldn't be worth his time. Harry had agreed – so for the next many hours, he would be Henry Evans. Ron spoke up as well.

“I'm Ron. Ron Weasley.” He stuck out a hand in greeting, obviously wanting to shake on it – but Harry knew Granger would decline before she even said it. Ron's hands looked absolutely filthy, grimy and unwashed. It didn't help that Harry had seen Ron handle his rat familiar, which was simply stuffed in one of the deep pockets of his dress-robe. How it wasn't covered in stains, spots and rat faeces yet, Harry didn't know. At least the other brothers had seemed a bit more concerned with personal hygiene. Ah well, Harry thought, time to pick up the leadership role.

Hermione simply gave a polite nod, not wishing to offend the boy. “Ron, euhm, no offense,” Harry began, “but your hands are really dirty. What did you do?” Ron hid his hand, blushing and obviously a bit angry at the remark. “I was late waking up – had to pack quickly, okay?” Oh dear, Harry thought, he's not a morning person - that's gonna be loads of fun for his future dorm-mates. “It's okay, Ron. Just... stick out your hands, please?” Ron didn't move, obviously wary of Harry's intent. Harry suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. “I'm just gonna clean your hands with a Charm, Ron – I'm not cutting them off. If you're always late with waking up, it might be useful if you learned this Charm too. It's really easy and it'll save you a few minutes each morning. Okay?”

Reluctantly, Ron nodded his head – possibly mollified with the prospect of not having to hurry as much each morning and being to sleep in a few more minutes... Sticking out his hands and shaking them out of his robes' sleeves, Ron presented them to Harry.

“Scourgify.” Harry chanted, waving his wand. A soft wave of nigh-visible light washed over Ron's hands and his forearms, gently washing away each small spot and stain. “Wow...” Ron said breathlessly, looking over his hands from all angles once the Charm had finished its work. “If you want, I can teach it to you now?” Harry said. Meanwhile, Hermione had quietly left to return Trevor to his master, whilst Luna seated herself besides Harry. She was watching Ron with her bright open eyes, dreamily taking in his reaction to Harry's Scouring Charm.

“That's wicked, mate. How come you already know it?” Ron asked, with a bit of wonder in his eyes. Harry chuckled. “Severus taught it to me a few weeks ago – he considers it one of the Essential Charms to know as quickly as you can cast it. It has sooo many uses.” As Harry
mentioned Snape, Ron's face turned sour. “Can't believe you have to live with that slimy git.” Ron's venomous remark shocked Harry, who immediately became very still. “My brother say he's a right foul bat, always stalking the corridors, looking for Griffyndors to punish unfairly and Slytherins to give unfairly earned points. Don't know how you can stand to live with 'im.” Harry gritted his teeth, trying his best to Occlude his mind and push back the hot anger that began to tinge his vision red. Luckily, for both Harry and Ron, Luna choose that moment to intervene.

“It's not polite to judge people before you know them, Ronald. People always think my Daddy is crazy, but if he was, why would he love me?” The matter-of-fact statement was spoken so plainly, without venom or anger – only with plain curiosity, that it stunned Ron into silence. Ron didn't seem like he knew how to really respond to this. “Euhm – well... I mean – look at him. He looks slimy, doesn't he? And why would my brothers lie? They all said it. Only Percy didn't – but everyone knows Percy is a suck-up...”

Harry cut Ron off at that, his voice even and unwavering – even though he was practically shaking in his seat, with blazing-hot anger coursing through his veins and cold fury tainting his vision red. “That slimy, greasy, bat of a git has been a better parent to me these past two months than my actual family ever was after my parents died...” Ron's eyes became wide after that, and a deep red blush of shame coloured his freckled face.

Luna stayed silent a moment, before she started humming a lullaby Harry couldn't immediately recognize. After a minute or two of deathly silence, during which the train had finally started moving, Harry gave a deep sigh. “Let's – let's try again. I'm happy you haven't had to experience the death of a parent.” Harry said, holding out his hand again. Ron, this time at least, was quick on the uptake, grasping Harry's hand in return. “And I – I'm happy you have a better parent now. Sorry...”

Shaking Ron's hand, Harry gave a smile of satisfaction. “Apology accepted. Just – don't do stuff like that again.” He let go. “Not everyone is gonna be as calm as I was – and I only kept my cool cuz Severus showed my how to meditate...” Ron gave an uncertain nod, eyes downcast as he fiddled with the hem of his robes. Luna quietly finished her lullaby, picking her wand out of her sleeve-holster and placing it behind her ear. She took out a copy of the Quibbler from her robes and started reading it, the gazette turned upside-down as she leafed through it. Slowly Harry began bantering a bit with Ron, keeping to simple subjects that were safe to discuss without risking further escalations.

Ron wasn't stupid – that much became clear quickly. When they'd eventually begun speaking about Wizard's Chess, the redhead had launched into a deep discussion of strategy and movement of pieces. There was a brilliant strategic mind there, Harry recognized – it was just easily clouded by youthful lack of emotions. Not that he was any better, not really – Harry just knew how to conceal his emotions better. Always had been, even before Snape took him in – the Dursleys’ behaviour had always necessitated a poker-face to prevent certain situations from escalating. And the weeks spent with Snape, learning to meditate and Occlude, had simply honed the basic skills Harry had taught himself out of necessity. It might be best to teach Ron these tricks as well, if he wanted to really be friends – Harry really didn't want to have to deal with a volatile personality around him.

And it wasn't just because of his strategic thinking that Harry wanted to know Ron better – the boy actually had quite broad interests on the non-academical level that overlapped with Harry's interests. He liked flying, playing Quidditch – though Harry wasn't sure about that one yet, seeing as he had only played it once and Draco had made it clear it had been a simpler version of the official game. There was a deep-seated love of strategy games – and considering the multiple older brothers, Harry suspected some sibling-jealousy being responsible for it. It was not too unsimilar to what happened between Dudley and Harry – strategising ways to garner positive attention, to direct
negative attention, to get a step up on the other, … Yes, Harry could very easily identify with that. They'd been discussing chess strategies for a while, when the door of the compartment opened to reveal the Malfoy Heir. Draco was already dressed in his school-robes, evidently expecting to be sorted in Slytherin if the emerald-green trims and snake-embroidery were anything to go on. Fixing his gaze on Harry, adamantly refusing to acknowledge the redhead opposite for now, Draco addressed him. “Evans. Good to see you – what did you think of the Platform?” Ah, Harry thought, at least Draco had remembered to address him with the pseudonym in the train. He hadn't been sure if the Malfoy Heir would've cared to remember. “Malfoy. Good morning. It was interesting – Severus told me all about it before we arrived, of course, but it still was very different from what I'd imagined. It has quite a... magical quality to it all, doesn't it?” Draco sneered. “Well, you would say that – you aren't used to it all yet. My grandfather didn't see it like that, though – he thought it quite beneath us Pure-Bloods to lower ourselves to resorting to Muggle technology to deliver us to Hogwarts.” Harry almost chuckled – Draco was saying that, but it sounded only half-hearted and he was pretty sure the blonde would've been bug-eyed when he'd arrived. Draco was a good actor, but not quite as good for someone as observant as Harry. Ah well, Harry thought, he'll get there eventually. “Well, maybe, but you have to admit it has some style, no? And it is a rather spectacular way of arriving at the Castle, I reckon. After all, trains were once the method of travelling for the noble elite...” Harry drawled, leaving out the bits that it was Muggle elite and that this was no longer the case. “Well, if that was the case, we wouldn't be allowing Mud-bloods and Blood-Traitors on board, would we?” Draco sneered, venom in his voice. Oh dear, Harry thought, so far the manners had been good. Ron instantly turned red as a beet, face contorted in rage. Ron was about to leap up and throttle Draco, when Harry rose. “Malfoy. It'd quite appreciate it if you wouldn't insult people like my mother.” Draco paled lightly, remembering all too late what Harry's lineage was. “So I suggest you sit down and apologize, so that we can have a civil conversation.” Ron was looking extremely confused at Draco's sudden reluctance – and became visibly disconcerted when Draco actually sat down and apologized. “My apologies, Evans. I didn't meant to insult you.” “Yes, you did – you just forgot what insulting me would mean...” Harry answered back, voice sharp as steel and cold as ice. Ron was now more curious than confused or angry, gaze switching between the blonde git and raven-haired boy. Ron could recognize a game being played, but he wasn't sure what game this was. Luna giggled, speaking up as she put down her gazette. “Oh Draco, your sharp tongue is gonna get pinched one of these days. Better keep it quiet – we don't want Nargles to fill your head with stupid fuzzy thoughts that would get your father mad.” Draco kept quiet, for the first time really looking at Luna now. He obviously wasn't sure what to make of her. “I know you – you're loony Lovegood's daughter, aren't you,” Harry rolled his eyes, giving a sigh. “Really, Draco? Not even two minutes later and you're already insulting someone else? I thought your father taught you better...” Giving Malfoy a pointed look, Harry waited to see if he'd bite at the comment. Instead, Draco merely blushed and turned back to Luna. “Apologies, Lovegood.” “Thanks, Draco.” Luna sing-songed, picking her gazette back up. “But I thought you were a year younger than me?” Draco asked. “Aren't you supposed to wait another year?” Luna giggled. “Not any more. Ask Henry – he knows what I mean.” Draco looked at Harry, who just shrugged. “Hell if I know, Draco – just... go with it, I guess.” Draco looked at Luna for a while after that, as Harry took up his earlier conversation with Ron. Draco kept quiet for a while, before he eventually spoke up at the Quidditch strategies Ron had started to explain to Harry. And soon, almost two hours had passed. And looking outside, Harry wondered how much longer the train-ride would last...
The plaques indentifying the train-engine are word-for-word what is canonically written on the train according to Rowling - and it made me spend a few hours looking up locomotives and train-carrriages to find the type of carriage most alike the ones described in the books (as these were never specified via serial-number or anything alike that).

Oh, and don't mind Luna - she'll make sense. Eventually.
Chapter XXV

Chapter Summary

The road to Hogwarts is long, but not endless - and it's made all the sweeter with a trolley of sweets and some good company.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

About two and a half hours into the journey, Harry heared the telltale advertising of a salesman – or in this case, a candy saleswoman. Draco heared it too, already taking out a small pouch from his robes and taking out a Galleon. Ron looked envious – and even though he too took out a small brand-new pouch, he only took out a few Knutts. After a while, as Harry could hear the woman halt regularly, she passed by their compartment and halted. She was old, so old – and Harry was sure that the only reason she was standing upright was because she clung unto the trolley she was pushing before her. “Anything off the trolley, dears?” Her voice was silken, wizened, dripping with age and honeysuckle. It painted pictures in Harry's subconscious and he could almost imagine her as she had once been, long ago. Shaking out of the reverie that her tones caused, he cleared his head. She smiled her dimply smile at them, waiting on an answer.

“Yes, madame. Three Chocolate Frogs, a Fizzy Pop Soda, two Egg Sandwhiches, and few napkins, please.” Draco responded, handing over the Galleon and getting two Knutts back in change. He clapped open a small side-table that was hidden in the panelling besides his seat and took the items from the aged witch. Draco took two of the napkins and placed them, unfolded, over his lap, putting the rest aside for later – after handing a few to Harry, Ron and Luna.

Luna settled for the same as Draco, handing over sixteen Sickles and twenty-seven Knutts – which the witch accepted with a happy smile, for it was exact change. Dumping the coins in a small lockbox, the witch took Luna's order item per item, handing each to Luna as she took the next. Meanwhile Harry took in the sight of the trolley before him. It was stacked with goods, a display of sugar oppulence that reached high above the crooked witch's head!

He read all the cards identifying the numerous sweets, drinks, sandwiches, potions, … There were Chocolate Frogs, Bertie Bott's Every-Flavour Beans, Dooble's Best-Blowing Bubblegum, Pumpkin Pasties, Cauldron Cakes, Liquorice Wands, Jelly Slugs, Dew Dew Psychodrops, Fizzling Whisbees, Popping Pixie-Wing Dust, Roasted Chimera Potato Crisps, Shrieking Serbets, Acid Pops, Zebra Hoofs, … Harry had trouble even understanding what half the plaques were saying – and he didn't even dare imagine what they'd taste like. Finally, he settled for the only acceptable answer.

Ron, meanwhile, had ordered his own meal – being two Chocolate Frogs, a Jelly Slug, and a small bottle of Clear-Spring Water. Taking out a small wrapped package from his robes as the witch placed the items in Luna's hands – who then set them on the table between Harry and Ron, the redhead opened the package. It revealed a pair of smushed sandwiched, evidently homemade, probably by his mother. “Oh no, not again. She made me cornbeef – I told her so many times I dislike cornbeef.” Ron whined as he accepted the rest of his order from Luna. “We can share, if you want. I like cornbeef.” Harry said, before he turned to the trolley witch.

“One of everything please, except the sandwiched and drinks. I'll take a cup of tea, if you have
any – lemon and mint, please, madame.” The witch simply nodded, with her jovial smile, accepting five Galleons Harry handed over, giving only three Knutts in return. Before she handed over Harry's order however, she took out her gnarled wand and waved it at the table between the boys. Abruptly, it began to slide and shift, slowly expanding to form a larger surface – so the orders could fit on it. She even Transfigured it to have a small elevated display, so they could put the unopened products out of the way while they ate. Harry thanked her, earning him a simple nod, as he accepted the items, one by one.

Ron's eyes were bugged out, open and wide, as the sweets just kept coming. And by the time Harry accepted the last item – a tin of Magma Moles, advertised as “The Spiciest Sweet This Side Of The Globe™”, there was nigh no room left for Ron's homemade cornbeef-sandwiches. Soon, the witch was on her merry way, stopping soon at the next compartment before moving on...

“That's quite a lot of sweets, Harry. If you eat it all, you might turn less sour.” Luna giggled, as she took a bit of her sandwich, which Draco chucklingly agreed with. Harry could only laugh at that. “Who knows, Luna, you might right. Then again, aren't I already sweet enough?” And he gave her a little pout, looking at her with big wet eyes. She merely snorted, almost goading Draco into choking in his sandwich. Ron could only laugh. Ron and Harry shared the sandwiches, with Harry giving Ron half of each sweet when he could, even handing a few out to Draco and Luna when there was more than two in a packaging.

The landscape outside had slowly been changing. About an hour after their departure, a quick message through the intercom of the carriage had informed them they'd entered into Norfolk – and about twenty minutes later, they'd crossed from Norfolk into Lincolnshire. Soon after, Harry had caught a glimpse of water on the horizon – and he'd reasoned that it was probably the North-Sea on which Lincolnshire bordered. But the water wasn't visible for long, soon again receding beyond the visible horizon. They'd passed through moorland, near small villages, once a larger city, by this point. And once they'd passed into Norfolk and Lincolnshire, the landscape became one of low rolling hills, interspersed with solitary houses and copses of trees and large bushes.

It was a varied landscape, much of which Harry had never seen before – the opportunity had never presented itself, as the Dursleys preferred to keep him at home, grounding him whenever they visited anywhere. And Harry occupied himself by taking it all in, occasionally pipping into the conversations Luna, Draco and Ron were having. About one o'clock PM, Hermione passed by their carriage again, followed by a timid young boy who looked so afraid that Harry thought he was gonna pass out soon. “Hey, Henry, Neville here wanted to say thanks for finding his toad. Neville, this is Henry Evans. Henry, this is Neville Longbottom.” Harry perked up – he knew the boy, even thought he hadn't seen him before – he was the Longbottom heir! “It was no problem – you're welcome, Neville. And hi!” He stuck out his hand, waiting for the boy to shake it.

But Neville was much more timid than Harry thought and merely nodded, muttering a quiet “Hello.” before turning his eyes downwards again. Another approach was needed, Harry realized. “Ah, it's okay if you're afraid. I know your grandmother though – Augusta. She told me about you.” He gave a genuine smile, hoping to win the boy over. But, if anything, the mention of his grandmother made Neville shrink into himself even further. “Y-You know my grandmother? Oh no, was she angry again?” And something in that statement made Harry flinch – he recognized that kind of fear and timidity, fearing the worst now...

“Oh, no, Neville, not at all. Why don't you sit down?” Harry pleaded, Luna understanding the situation and rising to offer her seat. Neville seemed little inclined to accept the offer, until Hermione whispered a few things in his ear. Then, very reluctantly, Neville sat himself down besides Harry. Still he didn't dare to look anyway in the eye, turning his gaze to the floor and trying to be as small as possible. Draco seemed to sense the change in mood and slowly stood up. “Well, I
have a few other friends to find and talk to – so I'll see you later. Evans, Weasley.” Draco gave a
polite nod to both boys, giving another to Luna and Hermione. “Lovegood. Miss.” And stepping
out, turned to the left and began walking to the front of the carriage.

Harry seated himself a bit closer to Neville, careful not to startle the boy, speaking in a soft quiet
voice. “Are you okay? It's okay if you're afraid or uncertain.” Neville merely shook his head, desparately trying to keep back his tears and slowly failing. “Does – does your grandmother scare
you?” Neville didn't move. “Does she hurt you?” No response, and Harry really didn't know how to
interpret this. Looking at Hermione, it was obvious she didn't really know what to do either.
“Neville, we want to help. But we can't if you don't talk to us.” But Neville had completely
retreated into himself, Harry realized – whatever they'd say, it would be of no use. All that Neville
would notice was a dull noise whilst he ignored everything. Sighing defeatedly, Harry shook his
head and sat back towards the window.

“Let's give him some space, guys. We can't do anything but wait for now, I think...” Hermione
agreed, Ron looking really dejected as well. So they spent the next half hour in relative silence,
before they started discussing between eachother again. Slowly the train moved underneath a
cloud-front, and for a while heavy drops of rain were impacting against the thick window-glass
before it became sunny again. It created a dull roar, a background-noise that simulated perfectly
how everybody felt regarding poor Neville. He didn't seem to get better at all, even when the
weather cleared again – until hermione began a discussion about the magical plants they'd be
learning about in Herbology this year.

Slowly, Neville began to react to his surroundings again – something that didn't go unnoticed by
Hermione and Ron either. So, carefully they started throwing simple questions to Neville about
plants – or include him in their speculations and such. It took the better part of an hour, but
eventually Neville began conversing with Hermione – and only her, in a quit soft-spoken voice. It
became clear, over the next hour, from short replies and quiet whispers, that Neville had a passion
for magical plants of every kind and manner. Harry could see why – plants were quiet, grateful for
the smallest act of kindness towards them. And, most of all, Harry suspected it was because plants
don't threaten one unduly, without reason or warning.

It might be beste to keep an eye out on Neville, Harry mused, watching the landscape pass by, idly
responding to certain topics when he thought his idea might be appreciated. Bit by bit, Neville
found his courage in their presence and his voice carefully grew stronger. They'd passed through
Nothinghamshire, then South and West Yorkshire – and as Neville finally spoke to someone else
but Hermione for the first time since he came to sit with them, the intercom announced they'd just
passed into North Yorkshire. Gods, Harry lamented, why are there so many Yorkshires? You'd
think one would be enough – yet apparently not, he thought with a grimace.

The weather had stayed fair, with only the occasional cloud casting a shadow across the sunny
landscape. The late summer heat was slowly making the interior of the carriages swelter,
neccesitating Harry to finally shed his outer robes, hanging them up besides the window. He didn't
dare open the window, fearing he might lose half the candy they still hadn't opened. Taking a few
from the pile, he handed them over to Neville without a word. The boy was talking animatedly with
Hermione about the magical properties of Wormwood and how it could react with Mistletoe, and
he accepted the candy without really paying attention. It was a small victory, Harry mused with a
smile.

The hours slowly wore on and on, other students occasionally passing by, introducing themselves
before moving on to the next compartment. Harry filed away their names, but didn't pay much
attention beyond that. The train had moved uphill for a while, now trundling along its predestined
route among a bare mountain range – Harry figured it's probably be the Pennines, the central range
of peaks that bordered North West England. Snape had warned Harry it'd be a long journey and had adamantly refused to disclose where approximately Hogwarts was located – saying it'd be a nice puzzle to figure out, one that'd help refresh Harry's lessons on geography of the British Isles. Sighing, Harry added the next intercom announcement to the map he had drawn in his mind. “We are now passing County Durham.” Another while later, yet another announcement added to the route in Harry's mind. “Now entering Northumberland.” Some vague warning followed after that, reminding the students not to open the windows and not to cross between passenger-carriages by going through the baggage-carriages.

It was around half past two o'clock PM when the intercom announced they'd crossed the border into Scotland – they'd been travelling for almost five and a half hours by now, and Harry really felt his attention slip more and more. He tried to busy himself by taking out the Daily Prophet and reading the Skeeter article it had published. He really was curious he she'd sensationalize Dumbledore being reviewed.

“DUMBLEDORE UNDER REVIEW – BOARD OF GOVERNORS CONCERNED WITH RECENT RUMOURS, INVESTIGATION STARTED!”

“Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry's Board of Governors, the elected Wizengamot Seat holders responsible for reviewing standard conduct, protocol and funds of our esteemed educational institution, have found the recent rumours regarding the infallibility of Albus Dumbledore to have enough merrit to warrant an in-depth review by their own internal team in tandem with the ongoing Ministry investigations.”

“Spearheaded by Lord Lucius Malfoy, one of the largest contributors to Hogwarts' public funds, the motion was carried through the Wizengamot early yesterday morning with near-unanimous approval across all votes – and the review-request was likewise cleared by vote late yesterday evening, thirteen votes approving to seven votes disapproving with two abstentions. It will now go through the normal channels of bureaucracy and the actual review will be expected to commence early October.”

“As such, Dumbledore's status as current Headmaster is secure for the on-coming year – though it is expected he will probably be placed on probation beginning July 1992, with Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall expected to take up Dumbledore's position of this would be the case. Board Governer Malfoy was very pleased with these proceedings and took some time out of his busy schedule to share his opinion on recent events.”

“I have always maintained that Albus was an ineffective Headmaster of our most noble institute, and for years my worries and objections were waved aside merely because of Dumbledore's status as a national hero. But those days have long since passed – and now it appears that Dumbledore's actions finally are undergoing the unbiased scrutiny I have long said they deserve. It is clear that he is no longer fit to lead Hogwarts. At his age, any decent wizard deserves retirement, a spot near his fireplace with some good Firewhiskey. So I fully welcome these decisions – and I think I will not be remiss to wish Deputy Headmistress McGonagall all the support she will undoubtedly need next year!”

“Lord Malfoy's hopefulness is echoed in many other voices, most notably from Minister Fudge's side of the political battlefield. Minister Fudge has issued many public statements since the first investigations were opened late August.”
“We honour the decisions of the Wizengamot and Gringott's to fully investigate these matters, right to the bottom of the truth. We cannot deny the contributions that Headmaster Dumbledore has provided to our community, but likewise we cannot deny that is time for the next generation of wizards to stamp their mark upon Hogwarts, the Wizengamot – indeed, the Ministry itself. We hope that, using these investigations as a jumping board, we can eliminate a fair amount of corruption in our departments that has slowly infiltrated them since the end of the War. For ten years, we have been lazy and complacent, hopeful that the worst was behind us. And it is! It still is behind us, indeed. But we must take this opportunity to really invigorate the Ministry – and through it, our whole Community!”

“Minister Fudge's call for unity and renewal was heartedly received and applauded by many of the Wizengamot members, Heads of Department in the Ministry, and numerous Lords and Ladies. In recent polls, Minister Fudge's popularity has risen to levels not seen since just before his election. It is obvious our Minister is making the most of the situation – but is he taking too many liberties? Some less-traditional Houses and Families have called upon the Minister not to react too hastily and rather await the preliminary results of the first investigations, fearing that this situation would give the traditional parties a chance to solidify their majority in the Wizengamot.”

Harry put down the Daily Prophet, sighing deeply as he contemplated this situation. Fudge had acted in a way Snape and Lucius had expected – indeed, Lucius had gently been steering the Minister towards this reaction for the past weeks. But the way the Light families were butting against the investigations troubled Harry. Had Dumbledore really made people so blind to his personal faults that they'd actually impede official Ministry investigations into his actions? If so, Harry reasoned that Lucius might have to urge a more pro-active approach to limit the actions the Light families could perform, to prevent them from sabotaging his efforts to expose Dumbledore's dark side.

Harry didn't immediately notice the way Neville stared at the paper, only after a few minutes did he boy's stare catch his attention. Looking back at Neville, the boy quickly averting his gaze, Harry recognized curiosity for what it was. "Hey Neville, you wanna read the paper?" Neville didn't say anything, just nodded his head, eyes still averted. Handing over the paper to the boy, Neville cautiously took it and began reading the Skeeter article.

“Do you often read the Daily Prophet?” Harry asked, Neville shaking his head in response. “N-No. My gran says it's all false news... Says that Dark Wizards, like Malfoy, pull the string, spread lies...” Oh dear, Harry misered, seems the Longbottom Matriarch might be a bit too strict in her interpretations of... morality. “Well, can't say I'd know if she's right. Still, sounds rather harsh. I mean, take this whole situation around Dumbledore. If he did wrong, he should be punished, right? If people are shielding him, just because he did good things before, aren't they complicit in allowing him to do bad stuff unchecked?” It was a crude argument, Harry realized, but he didn't really think that Neville would be ready to think about it all in a more grey manner of reasoning. Hermione, eagerly nodded her head, though she quickly made her personal opinion and counter-arguments known.

“Indeed! I heard that Dumbledore is our Headmaster – and though you should always obey your professors, I think that they also should always act according to the rules. I mean, our teachers are supposed to be role-models, so if the teacher is wrong or acts in a bad way, they should be reviewed. I have taken a daily subscription on the Daily Prophet, you know, both Editions together
with the Umbral Oracle, for the Muggle-news, and I've been following the news since I went to Diagon Alley on the first of August. I do think that Dumbledore did things wrongly – too many people have shared details that collaborate the accusations, you know. And if that's all true, then Dumbledore should step down as Headmaster, I think. I mean, it wouldn't be very good for the reputation of Hogwarts if he stayed on as Headmaster if he was found guilty. And I need to graduate with perfect grades, of course, so that I can find a good job! I'm really excited to learn magic, and I think it wouldn't be good for us if Hogwarts' reputation is slandered because Dumbledore did things wrongly and wasn't punished...”

Good gods, Harry thought, she just kept going! It was like a steam-locomotive without breaks, cranked to highest speed and fuelled by benzine-soaked coals! Was she trying to set a new record of most words spoken per minute? Or was it how she always spoke? Harry really hoped it wasn't the latter – he wasn't sure if he could bear hearing someone talk so fast day after day. He'd almost rather go back to the Dursleys – almost. No, not really. He really didn't wanna go back there! But neither did he want to spend more time than necessary hearing Hermione babble on and on and on...

Neville didn't seem to mind, however – he just nodded along with Hermione's monologue. Evidently the kid had his own opinions – he was just really shy, or uncertain. Probably both – and more, if Harry's dark suspicions were true. Did Augusta overbear so much that it'd frighten her own grandson from speaking his mind? What did she do that made Neville fear her anger? He really needed to get to the bottom of this, Harry thought, resolving himself to figure out the true circumstances at Longbottom Estate...

Eventually, Harry decided he couldn't keep up the fight against his fatigue, and he settled himself against the window, slowly nodding off. It was Ron who awoke him, saying they were almost there – the intercom had announced they'd arrive at Hogsmeade Station in less than twenty minutes. Slowly, everyone began packing up their stuff, putting their robes pack on despite the stuffy hotness that now dominated the carriages. Students were frantically walking back to their carriages, some even running through the corridor and almost knocking others over.

“Come, Neville, let's go get your things!” Hermione said, dragging boy with her out of the compartment and back to where they'd stowed their stuff. Ron turned to Harry the moment the door fell shut. “Blimey, that one's right mental! She spent half an hour discussing the proper intonation of Wingardium Leviosa, while you were asleep. Whatever House I'm in, I hope she isn't in it.” Said Ron, taking up his wand from the table and placing it in his sleeve. “She tried to teach me a spell, but it didn't work. I think my wand's tool old...” Harry had noticed that Ron's wand was threadbare, the wood chipped and dented, with its unicorn hair just barely poking out of the tip. Why hadn't they bought a new wand for Ron, wondered Harry. They had the money now – or was it too late for a wand? Or did Molly only want to buy what she deemed essential? If so, why wouldn't she deem a new wand essential above new clothes?

“Hm. Say, what House are your brothers in, Ron?” Ron huffed gloomily, a heavy weight sagging his shoulders. “Gryffindor – all of them. My parents too. They all made Prefect too, except Fred and George. Charly was even apointed Herald of Ravenclaw, in his last year – and Bill managed to become the Founders Duelist Champion in his last year. I dunno what they'd say if I didn't get in Gryffindor. I'd wager Ravenclaw wouldn't be too bad, but I don't like studying. And I really don't wanna get Sorted into Slytherin – I'd rather die! Can't even imagine what their reaction would be!” Harry barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes. “What's wrong with Slytherin?” Ron scoffed, as if Harry had asked what was wrong with breathing. “What's wrong with Slytherin? Are you joking? It's the House You-Know-Who had been sorted in! They're practically all Death-Eaters' children in there! And everybody knows all Dark Wizards come from Slytherin!”
Harry opted not to take the bait – tailoring and adjusting Ron's biased attitudes would be a many-year work, he recognized by now. “And what are your brothers doing now? I know Percy and the twins go to Hogwarts still, but what are your oldest brothers doing now that the've graduated from Hogwarts?” Ron answered proudly. “Charly's in Romania, studying dragons – he even sent us a scale of a Norwegian Ridgeback last month, as a memento. Mom was so proud, she had it framed and hung it on the mantelpiece in our living room. Mind, she's worried sick every day about him – she's always afraid that one day something bad's gonna happen to 'im. But I know Charly – he's got a right nack with animals – always had the highest scores on Care for Magical Creatures and Herbology.”

“As for Bill, he's currently doing an internship at Gringott's as a Curse-Breaker. They clear out magical tombs and such, finding and destroying Cursed objects and undoing Curses. He's currently in Egypt for some top secret project. He was not allowed to say more about it, so that's all we know.” Harry found both jobs interesting to hear about – what was more magical than dragons, after all? And going to distant places, exotic environments, to find and destroy dangerous things? That certainly was a life of adventure and excitement! But would it be a long life? Harry wagered that Charlies chances of getting to retirement were probably a lot better than Bills chances were. Dragons, after all, were still animals – and animals were predictable. You can study them, observe their behaviour, learn their cues. So you'd just play it smart, really look at them and you'd be fine – mostly. But curses and dark objects and tombs – the human factor often made such things much moire unpredictable. And he'd wager that any intership for such a job would be rigorous, difficult and merciless. You can't employ Curse-Breakers if you constantly have to train new ones from scratch cuz the old ones didn't pay attention, after all...

Now the train had begun to slow down noticeably, and the intercom sprang alive for the last time this journey. “Ladies and gentlemen, students, prefects, we are now arriving in Hogsmeade station. First-years, please disembark on the right-side of the train, unto the platform with the ticket station. All other years, please disembark on the left-side of the train and gather per year near the carriage. Please, leave your trunks, luggage, and other baggage, on the train – it will be transported to Hogwarts separately by our staff. Thank you for riding with us today!” This was it, Harry thought with mild trepidation, the train had finally arrived. It was about thirty past six o'clock PM – and soon, Harry would finally get to see Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit! 100,000 Words now :D

The Daily Prophet has three separate prints everyday. You have the Morning and Evening Edition, which are the standard Daily Prophet. Morning Edition covers mostly international news that is being reported on overnight, and the Evening Edition covers mostly national news as it's being reported or updated.

The third print the Daily Prophet published is the Umbral Oracle, which is a separate gazette that focusses mostly on Muggle-news (such as Muggle-sightings of magical stuff, or of Muggle events that can have an impact on the Wizarding community). Initially created as a gazette for Muggle-borns and -raised, it's slowly evolved into a more broad news-gazette.

If you want a map of the route they take to Hogwarts, go visit http://members.madasafish.com/~cj_whitehound/Fanfic/map_of_Hogwarts/location.htm
It's a wonderful resource-website that's helped loads! :D

I forgot to mention in the last chapters that, in this AU, the Hogwarts Express leaves the Platform at 9.15 or 9.30, depending on how busy it is. The journey takes the better part of a day, about 9 to 10 hours - again, depending on how busy the station and raillines were.

I expanded the selection of sweets that the Trolley Witch has available for sale - you can find a list all the way down these notes.

I devised the prices that Malfoy and Harry pay for their goods on the canonical price mentioned in HP&tPS, where Harry pays 11 Sickles and 7 Knutts. So now Harry pays 2462 Knutts, or roughly 145 Sickles, with a small amount of change. Luna and Draco pay 16 Sickles and 2 Knutts for their meals.

Dragon-Egg Sandwiches, Dozen-Flavour Sandwich.

As the fic progresses, I'm sure I'll figure out new products that'll be mentioned. And if you want a description of what one of these non-canon products are, ask and I shall deliver via the end-notes of the next chapter (given I don't forget).
They exited the train as requested by the intercom – Harry, Ron, Hermione, … all unboarding to the right of the train and gathering near the small station-building that bordered on the platform. A small footbridge crossed over the rail-line, allowing one to switch between platforms. The whole had a delightfully rustic look, with its flagstone floors, cobblestone walls, moss-covered shingle roof, … It all felt so very quintessentially British somehow – which was probably the point. A forest surrounded the area on all sides, with a small road disappearing in the dark canopy-covered depths on both sides. Hagrid was crossing the footbridge now, loudly asking all the first-years students to enter the station-building one by one.

“Right, all o'ya, into da buildin', if ya wanna git on soon. Com'on, li'll ones, in ya go!” Hagrid's booming voice did more to spur the children into action that the words he said did. His intimidating figure was quite an incentive to follow his wishes, obviously, and Harry couldn't help himself from giggling at the wide eyes full of fear at seeing the giant of a man. Hagrid was quite harmless, but they couldn't know that of course. Finally, after ten minutes of chaos, they'd all squeezed into the building – which was surprisingly spacious enough to hold all the one hundred and fifty students. They were all clustered in small groups, already friendships and alliances were forming – and Harry could spot Draco's telltale platinum-blond head of hair near the back of the room a few times, before the shifting throng of curious students blocked him from view again. Nobody seemed to be sure what was gonna happen and they were all waiting for news.

Eventually, a Witch arose unto a small platform near the doors opposite the one's they'd all entered through. She reminded Harry of a vulture, with sunken-in cheeks, a long hooked nose, skin like dried parchment stretched taut across her cheekbones, … She raised her wand and a flash of light
took everyone's attention. Satisfied with the ensuing silence, she cleared her throat and began to speak in a high rasping voice. “Good evening! I am Irma Pince, Head Librarian of Hogwarts, and your standard Safety Instructor. Most of you, but not all, will know much of Hogwarts and its surrounding lands. However, because of Ministry regulations, and because we value all of your safety, I will now instruct you on all you ought to know."

“On no account, none, are you, as a student, allowed to cross beyond Hogwarts boundaries during the school-year. The boundaries, clearly visible as a cobblestone wall, are where Hogwarts' protective wards end. Beyond these wards, you are vulnerable to be attacked by malevolent persons and forces when not accompanied or escorted by your legal guardian or a professor. Crossing these boundaries, if you survive, is grounds for immediate expulsion, without exception!”

Well, Harry thought, she really dove right into it, didn't she. Murmurs were slowly rising up amongst the students. Harry saw the logic of the argument, it was really clear why they'd phrase it like that – Snape had told him about the Forbidden Forest after all.

“You are not to enter into the Forbidden Forest without a professor. Not your guardian, not a prefect, nor a Head-Boy or -Girl! Only with a professor. The Forbidden Forest is a magical nature-reserve, the largest of its kind in the immediate regions. And as such, it attracts all manner of magical creatures and beings that only feel safe here, far away from Muggles.”

“Because of this, you are also not allowed unto the exterior grounds of Hogwarts after dark. Once the sun has set, you are to remain within the walls of Hogwarts castle itself. Gytrashes patrol the edges of the Forbidden Forest at night – and they have been known to penetrate deep into the Hogwarts castle grounds from time to time. If you, at any moment, see a white dog or doglike creature on the grounds, do not approach them! Notify a professor, or Mr Filch, or Hagrid, immediately, and we'll deal with their presence. If you are, at any moment, somehow cornered by one or more of these creatures, attempt to create a light of any kind. They are extremely sensitive to this and will not approach closer as long as the light burns. Do not approach them, try to scare them off, or hunt them down! Foregoing these warnings can end in lethal wounds – I can not stress this enough!”

“Other creatures that can be found in the Forbidden Forest and roaming the border with the castle grounds are, including but not limited to, centaurs, acromantulas, unicorns, thestrals, pixies, doxies, hippogryphs, etcetera... Most of these creatures will be covered in your first year of Care for Magical Creatures. In this course, your professor will teach you how to recognize these creatures, how to understand their behaviour, and rudimentary spells to either calm them, ward them off or temporarily disable them. I highly recommend you pay the utmost attention in this course!!”

Now certain students began to whimper almost, and Harry too felt a small coil of fear settle in his stomach at the warning. Were there no other ways to deal with those dog-things more permanently, he wondered.

“For such selfsame reasons, always stay within view of the castle itself. You are allowed unto the grounds during the day, when no lessons are in session. The Quidditch pitch is off-limits, except for members of the Quidditch Club, team trainings and official matches. Flying unsupervised outside the pitch will earn you detention, confiscation of your broom, revocation of your right to play Quidditch in team-capacity, and even expulsion if you continue to break rules. Hogwarts utilizes a three-strike system, whereby three warnings and detentions are given before we start to enforce more strict penalties. These penalties utilize the same system – and three penalties harsher than detention will warrant you an expulsion of indeterminate length. Depending on the severity of your transgressions, this may range from a single month – to permanent expulsion from all official Ministry-funded schools within the British Isles.”
Well, Harry mused, that was both harsh and fair. Some people were, after all, a lot more stubborn than others and usually only learned their lessons when they get burned.

“The loch is not to be crossed in any way, or via any method, other than the boats which you will be on in a short while. The loch is home to a native colony of mermaids, an exquisite specimen of Kraken, ferocious grindylows and various other potentially hostile fauna and flora. A special section of the loch is accessible via stairs from the courtyard down to the boathouse. It is warded and thus safe for swimming. Buoys demarcate the edges of those wards. Do not cross them! The same cautions apply here as for the Forbidden Forest.”

Madame Pince took a breath, giving the kids a moment to digest her words. Taking a deep breath, she continued.

“This evening, you will be sorted into one of the Houses of Hogwarts. Each House represents a quality which the Four Founders found most important in the education of their young pupils. These qualities are ambition, curiosity, justice, and honesty. These represent Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Gryffindor, and Hufflepuff. Each House will have its own common room and dormitories. Members of each House are forbidden from entering the common rooms of other Houses.”

She stopped, taking in the children before her, watching if they were still paying attention to her.

“Now, in a moment, you will be allowed to exit through the doors behind me. Hagrid and I will escort you through the forest and to the loch, where you shall all board the boats waiting for you. Each boat can hold six people and will deliver you to Hogwarts over the loch on their own. Please keep your arms inside of the boat and do not lean over the edges. You are allowed to talk, but keep your voices down while you're travelling. Is everything understood?”

A discordant chorus of agreeing voices echoed through the room – and Madame Pince was obviously resigned to accepting it wasn't gonna get better than that. “Very well, children. Please, exit through the doors and followed Hagrid. Get along now!”

The mass of children started moving, one by one filing out through the doors, excitedly congregating around Hagrid's towering form. Most seemed excited, though several wore worried faces and frowns. Harry could understand why – hearing such a lengthy warning about so many dangers, and that in a place that was supposed to be 'safe'? Of course it would worry them – it worried Harry too, though he was sure he could stay safe by just heeding the warnings given. It was not like they just threw them out unto the grounds without warning or precautions...

Once the whole group was outside, Hagrid bellowed over their heads that they were to follow him closely. “R'member, u lot, stay on tha path! Dun wander off an' dun make a fuzz! This ain't the forbidd'n forest, but there's still all mann'r of beasties out dar!” He lifted a large lantern above his head, illuminating the path before him, now that the sun was setting behind the mountains that made up the landscape around them. Clouds were gathering overhead, yet stars were still just barely visible in the sky. Softly their blinking lights spoke their tales, unheard by the eyes of the children that quietly followed the half-giant Grounds-keeper below. Weaving through the trees, the path occasionally meandered past a large boulder, a depression between trees, or around a dense copse that barred passage through them.

After ten minutes of walking, the sound of lapping waves cast ashore the lake's edge caught their attention, and soon they exited the forest. Before them were a two long piers, each bearing six boats either side. A larger boat, obviously meant for Hagrid and Madame Pince, floated separately at the end of one pier. Slowly, the children were helped into the boats by Hagrid and Pince, before they sat down in their personal boat. Pince waved her wand about, and gently the boats rocked into motion, their proud prows cleaving through the lake's surface which was as smooth as glass. The
sun had now fully set, and the last rays were half-obscured by the clouds above. Kindly twinkled the reflections of the stars and clouds on the water's level plane, a perfect reflection of a night sky, as they were moving through the stars themselves. The cove in which the piers stood was secluded and surrounded by the forest on three sides, a small bay of shallow water.

The little boats moved slowly, and every occupant was quiet, their whispering voices barely carrying across the water. It was as if the world had stopped moving and they were utterly alone. As they neared the exit of the small bay, a fog slowly began to form above the surface of the lake, and Harry startled when he saw pinpricks of light appear just above the surface not too far away from them! Eyes! Dozens of pairs of eyes were emerging from the lake, gazing at them with a deadly calm that unnerved him greatly. And he wasn't the only one who saw them, some children almost screaming hysterically – until Pince silenced them all with a dim flash of light from her wand. “Quiet!” She hissed, her patience gone. And then they heard it, beautiful voices carrying musical notes across the water on the gentle wind's caress upon their cheeks. It was a song!

“Hear across the foggy moors,  
And deathly night-dark shades,  
Of the unending forest besides our deep dark lake,  
The siren songs we do now sing,  
Melodies of love and praise,  
For you dear children, have come here now  
To grow and learn your ways.”

Some of the eyes, obviously belonging to those who were singing the song, now began approaching their boats – and Harry could make out humanoid bodies, with webbed fingers and bulging eyes and sharp teeth filed to points. They were mermaids, he realized with a start! Hermione, Ron, Neville and Luna, saw the figures too and each gave a small gasp when they recognized the creatures. It seemed everyone could recognize the mermaids for what they were – and none uttered a single syllable, entranced by the song as they were.

“Daughters of Achelous are we,  
Many-formed and deeply hued,  
With fin and flipper and tail,  
Yet alike we look in many away,  
In shape and mind and choice,  
Yet most of all in our living days.”

“Hear then now from our dark deeps,  
Untethered by fragile mortal coil,  
The songs of our blessed god, who never sleeps,  
For he lies still and quiet in the deep dark ways,  
Of our loving tight embrace.”

“Let our music deceive thy ears,  
For above the wave is changed its sound,  
Across the globe so round,  
Where ever we are found.”

“Oh Kronidos, King of Deep,  
Hear our greeting song leap,  
From drowning lip to cunning ear,  
Where all meaning forms,  
The true song there is known.”
“We shall harm you not,
For we have all made our vow,
To never touch or call upon,
The deathly Siren's ways.”

“Take these children in thy hand, oh Fate,
Guideless and asleep,
To drift them across our shores,
So self-formed purpose they may keep,”

“We blow a breath across these waters,
A fog thus forms to guide your way,
Across night-black waves after-day,
To star-studded walls of lore,
High above our Lake,”

“The Kraken now stirs, senses our singing voice,
He rises soon, from his muddy bed, aloft,
So here we depart, shy children,
Until your ambitions once-more cross our separate ways.”

The mermaids disappeared from sight, sinking below the surface again, and all the children gasped when they saw Hogwarts through the thick fog that now blanketed the whole of the lake! A thousand twinkling lights, of fire-lit windows casting their rays through the mist-laden air, illuminating the craggy bluff upon which it stood perched, looking out over the lake. Turrets crowned the roofs and towers, crenellations were visible everywhere, and a dozen different architectural styles blended together, giving the whole a mystical look as if a thousand ages melted together into a single shape!

Everyone was entranced by the view and none looked up when a soft splash came from nearby the boats, somewhere to their left. Harry, however, did notice the second splash and turned towards the sounds. Small ripples were all he could see and he was about to dismiss it as a fish leaping up from the water – when a third splash occurred, now to their right. The boats had been travelling in four rows, one after the other, and Harry was now on high alert. He immediately turned when he heard the fourth splash – and nearly soiled his underwear when he saw the tip of a tentacle slowly rise from the water! Looking around, towards the professors, he saw they were calm – and he saw three other tentacles now rise from the water in a circle around the boats! Others noticed them too now and panic began to grip the children, screams of fear and confusion – until Pince gave another dull flash with her wand, hissing again they should stay calm and quiet. She really expected a lot from eleven year old kids, Harry thought bitterly – and he didn't think he would like her a person, not really.

One by one, ten tentacles had risen up from the water, lazily waving through the air. And now a new song began to reverberate through the hulls of the small boats, as if a whale was singing. It was a calm song, inquisitive and non-threatening. One of the tentacles was so close, Harry saw – and the way it swayed. It was so... peaceful, graceful. There was no ill intent there. No, it was so... beautiful. Harry reached out, nobody paid attention – touched the tentacle, its clammy slimy skin. One of the suckers stuck to his hand for a moment, before loosening up again – and slowly the tentacle sank back below the dark mirror of the lake's surface. And when Harry fully regained his attention and realized just how stupid that action of reaching out had been, his fingers closed around a small stone object. It was a small stone, with a hole through it. Its speckled surface was a midnight black, with gold flecks and a green hue. How peculiar, Harry thought.
Harry turned his head, looking at the other tentacles. Three others had already sunk beneath the waves too, leaving three bewildered students who were studying something in their hands like he had. The other six limbs waved a for a while, still, before they too finally sunk beneath the waves. The boats, which had halted their progress, shuddered back into motion, continuing their trek across the loch. And now Harry saw the extent of the lake. It wasn't too broad, but its length on the other sides was seemingly endless. To their right, he could just barely see the loch end on another distant shore. And from this vantage point, now that the fog was slowly clearing up, he could also see that their starting point had actually been really close to that other shore.

To his left, however, the loch kept going. He saw a bridge, but from this distance, he couldn't see what it was made from or how big it really was. All he saw was that it crossed from one shore all the way to the other – so the loch was probably shallower there and at its smallest in breadth.

Slowly and deliberately, the boats were moving towards a section of the cliff where a curtain of ivy cloaked a cavernous entrance. “Duck yer heads, you lot.” Hagrid's voice boomed across the water, as the kid all bowed their heads and the boats passed under the ivy curtain, one by one. The tunnel they'd entered had been hewn out of the rock in a rough manner, even though polished and beautifully engraved columns and arches supported it every ten meters. Lanterns hung from the ceiling, casting the tunnel in a soft warm glow. Harry looked down, into the water, and saw it was deeper than he'd have expected. And near the bottom, keeping pace with the boats, were two or three of the mermaids. They kept an eye on the boats, occasionally circling a boat when it began to rock slightly because the occupants moved about a bit too roughly. So they were there to keep an eye on the kids and save them if they fell out, Harry thought – a decent solution, practical and bound to improve children's respect for the beings in a way.

Eventually, the boats began to slow down, after travelling nearly two hundred meters through the tunnel. A large cavern opened up, with seven enormously thick stone pillars supporting the ceiling and the millions of tons of rock above them. Flecks of mica shimmered within the granite walls, reflecting the light of a hundred braziers, hanging from the ceiling and riveted to the pillars and rough-hewn walls. A pier of precisely-cut stones jetted out into the water, leading up to a set of stairs that hugged the interior walls for a while before disappearing into a well-lit tunnel, all the while steadily angled upwards – towards the castle itself.

The little boats finally docked, shuddering to a complete stand-still against the stone pier. One by one, the boats were offloaded with help from Hagrid and Madame Pince. And when everyone had finally exited their boats, the two adults gestured everyone to follow them up the stairs. And as harry ascended the stairs with his fellow students, he cast a last single look behind him, seeing the mermaids peeking out from the water, their eyes watching the students begin their academic journey into the future.

The trek up the stairs was long enough – Harry counted almost three hundred steps before they exited into a small vestibule. It was a small square room, and the adults didn't halt in it, simply stepping out of it immediately into a large open courtyard. Stepping out, Harry saw it was a small open-air cloister, with a fountain in the middle. The fountain looked like a narrow and high shrine almost, a Gothic gazebo standing in a small pond. Four ravens stood perched a top stone branches, each with a coiling serpent in their beaks. The serpents were facing outwards and upwards, with a small jet of water spewing forth and into the basin below. A tree dominated one corner of the cloister, with its branches stretching across the gutter of the roof and casting deep shadows in the moon-lit night. The courtyard was connected to the castle itself, with high windows looking down on it all. Without a word, they all followed the two adults and crossed the threshold into Hogwarts castle itself. And as Harry's group set their first step upon the interior flagstones, Hogwarts' bells tolled three sonorous chimes that reverberated loudly through the silent night.
Madame Pince halted immediately, her eyes wide and unbelieving – an Heir of House was amongst the children!

And yet, not half a minute later, the bells tolled thrice once again, the echoes chasing after their younger brethren across the loch’s glass surface. Pince almost doubled down on herself – two Heirs! What are the odds? One in a thousand, not incorporating dilution of blood and Squib-descendants. But no, she couldn't dawdle, she had to keep up decorum and do as her orders wished. She kept up her pace and stepped into the Courtyard Vestibule, waiting until all the children had entered. And as the last student joined the rest of the group, the high oaken doors slowly closed behind them. With a sonorous clang, they fell shut, heralding the arrival of the first-year students to the Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall in the Entrance Hall.

The Vestibule was a stairwell, broad marble stairs leading up to pair of doors through which the Entrance Hall could be entered. Pince and Hagrid stood besides each-other, each on one side of the doors, waiting for the next step. And, as if right on cue, the doors swung open – and before the gathered throng of first-years stood a tall witch dressed in emerald-green robes. Her hair was black as pitch, bound tightly into a bun, with a broad-rimmed feathered hat atop her head. Her stern expression and pinched face, aged with lines of wisdom and stress, looked out over the children before her. She turned her head to the sides, to Hagrid and Pince, giving them a quiet nod. The other two adults disappeared through the open doors, closing them behind.

“I am Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and I welcome you, one and all, to our fine institution, your home for the next year. In a short while, the start-of-term banquet will begin, but before we partake in that particular feast, you shall all be Sorted into one of the four Houses of Hogwarts.”

“The Sorting Ceremony is a very important event, as it will decide in which House you shall reside until your Graduation in six years. During these six years, your House shall be like a family to you – you will have classes together, share a common room, sleep in the same dormitories, as the rest of your House.”

“The Four Houses are Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Slytherin, and Ravenclaw. And each House was founded by one of the Four Founders – Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Salazar Slytherin, and Rowena Ravenclaw. Each House cherishes different characteristics – and each House has produced some of the greatest Witches and Wizards of our Age. So take pride in your House, in what it values, and what you can contribute to it!”

“While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs and club participations can earn you House-Points. These are part of a system to encourage friendly inter-House competition, to drive you to excel where you can and contribute where you wish. Each month, the House with the most House-Points earns a trip to Hogsmeade. Normally, these trips are restricted to students of the third year and above – but when a House wins this prize, all years may participate and visit the town under supervision of teachers such as me.”

“Be warned, however, for every rule broken will lose you Points. And if the rule broken is severe enough, you will be warranted detention. These detentions will be decided either by the teacher who has warranted it necessary – or by your Head of House. I am the Head of House Gryffindor. My colleagues Heads of House are Severus Snape for Slytherin, Pomona Sprout for Hufflepuff, and Fillius Flitwick for Ravenclaw. If you are troubled by occurrences within your House, we urge you to contact your Head of House. Similarly, we encourage you to contact any of the other teachers when you think something warrants our attention!”

“At the end of the year, the House with the most Points will earn the privilege of displaying the
House Cup in their common room the next year. Furthermore, each of our core curriculum classes has so-called Race Cups and Class Excellency Trophies. The Race Cups are specialized timed challenges, created by the Professor of the class to challenge your grasp of both the theory and practical work of their lessons. Anyone can take the Race Cup Challenge at the end of each month, though the Professor shall decide whether you can participate or not, since the challenge is for all the years and not merely your own.”

“The Class Excellency Trophy will be awarded to the person who has been awarded the most House-Points in the whole year. Their name shall be engraved upon it and it shall be displayed in their common room in the next year. However, I wish to remind you that all these are merely to enable you to fulfil personal ambitions and encourage you to grow. Should competition grow too fierce, too baleful, these challenges, the Points, they will be rescinded until the next year.”

“Now, each and everyone of you has received your letter to Hogwarts because you are Wizards and Witches, magical blood flows through your veins. Here, you will learn how to control that innate power, how to hone and improve it. We, your teachers, shall guide each and every one of you on this path.”

“In a few moments, we will all enter the Entrance Hall. There, four statues stand, each graven in the image of the Founders. You shall pass between them, on your way to the Great Hall. When you pass, one of the Founder Statues may decide you are a perfect example of their desired virtues and characteristics – and they may choose to appoint you Herald of a House. Being a Herald is a honorary title, even when you won't be chosen into the House to which you shall be the Herald. The specifics of what being a Herald means shall be explained only when you are chosen. For now, I want you all to pass between the statues in groups of six.”

Minerva spun on her axis, pushing open the doors with a wave of her hand. Slowly the doors opened inwards, and showed the interior of the Entrance Hall. And when the doors came to a stop, four voices resounded strong and clear, as if addressing the children.

“Rowena fair, of heart and mind, always did the cleverest find!” It was a female voice speaking first, sounding old and learned.

“Godric strong and stout, always chose those that defend with a doubt!” A strong male voice, somehow reminding Harry of a lion's roar.

“Helga, sweet and kind, always took in those without a place to find!” A woman again, and Harry was reminded of Molly Weasley's stern but affectionate tones against the twins.

“Salazar, noble and cunning, always uncovered those with ambition to keep in the running!” Another man, with a tone that made Snape's sneers and drawls come to mind. And then the four voices spoke in unison, like a well-rehearsed quartet.

“Founders Four, all proud and strong,
With ties that bound beyond the grave!
Four as One, each with different vision,
Yet sharing a dream beyond their time!
Head their lessons, beware their faults,
For even our Founders Four were merely men!”

“Step now forth,
Herald Green,
Herald Red,
Herald Blue,
Only when the voices stopped and silence returned, did Deputy Headmistress McGonagall send the first group of students into the Hall. Carefully, they walked towards the open doors opposite of the Hall, where a dim hubbub of noise and curiosity could now be heard from.

The Entrance Hall looked normal enough, if a bit large – the whole house of the Dursleys could've easily fitted within it. On the opposite end, they could clearly see the Great Hall, where all the other students where seated on four enormously long tables. On the left was a large alcove with windows, and in it stood a massive gilded statue of a Wizard, clutching scrolls between his arms, a sextant hanging from a belt, and a scale-model of Hogwarts castle placed in his raised open right hand. His eyes, glinting with a red gleam, were fixated on the scale-model in his hand.

To their right, a marble set of steps went upwards, leading to a larger room they couldn't rightly observe from inside the Vestibule. And in the four corners of the square Entrance Hall, larger than life and standing almost seven meters tall, were the four statues. And as the children passed between them, their stone faces slowly turned with them.

Left back stood the statue of a man, ancient, with a long trailing thin beard, bald scalp and wild eyebrows. His facial hair really made him look like a bearded emperor tamarin, Harry mused. The carven robes were floor-length, trailing and flowing. Both hands were clasped together on his stomach, long sharp nails ghosting the stone fabrics. A locket hung from his neck, resting on his chest. An intricate 'S' was carved in the pedestal, stylized to mimic a coiling serpent – and Harry deduced that this was probably Salazar Slytherin.

Right back stood the statue of another man – so that could only be Godric Gryffindor, Harry realized. And this statue was completely different from Salazar's. It depicted a muscular man with a veritable mane of waving hair, and a beard so manicured and well-coifed as to make a lion envious indeed. His robes were equally as intricately decorated as those of Slytherin were, but great care was taken to depict what could only be pauldrons, greaves and gauntlets. The man was half-covered in armour, it seemed. His left hand rested upon a grand carven sword which hung from his belt, and a crumpled hat was clutched in his right hand which rested on his hip. A simple 'G', mildly stylized as a roaring lion's head, was carved upon its pedestal.

Only when Harry stepped into the Hall later on did he see the last two statues.

On the left front stood Ravenclaw's statue, of a picturesque tall woman, with floor-length hair and floor-length dress. Held in her hands, about the height of her chest, was a tome of sorts, and Harry could not read the faint lettering carved within the stone cover. A 'R' was engraved on her pedestal, unstylized and simple. Upon her head, she wore a diadem – which would've been gorgeous had it been anything but cold stone. And her eyes had an intensity the other statues quite definitely lacked somehow.

On the right front stood the statue of a lump and stout woman, with a smile that instilled happiness in anyone who looked at it. Her eyes were merry and full of life, somehow, and she wore a simple dress-robe with a beautifully carved cape. In her hands, she held a small cup which bore a badger as decoration. And graven in the pedestal was an ornate 'H'.

Group after group passed through, without anything happening. Then, when Luna walked through with a few other children Harry didn't immediately recognize, one of the statues suddenly became animated!
The song of the mermaids is based on the song of the sirens as described in the 
Odyssee and how songs were composed in classical Greece. I found a delightfully 
informative website about this, but alas! I forgot to save the link *sadface*

In Greek mythology, Achelous (also Acheloos or Acheloios) (/ˌækəˈloʊ.əs/; Ancient 
Greek: Ἀχελώιος, and later Ἀχελόος, Akhelóios) was the god associated with the 
Achelous River, the largest river in Greece. According to Hesiod, he was the son of the 
Titans Oceanus and Tethys. He was also said to be the father of the Sirens, several 
nymphs, and other offspring.

Kronidos is more ambiguous, seemingly more a generic name/title for the deep ocean 
as a concept rather than a character.

An adder stone is a type of stone, usually glassy, with a naturally occurring hole 
through it. Such stones have been discovered by archaeologists in both Britain and 
Egypt. Commonly, they are found in Northern Germany at the coasts of the North and 
Baltic Seas.

In Britain they are also called hag stones, witch stones, serpent's eggs, snake's eggs, or 
Glain Neidr in Wales, milpreeve in Cornwall, adderstanes in the south of Scotland and 
Gloine nan Druidh ("Druids' glass" in Scottish Gaelic) in the north. In Germany they 
are called Hühnergötter ("chicken gods"). In Egypt they are called aggy or aggri.

Three traditions exist as to the origins of adder stones. One holds that the stones are 
the hardened saliva of large numbers of serpents massing together, the perforations 
being caused by their tongues. The second claims that an adder stone comes from the 
head of a serpent or is made by the sting of an adder. The third is more modern (and 
much easier to attain). It details that the stone can be any rock with a hole bored 
through the middle by water. Human intervention (i.e., direction of water or placement 
of the stone) is not allowed.

The description of the Hag Stone is based on both the description of the Elder Things' 
soapstone amulets from H.P. Lovecraft's "Mountains of Madness" and the black stone 
of the Astral Plane/Foundation in the 2019 game 'Control'.

Hogwarts' location is moved from the semi-canonical Lochindorb (In the film version 
of Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, it is stated that Sirius Black has been 
sighted in Dufftown and Hermione replies "Dufftown? That's not far from here." 
Dufftown is in the Cairngorms and if we accept this statement from the film, that 
would place Hogwarts in the Cairngorms too. However, the book says only "... they 
reckon Sirius Black’s been sighted [cut] Not too far from here [cut] It was a Muggle 
who saw him." [PoA ch. #07; p. 96]. So the association with Dufftown belongs only to 
the films, and does not fit with the films' simultaneous presentation of Hogwarts as 
accessible via the iconic Glenfinnan Viaduct.) to Loch Shiel (which was the most 
probable location to inspire Hogwarts' surrounding lands as Rowling visited it several 
times in the years prior to writing the books.

To be more precise, I placed the Castle on the Glenaladale river's delta at the loch's 
shore (Glenfinnan, PH37 4LU, UK - 56.806551, -5.566842).

Hogwarts' tolls welcome to all the Heirs of its Founders.
“Moon child fair, clever of wit,
Your eyes see far, your mind further still,
And in your soul, I do declare,
Hides a shard of my daughter fair.
Yes, dear child of a mother lost,
Great power stirs beneath,
Like in fair Pandora who had to pay a cost,
You are to be the Heir to take my Seat.”

Rowena’s statue spoke the words with a soft yet clear and audible voice, her animated motions underpinning the message she shared to all who could hear. Luna, looking so unsurprised that Harry almost suspected she’d know this would happen, had merely turned to look at the graven image of her supposed ancestor. And when the stone witch stopped speaking and returned in pose to her earlier state, Luna simply gave a polite curtsy and kept walking to the Great Hall.

Professor McGonagall seemed as equally surprised as everybody else, though she very much succeeded in not showing it as overtly as others. She took a few seconds to recover her senses, before she sent the next group through. And several groups passed through without anything happening, each reaching the Great Hall to the half-whispered half-shouted greetings of the older students.

And then Harry’s group were up next. With Hermione, Neville, and Ron, Harry stepped unto the flagstones of the Entrance Hall and made his way to the centre upon which all four statues looked down with their various gazes of expectation. And when his group reached the centre, three of the statues spoke up, one after the other, nearly causing professor McGonagall’s knees to buckle from surprise and shock!

“Child with hair like ember and flame,
Born of many with noble name,
Least appreciated in a house of men,
With singular sister that distracts the hen,
Yet within that mind a thirst I find,
Of justice and fairness I ken,
To treat fairly those easily oppressed,
And hunt down those that justice mar.
Yes, brave child of strategy and moor,
In you my Herald I thus declare!"

It had been Gryffindor's statue that spoke up first, his wild eyes locked with Ron's, who was now
trembling under the gaze – though Harry could not recognize if it was excitement or fear that drove
Ron's reaction. But it had been all too clear who Godric spoke off – Ron was the only one of their
group with red hair, after all. But before Harry had time to comfort Ron with a clap on the
shoulder, the next statue spoke up – Rowena again, voice equally clear and strong as before, with
Luna.

“Child with hair like a lion's mane,
Who my brother would dearly like,
Yet with a thirst for knowledge quite un-same,
Like a dam that would burst, overflow the dyke,
In you I spy what I for strife,
In students and teachers it I seek,
To wield the sharp edge of wit's knife,
Found alike in the brave, ambitious, and meek,
So here I proclaim, cool and scald,
You are to be my new Herald.”

Hermione blushed heavily, her cheeks a deep red against her darker skin. Her wild hair had been
the obvious give-away, none of the statues were really trying to hide who they were naming
without using names, obviously. Yet, Harry had no time to really ponder further when the third
statue spoke up. And this time, the sonorous deep voice that spoke forced the busy voices in the
Great Hall to a deadly quiet, with unspoken command. It was the monkey-like statue that spoke,
Slytherin himself!

“Through mother's blood, my Heir I spy,
Through mind and thought, my Herald I scry.
And more I ought not to say,
For too much knowledge your choice may sway,
No more clues I shall spread,
For a real serpent through the lines should read,
Nor shall I offer a challenge at hand,
For no lions would stalk my land,
Nor shall I coddle and consider your heart,
For meek badgers I didn't choose, from the start.
So my Heir, my Herald, my legacy,
Remember that the ocean is not a sea.”

And then began to spring from those lips a susserous hissing that Harry knew all too well, for he
had used it often when speaking to those snakes that lived in various gardens around the Dursley
household.

“Yet, to find my image in living paint,
Descend the dungeons cold,
Find the slithering serpent oh so faint,
And follow the clues its words hold.”

It was evident that nobody else understood the words, as all looked equally confused or surprised –
and thinking it best to follow suit, for now, Harry moulded his expression similarly. After a few
seconds, it seemed nothing else would be said by the last statue, so their little group continued on into the Great Hall. Ravenous whispering rumours now dominated the poorly-understood discussions between the four tables and the numerous students. Parts and pieces, shards of sentences, louder words, together they formed a half-cohesive whole which Harry pieced together quickly. Three new Heralds, and two long-lost Heirs returned – it was quite unheard from, something that had never happened before. Or at least wasn't known from recent memory – though Harry would wager that if they'd delve enough deep enough in the library, they'd probably find some precedent of sorts. After all, a thousand years is a long time...

One per one, the last groups of children passed through the Entrance Hall, with no more reaction from the Founders' Statues. At last, professor McGonagall crossed the expanse herself, closing the doors of the Great Hall behind her and walking to the front of the room. There, standing on a room-wide platform, was a fifth large table, where were seated all the professors, including Hagrid and Madame Pince. Harry could recognize Snape easily, his dark brooding face a lone island of solemn solitude in a sea of smiling faces and happy eyes gazing out over the Hall. Off to the left, Harry recognized Quirrell, who had met once before in Diagon Alley when Harry had been so very new to all of this. And as they locked eyes for a mere second, a headache bloomed behind Harry's eyes and a sharp ache echoed through his scar. He closed his eyes shut for a moment, focusing on keeping the pain in check – which it immediately did.

Looking back up, Quirrell was now in conversation with a witch besides him, and Snape looked at Harry with worry in his eyes. Giving a small smile, hoping it would defuse the Potion Master's worry, Harry let his eyes rove over the other people at the table. Then Harry saw him, central to the table. Seated in a high-backed chair that was gilded and carved with detailed engravings, was the oldest person in the whole room. With a long flowing beard and long hair, both as white as snow, banded together and partially braided, Harry realized this could only be the Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore.

Deep-seated dark-blue eyes locked with his, a twinkling spark in them, and the subtle pressure of a Legilimens pushed against the defences of Harry's mind. No, he wouldn't shut the man out – Snape had taught Harry how to project false thought-images as a last lesson in Occlumency a week prior. And Harry mused that perhaps it was time to put his last lesson to the test. Slightly lowering his defences, Harry projected some innocent thoughts that had nothing to do with political motives. Curiosity about Hogwarts, a desire to make friends, trepidation at his Sorting, etcetera... And judging from the mild smile that got Harry from the Headmaster in return, it was well-received and foolishly accepted as truth. Idiot, Harry thought, attention now going back to the stern witch who had gone to stand before their group.

Sitting on a small stool between the House tables and the Staff table, was an ancient hat. It looked threadbare, fraying at its edges and ready to crumble into dust from sheer age. But nothing prepared Harry for the shock he got when one of the seams suddenly tore open and a curious sonorous voice began to issue forth from the opening.

"Oh you may not think I'm pretty,  
But don't judge on what you see,  
I'll eat myself if you can find  
A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,  
Your fancy top hats sleek and tall,  
For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat  
And I can out-cap them all.
There's nothing hidden in yer head 
That the Sorting Hat can't see,
So try me on now swiftly,
And I will tell you fairly,
Where you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor,
Where dwell the brave at heart,
Their daring, nerve, and chivalry
Set Gryffindors well apart.

Yet you might belong in Hufflepuff,
Where they are just and loyal,
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true and snuff,
And unafraid of toil.

Or yet may you be in wise old Ravenclaw,
if you've got a ready mind,
Where those of wit and learning,
Will always find their kind.

Or perhaps indeed in Slytherin
Where you'll make true real friends,
Where those cunning folks use any means
To achieve their ambitious ends.

So put me on – no, be not afraid!
And don't get in a fitting flap!
You're in now safe hands (though I have none)
For I'm a Thinking Cap!"

The students of the other years gave a polite applause, some more heartfelt than others – and only from Gryffindor's table did real enthusiasm come. Two redheads stood upright and began to give the Hat a real hoot, evidently stoked. And those were Ron's twin brothers, Harry saw, as another redhead pulled the two back down on their seats. From Slytherin's table came only soft applause, the eyes of those children more focussed on the Staff table than anything else. Harry gave a silent chuckle, knowing all too well how strict Severus could be – and he had told quite a few tales about discipline in Slytherin House.

Then professor McGonagall stepped up to the stool and took the Hat in hand, a scroll uncurling in her other hand. “I will now call upon you by name, one by one. When your name is called, step forward, sit on the stool and the Sorting Hat will decide your House. Abbott, Hannah!” A girl stepped forward, and McGonagall set the frayed-looking Sorting Hat upon her small head. For a few seconds, nothing happened – until the Hat gave a deep booming shout. “HUFFLEPUFF!” From the table decked in yellows, came a cheering chorus of approval!

“Boot, Terry.” A boy went to sit on the stool, the Hat covered his head and quickly a verdict was shouted. “RAVENCLAW!” And so it went, one after another, each time the Hat took but a few seconds before it shouted its decision. Only in a few instances did it take longer, but none took longer than about half a minute. Neville took a bit longer, about a minute, before the Hat declared him a Gryffindor – and Harry wondered why the Hat would decide so. Perhaps it was as much a decision based on what you already are as it was a decision based on what you needed? It was a train of thought that Harry mused was worth pursuing on a later date, when he had some time free.
The rest was quick enough, without fail, really - until Hermione was called forth. “Granger, Hermione.” She stepped forward, shaking with nerves, slowly sitting down on the stool. The Hat descended and pondered – and kept pondering. For nearly four minutes, the Hat was quiet – until it suddenly shouted, as if reluctant and peeved at something. “GRYFFINDOR THEN!”

Hermione set down the Hat and quickly walked over the table decked in red, where a few girls immediately latched unto her and started congratulating the young witch. Shortly after, Luna followed. “Lovegood, Luna.” Professor McGonagall called out, then a look of confusion settled over her face, before she shook her head as if to clear it. Skipping over, Luna sat down and accepted the Hat on her head. The Hat gave a right gasp, and twisted itself into a myriad of knots that Harry mused were probably the closest to human expressions. Did he read confusion and curiosity in those tangled swathes of fabric – or did he imagine it? Harry couldn't decide. And the Hat was silent for a long minute, before it finally came to a verdict. “RAVENCLAW!”

Luna almost skipped away, to her House table, before she remembered she was still wearing the Hat. Taking it from her head, she tossed it with flourish to professor McGonagall before skipping away. Harry chuckled, liking the dreamy girl's style of nonchalance. Definitely gonna keep her close, he thought, drowning out the next series of names. Until, finally, his own name was sounded. “Potter, Harry.” Instantly, whispers broke out, and Harry revelled, mildly, in their confusion. He could hear them all whisper about. “I didn't know he was on the train?” Waiting a few moments, for dramatic effect, Harry waited until McGonagall shouted his name again. “Potter, Harry!” Stepping forward, giving Ron an apologetic grimace when the redhead realized what was going on, Harry accepted his seat on the small rickety stool and patiently waited for a gruff-looking McGonagall to place the Hat on his mop of wild hair.

“Ah, what have we here? Well, well, well – quite a conundrum indeed. Such a mind, filled with plans and hopes and dreams. And you're not quite alone in it either. I could say I have sorted this bright mind twice already, yet also never before. How quaintly paradoxical, Mr Potter-Peverell. If certain people knew what I now see, your life would be in grave danger indeed.” Harry scoffed mentally, rolling his eyes. They were in his mind-scape, he and the Hat. It was an amorphous presence, not really a sentient mind but close enough to enable some form of manifestation, obviously. “Quite astute observation, young man. The Four Founders poured quite a lot of their wisdom and power into me, when they created me. Almost enough to really make me alive. Ah, but alas, I am but a mere shadow of their rationale, to be truthful. Sometimes I lament my present state, until I remember the many downsides that come with true sentience. No, I quite like my presence as is. But you, Mr Potter, what am I to say about you?”

“There is such ambition here, such cunning, really worthy of Salazar's Heir. Though not quite his Heir either – no, things are more complicated than that. Slytherin's essence flows through you, true enough, but it was not innate to you – not in the beginning, anyway. No, a gift of sorts – or a curse. I can not rightly comprehend it fully. How curious indeed!”

“And then there is that dark corner of your mind where I can not see, which should not be – can not be! In normal circumstances, anyway... Such bravery, desire to act boldly for the betterment of the world. No, not the world – the community into which you have stumbled. A selective desire, yes, but still – an admirable trait altogether.”

“Yet, also, how can I ignore that studiousness, that brilliance of mind? A drive to learn, comprehend, experiment! Oh, Rowena would be envious to have you in her fold, my boy! How she would clash with Godric and Salazar for your presence in her House! Such a clash of ideals indeed! And also there, in the background yet equally important to your desires, goals, dreams, … A wish for real friendships. A loyalty to those who prove their companionship, their trust. Like a hound, loyal only to those who prove they can be trusted. How can I choose?”
Harry laughed – he couldn't believe that this really was the way they choose how to place their students! Laughable. The Hat chuckled along. “Really, Mr Potter? Perhaps – yet I almost ne'er err, and ever stand by my decisions. I place the children where they need to be, not where they wish to be – unless I must. Sometimes, prejudices caution them from being placed in certain Houses. And though I know they would do well where I would place them, I can not ignore the poor fortune it would bring against their happiness in such cases. Not all families are liberal, my boy – and some go far, too far, to remove certain... stains, from their family-history.” And what a dark glower that brought to Harry's face.

“Well,” Harry quipped. “Where would you place me then? You could just decide not to place me anywhere – or everywhere. Wouldn't that be a hoot?” He laughed, and the Hat gave a hardy chuckle too. “Why, child, if anything, that smart response made up my mind. Yes, I know now – the right place for you to be would be...”

“GRYFFINDOR!” The Hat screamed, after six minutes of silence in the Hall. The red-decked table erupted in cheers and loud applause. “We got Potter! We got Potter! We got Potter!” The din was deafening and didn't abate till Dumbledore himself rose to caution everyone into silence. “Silence, please!” Instantly the ruckus died down, and Harry walked over to join his new House. Then too sat down Dumbledore, and judging from the sparkle in the old man's eye, this was more-or-less what he'd expected would happen – or had hoped would happen. It was difficult to get a read on the man, Harry lamented.

Student after student was Sorted – eventually Draco stepped forward. And before the Hat had even settled on his head, it shouted its decision. “SLYTHERIN!” Harry gave the blonde a polite smile, as he walked towards the green-decked table. A few kids were muttering darkly, Harry noticed, across his table. Turning to a nearby older student, Harry asked why. “The Malfoys are a Dark family. They say that Draco's dad, Lucius, was the head-honcho in You-Know-Who's army. Of course, he later claimed he'd been Imperiused – and was let go, cuz nobody could prove otherwise. They're as dark as Dark comes, and slimy twits too.” Harry rolled his eyes, already fed up with these prejudices – they'd be the first thing he'd tackle while he was here.

Eventually, the last students were being Sorted – and finally it was Ron's turn. The Hat was placed and for a full two minutes, it was quiet. Then it cried out. “GRYFFINDOR!” Ron quickly run over, towards his brothers and Harry. And now the small mob of redheads came to sit at Harry's side. Seated between the twins, they began jostling Harry good-naturedly. “Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived.” A hand-clap on his shoulder. “Cept that ain't what you called yerself on the train, did ya, Evans?” A poke in the ribs. “Sounds mighty Slytherin to me, right, Fred?” A grin shot to each-other, over Harry's head. “Right-o, Georgie. Mighty suspicious that. And what not, with Salazar's granite balls talking up too?” Two arms slung over his shoulders, hot breath on his cheeks, a blush in his face as two faces came very close to Harry's. “Almost like you's the serpent's Heir, right? Awful coincidental, Freddy.” A chuckle from the other. “Quite, brother of mine. Seems this one's almost as sneaky as us.”

Then they let him go, talking in whispers to him. “See, Potter, we're in the business of making merry and fun. Consider us the trickster gods of Hogwarts.” Fred said – or was it George. Then the other one spoke up. “Yeah. Ain't no place we don't know how to get in – except maybe the serpent's pit, where the Slytherins live.” Harry kept looking at the Sorting Ceremony, less than ten students were left. “So we was thinking, how about we team up?” George said, hands waving about. “We got a small store, and if you help us when you can, we can give you a nice discount.” Fred/George said, giving a luscious wink in Harry's direction. “So, whadayya say?” Harry pondered it – it might prove useful. Well, he thought, he was a lion now, wasn't he? Time to take a plunge. Chuckling, he responded. “Sure. But, ah, how about we exchange favours instead? I don't really need... discounts.” The twins looked at each-other, some silent communication going on between
them.

“And here we thought you were a Gryffindor – ah well, we can't say no to the Boy-Who-Lived, now can we? So favours it is then.” They took hold of his hands, crossing his arms by doing so, and shook on it. Then they started talking with the others besides them, while Ron gave Harry a sheepish grin and Percy just gave a stern nod. Seemed the twins really were the exact opposite of their older brother, if his dark looks were anything to go on.

Hermione and Neville were chatting in hushed tones, the boy's eyes darting around wide and wild, as if unseen assassins could come out of the shadows any moment now to slaughter everyone around him, so palpable was his fear to Harry. He really needed to discuss this with Severus, he thought – the boy needed a Mind-Healer more than Harry did, that was obvious.

Finally, the last student was sorted – some kid whose name Harry hadn't recognized, Sorted into Slytherin. And then, as McGonagall put away the stool and Hat in a back-room behind the Staff-table, the Headmaster slowly rose, his arms open wide, grabbing everyone's attention. “Welcome! Welcome back for another year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our delicious banquette, I would like to say a few choice words to you all! And here they are – nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!” And with that, the wizened Wizard backed down, into his high-backed chair, leaving the children to whisper amongst one another.

And as Dumbledore finished his words and sat down again, a veritable feast of plenty popped into existence before the eyes of the children, blanketing the tables in dozens of delicious foods. There was fresh bread, thick stews, fried chicken, leafy greens, hard-boiled eggs, … It was feast, through and through, for eye, nose and tongue – as each student began heaping a selection of odds and bits upon their plates. Then, from various of the tables, students began shrieking and yelling in surprise – when from the walls and floors came luminous translucent figures. Ghosts!

Harry watched a fat friar emerge from the Hufflepuff table, his round belly still half-sunken into the wood as he began greeting the new students at the table. Near Slytherin, an aristocratic gentleman, his cravat stained deeply dark, swung out of the wall, waving his half-real sabre across the empty air, delighting in scaring the new students – before he seemingly succumbed to a melancholy mood and stopped halfway the table, eyes downcast and floating lamely above it. A headless rider, with horse, stirrup and all, leaped from the high windows behind the staff-table, throwing some round object through the air and unto the aisle between two tables. And judging from the shrieks of several girls when they watched the thing land near them, Harry'd wager a thousand Galleons it was probably the rider's disembodied head.

Stately lairds, ladies, lords and baronets, they were all floating through the Great Hall now, their myriad styles of fashion, robe, coat and rack, giving Harry the distinct feeling that he had somehow landed in a costume-shop of sorts. It seemed that many people had died at Hogwarts over those ten centuries of slow years and swift days. And the Gryffindor table wasn't spared either – as a nobleman's ghostly figure slowly began ascending from the table, looking so calm and collected as he were merely walking up a set of stairs. He walked the whole length of the table, floating just an inch above the wood, greeting all the new students and asking older students about their holidays.

For a second, Harry was worried Neville might faint – but apparently, the prospect of talking to a long-dead spectre scared the boy significantly less than talking to the living. There was a certain logic in that, Harry mused as he began to peel a boiled egg. After all, ghosts can't harm you at all, and are probably predictable in their behaviour – Harry very much doubted that being a ghost came with keeping your full faculties of reasoning.

They ate and ate, each child stuffing its face with pastries, pies, drinking milk and iced tea and...
pumpkin juice. It was almost revolting, Harry thought, remembering all too well the many evenings in which his meal had been but a few scraps of bread or a shallow bowl of water-thinned soup. The egg he was holding squelched when he balled his fists in remembrance. Remembering where he was, he looked down on the sad remains of the egg and wiped his hands on a napkin, giving a deep sigh. From beside him, out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Fred had noticed the egg being squeezed out of existence. Then Harry stopped, pondered – how did he know it was Fred and not George? Curious, he mused. But no, it probably wasn't worth thinking over for now. Later, yes, when they would be going to sleep.

Dinner came and went, swiftly replaced by desserts – and what a display of sugary sweetness it was too! Ice-creams, fudge, pies, cakes, pancakes, … Harry really hoped that not every feast was like this, because he was pretty sure it'd all end in him becoming a diabetic shortly. Taking a few small cakes, with a side of hot tea, Harry enjoyed the friendly banter with the people seated near him. The twins were really interested in creating their own joke-items, listing a few things they'd like to make and how they thought they could make them. All in all, it was a curiously entertaining discussion – the two were much more clever than he'd supposed at first.

Eventually, the feast came to an end – the last desserts vanished, the plates were whisked away, many students were already nodding off as it was now long past ten. At the staff-table, the Headmaster rose once more, his twinkling eyes roving over the Hall before him and all its well-fed occupants. “Ahem! Just a few more choice words now, since we're all fed and watered and hoping for our comfortable beds! I have a few start-of-term notices to give you all!”

“First-years are reminded, once again, that the Forbidden Forest is off-limits for all students! And a few of our older students would do well to remember this as well.” The Headmaster's gaze locked onto the twins on either side of Harry for a moment as he said this, a mischievous twinkle in their eyes as they gave the old man a wink fit for Loki.

“Furthermore, I have been asked by Mr Filch, Caretaker and Custodian of the Castle, once again, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors and galleries. Hogwarts Castle holds quite a few priceless paintings, armours, and the like – and to see them damaged or destroyed will be punished severely. And even though Mr Filch very much would like to re-instate his favourite lesson, hanging by thumbs, I fear we shall all have to settle for mere lines.” A chuckle echoed, a few of the older students laughing as well – while Mr Filch, a dour looking old man at the end of the table, just looked disgruntled at being denied his request for corporeal punishment.

“Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of term – so anyone interested in playing for their House team should contact Madam Hooch before the first week ends, preferably. Please note that we at Hogwarts use a revised form of the standard Quidditch rules, to improve the stakes of the game and the enjoyment for both public and players alike. I, for one, will be looking forward to the first game of this year!” A witch rose from the other end of the table, with short spiked grey hair and eyes so bright to be almost luminous. Her face held many wrinkles, well-tanned as it was, though she didn't seem that old to Harry.

“And, finally, I must tell you that the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side of the Paved Courtyard is out-of-bounds to everyone who doesn't wish to die a most painful death.” Harry rolled his eyes – that was the most idiotic warning he could give if he were serious about it. Now the students would flock to that corridor to see what all the fuss was about. And indeed, immediately all sorts of whispering broke out amongst the House-tables. “Is he serious?” Harry muttered to Percy, a few seats down, who looked as confused as Harry did and obviously took his serious.

“Must be – he usually tells us why we're not allowed anywhere when he warns us like this. I do think he might've told us Prefects at the very least.” Percy answered with an annoyed and curious
“And now, before we all finally depart to our beds, let us rejoice and sing our beloved school-song!” Dumbledore almost cried out the last sentence, flourishing his wand and casting it up at the enchanted ceiling. From the tip of the wand, a stream of golden letters, bright and clear, began to write themselves across the dark night-sky. “Everyone is free to choose their favourite tune. And off we go!”

The cacophony was utter horror, discordant and unsynchronized, it was like listening to brown glass being scraped across a blackboard while nails were being blunted across the same board at the same time. It made Harry's hair stand on end and a shudder ran across his spine.

“Hogwarts, Hogwarts,
Hoggy Warty Hogwarts,
Teach us something please,
Whether we be old and bald,
Or young with scabby knees.”

“Our heads could do with filling,
With some interesting stuff,
For now they're bare and full of air,
Dead flies and bits of fluff,
So teach us things worth knowing,
Bring back what we've forgot,
Just do your best, we'll do the rest,
And learn until our brains all rot.”

The lyrics were awful, Harry realized with a cringe, surely this wasn't Hogwarts' official school-song? If so, it was an embarrassment. The twins were enjoying themselves though, he saw, as they were singing along the tune of a funerary march, deep and low. And when all the other students had finished, they were still going, earning a small applause from the Headmaster himself when they ended their rendition. And wasn't that cute, Harry idly wondered looking at those Lokean twins bow to their audience.

“Ah,” Dumbledore said with great myrth in his voice, as he wiped his eyes from behind his half-moon spectacles. “The power of music – a power beyond all we do here! And now, bedtime – off you trot, children!” A thousand-plus pair of feet began to move through the Great Hall, each House following their Prefects in half-organized lines and groups.

Chapter End Notes

I had way too much fun writing the poems of the Statues and the riddles in them. I wanted them to be fairly obvious, without shouting names too clearly :D

And I may have a soft spot for Fred/George & Harry pair-ups. Though, if it happens, it won't be for this book or the next one. Harry has too many plans to bother with childhood fooling around ;)

Oh, and is it clear I hate the Hogwarts school-song? :B

A few Alan Wake references, just to spice up the easter-egg count. Oh, and Control
references too. Can you find them all? :D

And don't forget to check out my chapter on Hatstalls in part of this series ;) It isn't necesary to the story, but it helps flesh out the world I'm writing :)
Harry had just joined Ron and Hermione's company, led to their small group by the twins, when
Percy halted him. “Sorry, Harry, but Headmaster Dumbledore wants to see you before you go to
bed. I'll give you the standard speech for first-years as we go up to the Headmaster's Office.”
Nodding to Percy, Harry followed his footsteps and together they followed the groups of students
into the Entrance Hall. Turning to the left, they made their way up the wide marble stairs, going
through a wide doorway and into the interior of a vast tower. Harry's eyes went wide, as he looked
up into almost seventy meters of moving staircases!

It was a vast interior stairwell, unlike anything Harry had ever seen. Dozens upon dozens of roving
marble staircases were changing and moving, swivveling at pivots in their bases, connecting to
different landings every so often. And every square meter of wall was covered in portraits, from
floor to roof, each animated and its painted inhabitants welcoming all the new students as they
passed. The noise of the marble thuds and grinding pivots was like a white noise, constantly in the
background, as Harry and Percy followed the rest of Gryffindor up to the seventh floor.

“Where they're going now is the portrait of the Fat Lady – she's the secret entrance into Gryffindor
Tower, where the common room, dormitories, bathrooms, etcetera... are. I'll demonstrate it to you
later – for now, we have to go even further up.” Percy explained, Harry trailing behind him as they
went up, up, up, … Stair after stair they ascended, sometimes waiting a few minutes until the
staircase had re-connected to where they needed to go. And Percy saved Harry from a terrible drop
a few times, when the step Harry had rested his weight on simply vanished. And as Harry watched
Percy, he quickly noticed how the Prefect deftly jumped over certain steps – which quietly
disappeared just before Harry rested his foot on them to test why. It was very likely that six years
of climbing these steps gets engrained, Harry guessed.

Eventually, they had ascended the highest marble staircase in the towering stairwell, entering
another part of the tower through a closed door – where they began ascending even more stairs!
Then, after nearly twenty minutes of climbing and waiting, they halted before an enormous stone
gargoyle. It looked like an eagle, with cats feet, seated upon a stone pedestal. Percy took his breath
for a minute, before he spoke to the gargoyle. “Lemon Sherbet.” With a deft movement, the
gargoyle sprang to life and jumped off its pedestal, revealing a small winding spiral staircase going
up even higher. Resigned to the excercise, Harry followed Percy up once more. After only a short
trip, they stood before a weathered oaken door. Percy knocked, opening the door when a soft
voice beyond bade them enter.

“Headmaster Dumbledore, I brought Harry, as you wished.” Percy said, opening the door fully to
allow Harry inside. “Thank you, Prefect Weasley, please wait downstairs at the gargoyle for young
Harry. It won't be long.” Percy bowed, turned and closed the door behind him – leaving Harry in the room. As Harry took a moment to take in the room, he took note of all he saw.

It was a large and beautiful circular room, full of various soft and strange noises. A number of curious silver instruments stood on spindle-legged tables, whirring and emitting little puffs of smoke – some looked like children's toys of sorts, and others looked so strange that Harry was afraid he'd loose a finger were he to touch them. The circular walls were covered with dozens of portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses, all of whom were snoozing gently in their frames – though Harry noted that at least four had their eyes only half-closed and were evidently trying to be sneaky at their peeking. There was also an enormous, claw-footed desk towards the back of the room, and, sitting on a shelf behind it, sat the Sorting Hat.

Seated at the desk was Dumbledore, his eyes locked on a parchment as he was signing something on it with his quill. Harry didn't bother with decorum, just standing in place, occasionally twisting to get a better look at everything without moving from his spot. What most fascinated him, out of everything else, was a grand bird-perch standing off towards a corner behind the Headmaster's desk. It looked large enough to hold a vulture – and Harry was reminded of the Augery he had seen in Diagon Alley on the day of the Gringott's break-in. What had Luna called it again? The Irish Phoenix? Was that what the perch was for perhaps?

After a few minutes, the paper was put aside and Dumbledore focussed his attention on Harry. “Harry, my boy – welcome, welcome to Hogwarts. I hope you shall enjoy your years here.” Oh, how Harry longed to wipe that grandfatherly smile of Dumbledore's face when it was directed at him. Steeling his response, Harry knew he had to play the act – that was the whole plan after all. "Thank you, Headmaster, I am certain I will. It's bound to be loads better than the Dursleys.” And how those balefull eyes could twinkle! Harry almost gagged as Dumbledore ramped his act as a benevolent figure over the top with mere gesture and body posturing. “My boy, such dreadful business. I'm sure all will be resolved come next summer – after all, there is no home like family.”

Harry pushed the anger down. “Must I, sir? They're really a most unpleasant company – as I made clear in my letters...” Albus merely shook his head at that. “Harry, my boy, family may be unpleasant, but family is family. Surely it was not as bad as the letters told – you're young and easily prone to judge such situations wrongly.”

Ice filled Harry's heart instantly. A bitter-cold fury coarsed through his veins at those words and Harry suddenly felt that their plan was too kind when it came to dealing with this fool. Denouncing his words as fancy and folly, a child misjudging a situation – a situation he would send Harry back to? “No.” Harry said. Dumbledore gave a chuckle at that. “Now, Harry, I really think it's best you trust me in this – you're safest with family.” They locked eyes and Harry let him in, into a mindscape of cold gale and bitter cold, pleased with the split-second of shock and fear that glimmered in those eyes before a mask was dropped before them. And Harry wondered how Dumbledore would interpret that. “I will not, Headmaster. I have used the weeks in professor Snape's care to consult various legal experts and go through both Muggle and Magical Laws concerning child abuse. Each said I was in the right, so I initiated the proper procedures, sir. I have no intention whatsoever to return to the people who would treat me like a slave every waking hour, if they were able.”

“Now, my boy, I really must insist that -” Harry didn't even let him finish. “No, Headmaster, you must not. Within this school, I shall abide by your every rule as set forth in the School's Charter – which I have read when I prepared for the year, sir. And I shall strive, of course – I'm most certain looking forward to learning the courses I have read about and make some friends, sir. Can I return to the common room?” Would the fool insist further and think Harry's well-voiced command was but a request? No, he didn't, Harry thought when he saw those eyes grow colder somewhat and become immeasurably calculating. “Of course, my boy, I wouldn't want to withhold you from a
good night's sleep. Good night, Harry, and good luck with your classes tomorrow.” Harry gave a polite bow. “Thank you, Headmaster, but I don't need luck – I make my own luck.” And with that, Harry turned, opened the door, and left behind a bewildered and very concerned Headmaster – who soon called for Severus to see him in his office...

Meanwhile, Percy returned with Harry to the seventh floor in silence - he had explained most of the internal House-rules during the trip and Harry had memorized them all. He had visualized them as a stone tablet to be raised in his mental mindscape, punctuating each rule with a plant or decorative aspect that enforced memory. And he had tried to memorize the steps too – he only triggered four on their way down, which was better than having to be saved by Percy every two minutes.

Eventually they stood before the Fat Lady's portrait, a rotund woman dressed in a toga – it had obviously been a costume rather than a practical robe. She looked middle-aged, but her eyes were still young – or at least, they'd been painted young. “Password?” She spoke drolly, as if she was too good for the role she'd been assigned to. “Caput Draconis.” Percy responded – to which the portrait swung open and revealed an arched doorway, which they entered through, after which she closed again.

Severus had been conversing with the Queen of the Loch, when Albus' request to see him came through the hearth in his office. Signing a quick farewell, he left the ichthyic figure at the bay-window which gave a vast view into the twilight depth of the Loch beyond. He had cast off most of his traditional robes when he'd entered his office, after having given a short speech to all his students about the importance of portraying a unified front towards all the other Houses – and already he had made a list of those new students most likely to come to him within the next weeks. He knew who'd be picked off by the other Houses quickly, by now, having seen it played over and over. He still couldn't forgive Albus and Minerva for their blatant favoritism, which let them overlook the horrendous behaviour displayed by their spitefull lions.

Thus Snape entered Albus' office via Floo, dressed in his standard potion-making shirt and trousers, each black and immaculate. With his hands behind his back, he walked over to the Headmaster who stood bent over his Pensieve, a silver bowl floating above a granite basin engraved with runes. Severus watched as Albus put his wand to his temple, slowly drew out a delicate silver strand of memory and dropping it into the swirling vortex contained in the Pensieve. “Severus, my boy, would you say that Harry reminds you of Tom?” Severus blinked his eyes a few times, wondering where this was going – they'd already had this discussion, several times in fact, and his opinion hadn't changed. “No, Albus, the boy reminds me much more of Lilly and James than he would make me think about the Dark Lord. I have told you this several times already.”

Albus just hummed, giving a non-commital nod.

“I had one of the Prefects bring the boy up to my office half an hour ago – I wanted to see for myself. I had watched the boy during the Feast – and at first I thought you'd been right. I saw nothing but a young boy wishing for friends after a life of none. But when he was here, in my office, I got a very different impression. I used Legilimency on him-” Albus spoke, before Snape cut him off. “Are you insane, Albus? You know better than that. What on Earth would compel you to do so?” Snape sneered, absolutely disappointed by Albus' behaviour. “Because when I saw him standing there, Severus, for a moment, I thought...” Ah, Severus thought, so he had been reminiscing. “You thought it had been an eleven year old Dark Lord, standing before you...”

Albus sighed, a weariness in his eyes, of more than simply age. “Yes. For a second, I thought that Tom Riddle stood before me, as he had been that day he arrived at Hogwarts and I had called him to my office as Head of Gryffindor House. I admit, I should not have based my next actions on that... sad reminiscence.” He shook his head, before continueing on. “But when the boy refused to
apologize for accusing his family of abuse—” Snape's blood went cold as ice, his posture stiffening. “You tried to force a child, who had probable cause to report his family for abuse, to apologize for doing so. Worse, you were accusing him of falsely accusing them?” Albus stood up. “Now, now, Severus, the boy is quite safe with his family, I assure you. I spoke with them myself and they all said the boy is prone to imagining things and—” Albus was about to pat Severus on the arm – who pulled away.

“You think he imagined having to wear cast-offs of his cousin, who is older by three years? You think his need for nutrient potions to counter-act regular malnourishment is imagined? The fact that he hasn't been to an optometrist since he went for the first and only time, when he got his single pair of glasses? Albus, you can not be serious.” Snape tried to stay level and calm, but Albus' dunderheaded behaviour was making it difficult. “Ah, no, Severus, I do not believe he imagined having to wear second-hand clothes - or that he has bad eye-sight and is a bit on the thin side. But to claim all this is evidence of abuse is a bit far-fetched, really.”

Severus couldn't believe his ears – the tothering old fool really believed it! Clearing his throat, Severus responded dryly. “Well, then, Albus, you shall excuse me when I say that I will take it seriously. I have been made the boy's legal guardian, on your express orders. And until that is undone, I shall do what I ought best for Potter's well-being. And that includes providing the child with new and fitted clothes, a regular regime of nutrient potions, new glasses, and teaching him all which is necessary to take up the mantle of Lord Potter.” And when that made Albus' head snap to lock eyes with Snape, Severus felt a little bit glad. “You didn't inform me you were training him to become the Lord Potter.” Albus said, almost in accusation. Snape sneered.

“Well, of course I would be. As I said, Albus, I am his guardian now – and part of a guardian's duty is to prepare an Heir of a House to pick up the mantle of Lordship. And that is what I have been doing.” Albus had now seated himself behind his desk, popping a hard candy in his mouth as Severus spoke. “And why didn't you tell me this earlier when I asked what you were teaching him?” Seating himself in one of the chairs before the desk, Severus folded his hands in his lap. “Because you only ever inquired after his academical studies – and I though you were expecting me to teach him all this. Surely you're not saying I should stop preparing Potter to become his father's successor?” Albus looked distracted, sunken in thought, for a few minutes, the only noise in the room the crackling of the figure and the sound of soft rain against a window. A small rain-storm was passing over.

Finally, Albus sighed, pinching his nose and rubbing his eyes. “I suppose you just as well can, yes. I'll keep up my post as Regent until the boy comes off age, of course.” Severus blinked a few times. “What do you mean, Albus? You're not the regent.” At this, Albus stilled, unsure what Severus meant with that. “How so, my boy? I have been the Potter Regent, ever since poor James and Lilly had gone into hiding.” Surely this hadn't changed – Albus had been present in the last Wizengamot meeting, so what could have changed between then and now?

“Well, you are the Lord of House Dumbledore, Albus – you can not be both Lord and Regent of two different Houses. Besides, when we checked last with Gringott's, we had word that Dowager Longbottom had been made Regent by Proxy – the Potter vote has been granted to her, citing the compatibilities between her viewpoints and those that Lilly, and James, had shared. In her stead, the Longbottom boy now officially casts the votes if he wants to.” At this, Albus almost choked on the candy he'd been sucking on. When had that happened? Albus didn't like to admit it, but he was slowly inching towards a mild panic-attack. First it had been his being shut out of the Wizengamot due to the investigation, then being shut out at Gringott's for anything except his own personal Vault and paperwork. And now this? What was happening?

“Why did you authorize the change, Severus? It could only have been you, the boy or I.” Those
blue eyes locked with Severus', their grandfatherly twinkle and mirth long gone now, replaced by a
cold hard steel resolve. “We didn't, Albus – I wager the Goblins probably found a provision
stipulating Dowager Longbottom as the Regentess in case of the untimely death of Lilly and
James. I vaguely recall you mentioning the Will had never been found.” Albus gave a deep sigh,
whispering a quiet apology in his mind – before he broke through Severus’ Occlumency shields at
full force. The Potion Master didn't take the sudden intrusion in silence or stride – so undisciplined,
Albus thought, as he tore through all of Severus' recent memories, watching each after another. Yet
he found nothing remiss – it was all as Severus had said during his daily reports.

Taking in the boy, sharing a bit of history, bringing him to Spinner's End, teaching him the basic
curriculum, … There was nothing wrong that he could find. Reluctantly, Albus withdrew from
Snape's mind, patching up the damage he had done as he left. Summoning two cups and some tea,
Albus filled their cups and pushed one towards the man seated before him. Snape was still
clutching his head, sagging somewhat to the side as he was desperately trying to regain his
bearings and senses. “My deepest apologies, my boy – I just had to make sure. I left no lingering
damage and a mild Pain-Relief Potion will deal with the headache. Now, let's have a nice cup of
tea and discuss your observations of this evening.”

Internally, Severus cursed the old man to the moon and back – though he felt mildly relieved when
Albus said he had patched the damage his forced Legilimency had done. And he could deal with
the headache before he went to sleep – which would be precious and few. The clock was near to
striking twelve. “Not a problem at all, Albus – the Dark Lord never gave us the mercy of undoing
the damage He did on our minds repeatedly whenever He wanted to verify our stories. I will cope,
I'm sure.” And when he picked up the cup with shaking hands, spilling some of the tea before he
sipped from it, that damned twinkle returned to the Headmaster's eyes – and how Snape longed to
spoon out those eyes and feed them to the Loch's Grindylows! But, no, he couldn't lose himself in
these feelings. Occluding those emotions away, making room for a deathly calm of indifference
and impartiality, Severus cleared his mind completely.

“Quite an eventful Judgement we had, wouldn't you say, my boy?” Albus began, sipping his tea
after poluting it with almost ten cubes of sugar. “Two Heirs of House returned to Hogwarts, three
Heralds newly appointed. And young Harry amongst those somewhere.” And those eyes dared
Snape to speak up in Harry's defence, leaving the unvoiced conclusion of Harry being Heir
Slytherin hanging in the air between them. “I wouldn't say that, Headmaster. Do not forget the
group consisted of Potter, Weasley, Granger, and Longbottom. And considering that we yet do not
know fully where Muggle-Born children get their magical heritage from, it might be the Heir could
be either Granger or Longbottom. Heaven knows the boy was always seen as a Squib by Augusta
for a long time. Wasn't it her who sent that letter of gratitude when her grandson received his letter
for Hogwarts? I distinctly remember she was quite... explicitive in her jubilations at your adress.”

How could he forget, Snape though – it had been a Howler and it had been long, extremely long. It
had been almost half an hour of Dowager Longbottom's croaking voice pouring admiration after
libation towards the Headmaster. Half an hour of how great he was, how kind, and fair, and strong,
and ... Eugh – it almost turned Severus' stomach again as he thought of it. Even Minerva had
trouble containing her laughter at Albus' expense during that half hour. And considering Minerva's
otherwise unbreakable and unreadable front of disguising her emotions and true thoughts, which
she could erect with such ease and confidence, that had been telling enough.

Sure, Filius had fallen off his stool a few times, and Pomona had been snickering behind her hand
for most of it – even Irma and Aurora had let a few cracks in their otherwise cold exterior been
seen, with laughter in their eyes and mildly upturned corners of their lips. Only Albus had found the
Howler an annoyance and openly displayed those feelings – though, of course, he was forced to
respond equally in kind.
Albus waved away the memory. “Please, do not remind me, Severus. Yes, it could have been either Granger or Longbottom – but if so, why hadn't Neville's parents been proclaimed Heir? No, the Longbottom boy is not the Heir. And I do not believe that destiny has the kind of irony to make a Muggle-Born witch the Heir of Salazar Slytherin himself. Oh, it would be a veritable hoot if it were true – but no, I believe not.” Eyes sunken in the reflections of the tea within his cup, Albus was following his thoughts as they strayed from one avenue of possibility to the other.

Severus rolled his eyes mentally, setting down his cup with only a faint tremor of the hand. “Albus, the boy was not explicitly named – nor described. All the Founder Statues always clearly denote the one they are talking to. When their words are dissected, the identity of the one spoken to can never be misconstrued – unless you are deliberately misunderstanding them. So, again, we can not know who is the Heir Slytherin – and until we do, I would advise you to stop fretting and get to the matters at hand.” Severus tried his best to stay civil, but the loss of his patience was mildly audible in his words. Albus' eyes snapped up, seemingly agreeing for the moment. “You're right, Severus – apologies. Now, any remarks you wish to make?”

Straightening up, banishing the last tremors from his lack of control, Severus spoke, calling to mind the list of observations he had made. “I have several students this year who are Muggle-Born, a rare occurrence but not surprising given the small pool of wizard-only children we could expect this year and the next. As such, I have already implemented stricter rules within the common room as to prevent any Pure-Blood bullying to occur. However, I fear this may not be enough. Cunning as my little serpents are, any rules I design, they circumvent. So I wish you to press to heart on Minerva to keep an eye out for these students during her classes. In the same vein, Albus, I once again implore you not to place both Slytherin AND Gryffindor in the same timeslot for Potions. The rivalry between these two Houses is bound to land someone in the hospice sooner or later.”

Albus waved the worry of the last remark away. “Nonsense, my boy – you have always managed to keep an eye on their antics and I'm sure you'll be able to continue doing so. Besides, a little competition is bound to keep spirits up.” Severus almost rolled his eyes. “Yes, Headmaster, provided there are still spirits bound to actual bodies that aren't spread across the four corners of my dungeons when the children inevitably go too far. So, once again, I make an official remark at the Board, Albus, declaring that I voiced my concerns and will in no way be held accountable to the accidents that happen and could have been prevented.” And he had – he did it every year, via Lucius, and every year the Board took his remark to notice. Severus only prayed it would never needed to be used to absolve his responsibilities of such an event. Still, he feared – he always feared...

“Beyond that, it seems clear that Crabbe and Goyle have been tasked by their fathers to watch over my godson during his tenure at Hogwarts. It seems that, like their fathers to Lucius, the boys are now to be considered vazals to Draco. Granted, I have seen this coming five years hence, but it seems now a solid fact indeed. They didn't leave his side from the moment they exited the train and entered Hogwarts. I suspect this will remain so for the foreseeable future. And then, ah, then there is former Heir Theodore Nott. I had last seen the boy and his father just before the summer started – and their fall from grace is markedly in the boy's dress. It seems that the Notts have been stripped of their House-Elf as well as their private tailor – the child's robes were looking a bit... tattered. Though Heavens knows how the boy managed to wear his clothes so thin in such a short time. I fear we shall have to keep an eye on the boy, to prevent him from being taken advantage off by the more opportunistic snakes in my pit.”

“Outside of my House, I have seen but a few interesting things – such as the arrival of the Semon Heir's only child, who is well-known locally in Spinner's End. And it surprised me – because there has never been mentioned of a girl being born to Theosophis and his wife Alexandra. So I think we may have to keep an eye on her as well – I believe she was Sorted into Ravenclaw?” A nod from
Albus confirmed the question, prompting Severus to go on. “Of course, we have several notable Heirs and Heiresses in Gryffindor this yeat too, I noticed. Runcorn, Sowerbutts, Robinson, … An auspicious years for those families to strengthen their connections through their young Heirs and Heiresses, I fear.” Albus nodded sadly.

“Yes, dreadful business that, using children so young to forge political bonds between families. It only gladdens my heart that many families have been stepping away from that depressing costum.” Severus hummed non-committaly, knowing full-well that Albus was talking about families such as the Weasleys and Lupins – Light Families who once had a grand standing amongst their peers in the Wizengamot and had relinquished all that power and responsibility in favour of political freedom and liberty to do as they wished. Yet, where had that brought them? Without influence to make real change and scoffed at by those who made the actual decisions, behind the screens and through puppets. Yes, they were free – but at what cost?

“Yes, well, that's neither here or now. Beyond that, we all will keep an eye on the new Heir Ravenclaw, I am certain. Yet, Albus, I quite clearly recall not having seen miss Lovegoods name on the list of children to be admitted this year. Was there a mistake?” Albus shook his head, waving towards a small cabinet beyond. “No, no – I was uncertain too, so I checked the Book from beyond the wards. But, sure enough, miss Lovegood's name was written down in this year's list. I think we may have just overlooked her.” Severus was quiet for a moment, trying to remember if that could've been the case. Either way, her name hadn't been called or discussed – so there had to have been a mistake somehow. Had they simply overlooked it? Must have – what else could it be?

And as the adults pondered these questions, and Harry slowly fell asleep in his bed, a dreamy-eyed Ravenclaw was braiding her hair on the window-sill of her room, softly singing a lullaby about the Redcaps frolicking on an ancient glen – which she had learned, oh so long ago, from her wise mother...

Chapter End Notes

So this is the point where many OC's are going to be introduced. As a rule of thumb, OC's will either be based on the IRL actors (using their names, for example) or on IRL historical families (such as the Semons).

I know that Rowena was canonically responsible for the creation of the Grand Staircase, with its swivveling stairs and vanishing steps - but honestly, it looks like a veritable deathtrap to me x.x

Albus really thinks too highly of himself, don't you think?

Oh, to be Muggle-born in the House of serpents - sounds dreadful :O
Chapter XXIX

Chapter Summary

We finally see the Gryffindor Common Room, meet the Fat Lady proper and Harry's unique talent is revealed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Harry followed Percy through the doorway behind the Fat Lady's portrait, he took in the corridor they entered. About twenty meters long, another corridor divided from it halfway through, leading to a few doors on the left. And as Harry walked, Percy pointed to each door and hallway they passed. “We have a library and study on the right here. The study looks out on the Castle below and gives a good view of the Grounds too. The library is out-of-bounds after midnight – Peeves has a habit of haunting it around that time and you'd rather not encounter him until you've learned the Skurge Spell.” Harry looked to the first door they passed on the right, which was currently closed, bearing a plaque with “LIBRARY” on it. And as they passed the second door on the right, which another plaque identified as the study, it showed a room that was surprisingly spacious.

With dark-red wood panelling, and tapestries on every wall, carpet lined the floors. A few couches stood against one wall, another wall had wide windows looking out. Several desks were spread throughout the room, with several chairs around each. It screamed 'school' to Harry, reminding him of Muggle school study-classes. Between these two doors had been another hallway on the left side of the corridor.

Percy took Harry down it as well, indicating the bathrooms for the students – one for boys, another for girls. A third door was visible too, but Percy said it used to be the Prefect's bathroom and was no longer in use. Instead, the Prefects used the bathroom for all House Prefects in another part of the Castle. The bathrooms were a row of twenty toilet-stalls and another row of about a dozen shower-stalls, all tastefully tiled in a neutral colour-pattern, with bronze-coloured piping and a wooden parquet-ceiling.

“You can sign up for the Duelling Club before the end of each trimester and up to the end of the first week of the trimester - which will enrol you for the next trimester. The Club gathers in the Gryffindor Duelling Class each Friday, around eight o'clock in the evening. It employs a one-on-one advancement-system, through which you will be pitted against a single opponent each time and which allows you to climb the ranks up to becoming number one. Stay number one for a full semester, without being beaten once, and you'll become eligible to be crowned Founder Duellist.”

“The Founder Duellists of all Houses can be challenged by anyone of any House, if they manage to beat their House's second-best Duellist first. Defeat all Four Founder Duellists, and you can claim the title of Hogwarts Champion Duellist. Any questions about that?” Harry shook his head – Percy had been damnably detailed and long-winded in his explanations. Harry wasn't sure he'd ever be able to forget any of it at all, ever. Percy showed him the common room then, which was unlike anything Harry had ever seen. It was round, with a high vaulted ceiling, and two large bay windows on the left and right. A roaring fireplace was lit in the right-hand corner, on the wall next
to the doorway. Cosy chairs and sofa's stood littered across the spacious room, with a few tables spread between. Tapestries and paintings covered the walls wherever there was space and a small balcony overlooked the whole room towards the back.

Beneath the balcony were two stairs, one up and one down. Percy explained that these led to the dormitories for the students. The boy's dormitories were all situated in the left turret, the girls in the right turret. First, second and third years were on the first, second and third floors when going up. Fourth, fifth and sixth years were on the first, second and third floors when going down. And all the way at the top of each turret was the Heir's room – one furnished for boys, the other for girls. The rooms were all tuned to the Castle's own blend of magic – so they magically Expanded to ensure there was enough room for all students when needed. As such, the dorm of Harry and his first-year House-mates was large enough to hold twenty boys – while the dorm of the sixth-years was large enough to hold almost eighty young men. Harry thought it a rather efficient spell, indeed.

Breakfast would be served, every day, between seven and nine o'clock in the morning. Lessons would start at half ten – to which Percy handed Harry his lessons-roster, which was rather jam-packed. The deadline for Club-subscriptions would be the second Monday of September – and try-outs for all practical School-Clubs would be held the second Friday of September. Students were expected to finalize their choices for extra-curricular courses by the end of the month, the deadline being the last Sunday of September. After that, the Head of House would discuss the lesson-roster with all students who have chosen four or more Clubs and ECC – which were the Extra-Curricular Courses, on the first Friday of October. If Harry didn't understand what certain courses or clubs entailed, he was free to ask any of the Prefects of his year.

Harry promised Percy he would do exactly that if he had any other questions. Percy gave a satisfied nod, bade Harry a good night and went up the stairs to his own dormitory. Harry kept standing in the common room for a while, taking in the changes that had happened. Taking in a deep breath, he closed his eyes, meditating for a few minutes – before he exhaled, opened his eyes again and began to ascend the stairs. Opening the door of his dorm, he saw that the others were all asleep already – all except for Neville. The boy sat at a window besides his bed, unaware of Harry entering the room. Only when Harry let himself fall down unto his bed's comforter did the boy look up, surprised and looking afraid.

Harry turned his head, locking eyes with Neville for a few moments – before giving a large grin and giving him a thumbs up. “Look, Neville – we're still alive.” For a moment, Harry wondered how he would react to that – he was almost certain the boy would just ignore him. Yet, instead, Neville gave a grin back – even if it was a very small one. Standing up again, Harry began to shed his clothes, putting them away in his trunk. Opening the Wardrobe, he picked out a pyjama and readied his school-robes for the next day. And from the corner of his eyes, he could see Neville watch the Wardrobe and Trunk with great curiosity. And when Harry had pulled on the nightwear and laid-out the school-robes atop his Trunk, he turned to Neville.

“The Trunk was a birthday-present from professor Snape. It's pear-wood, the engravings are Maori apparently – the artisan who carved it had a Maori mother and a British father.” Harry explained, seeing Neville's eyes trace the carvings across the Trunk's sides. Pointing to the Wardrobe with his thumb, Harry spoke. “And the Wardrobe was apparently a family-heirloom, made somewhere in the 12th century. Far as Severus and I could tell, it's apple-wood, but certain parts are in-laid with oak and ash. It's got Runes in odd spots too. You can look closer if ya want.” Pulling back the comforter, Harry slipped in his bed, leaving a curious Neville to do as he pleased. Harry wasn't concerned that the boy would do any damage – Neville was too cautious for that. Using his breath-exercises as Severus had taught him, Harry soon drifted off to sleep – and strange dreams...
It was his Mind-Palace, yet it wasn't – he didn't think of his mindscape as a palace. Yet this is definitely a palace of sorts. High colonnades stretched as far as the eye could see, lions and serpents carved in each column alternately. A hundred corridors stretched out from the chamber in which Harry found himself and each was locked-off by a padlocked grate. It was all strangely nebulous – Harry always imagined his mindscape as a hyper-realistic scene. There were bookcases, but nearing them revealed that they were just mere approximations of what a bookcase lined with books should look like. Best he could compare it to was a child's explanation of something detailed – vague, not correctly shaped and without deep details.

He wandered through this strange space, where a layer of fog curled around his feet and clouds drifted across the ceiling. There was a sun, of sorts, but he couldn't pinpoint where it should be. The shadows constantly shifted, as if the time of day jumped from one to another. One moment, the shadows were long and low – and the next, they were short and high. The colours were saturated yet also faded, as if the scene was lit too brightly – but the shadows were still a deep inky black. And when Harry inspected his own presence, he looked pretty much like in real life. It was also strange – familiar yet unknown.

He had been walking for a while, before he stumbled upon a large doorway. Entering through it, it seemed he had walked into a throne-room of sorts. He saw two figures sitting on the throne, but as he was about to ask them where they all were, they looked up at him as if he'd startled them. Not a sound came from their lips, but he suddenly found himself thrown back. “Not yet!” it was an impression, not a sentence – and before he knew it, he was ejected from the strange dream and launched into a series of regularly mediocre dreams. And when he woke, he could not remember what he had dreamed about...

He woke at around ten to eight in the morning, eyes bleary and sleep-encrusted. Rubbing them clean, he rose from the bed, finding himself alone – safe for Ron, who was happily snoring away in his bed still. All the other boys had already risen, and Harry thought it best he would too. Breakfast would only last for another hour at most, so he got up and dressed. Slipping into his school-robes, he went out of the dormitory and down into the common room. A few children were seated near the hearth, busily chatting away and Harry could only hear parts of their excited talking.

“- and I heard that the Herald of Hufflepuff is Cedric Diggory. You saw him – he was the cute ash-blond with the messy hair, and with those cheeks. Ah, he's dreamy.” Said the first girl, a few years older than Harry. “Oh my god, Alicia, I know! He's such a dream. And can you believe that that Granger-girl has been chosen as Herald for Ravenclaw? I can't believe it – I'm sure that Robert is a better Herald than that know-it-all could ever be. I mean, have you heard her yesterday? I could hear her nagging voice lecturing those poor girls all the way down to our dorm. I mean - “ Girl two began, voice getting higher and more exasperated as she went along.

He didn't hear the rest of their conversation, but found himself irate at their dumping upon Hermione. Sure, she might be annoying, but to denounce the possibility she was a better Herald than the previous, just because the previous Herald was a nice-looking guy? Preposterous. Making his way to the boy's bathroom, he set about brushing his teeth and washing his hair quickly. It was longer now, and though it helped with taming the unruly mess it could be, it caused his hair to get incredibly greasy quickly. At this rate, he would have to wash it every two or three days. And that was definitely gonna wreak havoc on his already split ends.

With his hair towel-dry, Harry exited the painting. Waiting for her to close again, he struck up a polite conversation with the Lady. “Good morning, madame.” And that polite morning greeting apparently surprised her tremendously. “Oh. Ah – good morning, young man. Excuse me, it is not often that the younger students greet me so... politely.” She said, giving a curtsy in response.
Giving a short bow back, Harry thanked her. “My guardian taught me etiquette over the holidays, madame. I thought it only polite to thank you for serving as the guardian to our common room.”

“Why, thank you, young man. Ah, but where are my manners? Lady Elizabeth Spriggson, pleased to make your acquaintance.” She gave another curtsy, Harry again bowing. “Harry Potter, Heir Potter. Happy to meet you, my Lady.” The Lady giggled. “Oho, Mr Potter, you’ll make an old painting blush. But I do thank you for your courtesy. However, considering the hour, you might want to hurry to the Great Hall – breakfast won’t last much longer. I wager I’ll see you tonight again.” Harry nodded. “Of course, Lady. And I guess we shall. However, I am interested to hear more about you, my Lady. I shall see you soon.” Giving a small wave, Harry turned and walked down the corridor, towards the Grand Staircases.

The Great Hall was full of students, though not all of them – it was clear from several groups leaving and a few lone students entering together with Harry, that everyone had a very different rhythm to waking up for breakfast. At the staff table, a few professors were seated – Quirrell, McGonagall, Pince, … Severus was absent – probably had eaten before everyone else. Or had his breakfast delivered to his quarters – which reminded Harry to talk to him before the day was done. Might be best to talk when Potions had finished – stay behind for a few minutes, before moving on to the next class.

Harry seated himself besides Neville, who was busy talking to Hermione. Greeting them both, Harry quickly filled his plate with scrambled eggs, hash-browns, beans, a few pieces of bacon, … The selection of food for breakfast was quite enormous – and Harry idly thought he could get used to this. Making small talk with Hermione, and sometimes with a less-shy Neville, Harry was halfway his second plate when a harried Ron came running through the Hall towards them. Less than twenty minutes were left before breakfast would end – and Ron wasted no time at even greeting them, as he dumped his plate full of fried eggs, beans and hash-browns. And then the redhead began stuffing his face at break-neck pace.

“Good morning, Ron – slept in?” Harry asked, with a small grin on his face. All the response he got was a glare from Ron and a nod from Hermione in agreement. “Honestly, Ronald, you should set an alarm. It’s your first day and you were almost too late for breakfast.” Harry tuned out Hermione’s tangent at that point, occasionally nodding as she was still right – the redhead was way too tardy in waking up. Harry only hoped this wasn’t going to be the daily norm. Otherwise he’d be finagled by Hermione into waking Ron up whenever he woke up – and Harry was not prepared to face someone who was not a morning person and just got woken up rudely.

Eventually, the bell tolled nine – and all plates vanished at the last stroke, leaving a very disgruntled Ron who hadn’t finished his second plate. “Come on, Ron, you ate enough beacon to reconstruct a whole piglet from – let’s go. We have to fetch our books – it’s Potions first period today. And History of Magic after that.” Ignoring Ron’s rumblings about greasy gits, and him still being hungry, Harry fell in step with Hermione.

“Say, Hermione, you said, on the train, that you’d read the whole of “Hogwarts – A History”. Did it say anything about our current teachers or the Headmaster?” Harry asked her, genuinely curious to know what they could figure out about their teachers. He knew what to expect from Severus – and his guardian had said enough about McGonagall to paint a very accurate picture of what kinda teacher she was. But that left the others mostly as unknowns. Severus had said little about Sprout and Pince – but at least he had mentioned them. Quirrell was completely new and an unknown, even though Harry had met him before – and professor Sinistra hadn’t been talked about at all. Harry was curious to see what they could uncover together.

“Oh, yes, Harry – I did. But it doesn’t say much about the teachers – only those who have died long
ago or did really great things. Headmaster Dumbledore was in there too, discussing how he had
discovered the twelve alchemical uses of Dragon's Blood.” Harry realized he'd known that, having
read it on a card that came with one of his Chocolate Frogs. “Yes! The Chocolate Frog card said
that too! And that he had done crazy alchemical work with someone called Nicholas Flamel. Do
you know who that is?” Hermione nodded, pulling Neville up as the boy stepped through a
vanishing step.

“Yes – he's very famous amongst Muggles too. Legends say that he is the only person to have ever
created a Philosopher's Stone – which is like a sort of Holy Grail for alchemists. It was
hypothesized to be able to turn any metal into gold – which is, of course, also possible in chemistry
by adding together the atomic weights of a metal less heavy than gold. But it requires tremendous
amounts of energy – and the cost of creating it can not be compensated by its actual per-kilogram
value.”

Interesting, Harry thought – he could see why such a product could have an appeal, but that wasn't
relevant for him now. So he dutifully filed it away and brought the subject back on track. “Is there
a way to figure out more about the professors, maybe? Hogwarts has a large library, right? Maybe
they have books on our teachers?” Harry asked, skipping over a vanishing step as they were almost
at the seventh floor. “They could have – but I’d wager Madame Pince would be rather cross if she'd
notice we were investigating her. I mean, obviously it's just so we know more and can get a better
idea of what to look for when we have their classes – but still...”

“It's fine – I can always ask Severus. I just have to be Slytherin about it.” Harry said with a bright
smile, knowing how much Severus didn't like people being too upfront and on the nose – unless it
was about real emergencies. “Eugh, I still can't see how you can stand him, Harry – I mean, did
you see him yesterday? He was looking at us like we were all garbage.” Ron began to complain –
though he didn't get very far as he suddenly fell through the empty spot where one of the vanishing
steps had been. Grabbing his arm just in time to prevent Ron from cracking a tooth on the marble,
Harry pulled him back up with Hermione's help.

“So? Ron, half the children our age are slimy gits – and a large number of those gits are spineless
and bullies. Trust me, I know. I wouldn't wanna teach them either.” Harry didn't wanna dirty any
more words about the subject, pulling Ron along through the seventh floor corridor. Ron wisely
kept his quiet while they walked, Hermione talking with Neville on the way. They arrived before
the portrait and Harry gave a bow. “Hello, Lady Elizabeth. Can we go through?”

“Oho, Mr Potter, such a polite young man like you can come and go as you please. I heard some of
your peers mention you're having Potions next. Would you kindly give my greetings to the portrait
of an old man with a purple hat and green robes near the Potions classroom? His name is Lord
Abraxas – he used to be a confidante to the King, you know. He's an old friend of mine and his
portrait isn't working properly any more due to the accidental vapours that sometimes escape the
nearby Potion Laboratory – he can't receive company until it's fixed by Master Filch. Ah, but poor
Argus has his hands full always repairing the damages caused by a certain duo of troublesome
redheads nowadays.” At this, she glared towards Ron – who merely ducked his head in shame.
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“I will give him your regards when I see him, madame.” She gave a grateful smile and promptly
swung open. “Run along, Mr Potter – Master Snape doesn't appreciate tardiness and prefers his
students to be five minutes early.” Dashing in with the rest in tow, they all quickly gathered their
text-books and writing sets before re-assembling in the common room. The two girls from before
were still seated in their sofa – and the girl called Alicia was giving Hermione the stink-eye quite a
bit. And Harry could notice how it unnerved Hermione.
“You know,” Harry began nonchalantly, voice just loud enough for the two older girls to hear. “I'm curious to see if Rowena's Statue was right in choosing you to be her Herald. I mean, the Statues are kinda like the Sorting Hat, no? So I wonder when they'd ever been wrong, really...” He looked up, staring at some random spot on the ceiling, as if lost deep in thought. Ron seemed to catch on quickly, when he spotted the curious look Harry now got and openly-hostile looks Hermione had gotten before. “Well,” Ron began, uncertain how well he could play the game along. “My dad said that the Statues never really give a reason why they choose who they choose – just that Rowena's Statue always managed to pick out the person who will get the highest grades in Hogwarts. And she's never been wrong in that, apparently. So ‘t stands to reason she's right, right?”

Harry winced mildly at the word choices and the less-than-perfect acting of Ron – his nervousness shone through, but apparently it had given the two older girls some food for thought. “Actually, didn't someone say that Robert's sometimes a bit dim?” Happy with the seeds of doubt sown and the baseless ire drawn away from Hermione, he urged the group on to leave the common room now, while the two were distracted. As they stepped through the portrait, getting a jovial goodbye from the Lady, Hermione gave Harry a grateful smile.

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“Thanks, Harry. They weren't discreet about them nit liking I was chosen as Herald. I mean, I can see why they'd like Robert over me – I mean, I'm not really that smart...” Harry shook his head. “Nonsense. Why would Rowena choose you if you weren't? I think that, maybe, you need to be a bit more Gryffindor in your being a Ravenclaw Herald.” He gave her a small smile, jumping down the stairs three steps at a time, trying his best to avoid the vanishing steps. Eventually, they'd made their all the way down to the ground floor, walking out into the courtyard. “Sir Nick told me that the quickest way to the Potion Laboratory in the Dungeons is over the Viaduct here. There's a spiral stairs next to the hall at the end of the Viaduct and it leads directly to the Dungeons. They're not immediately accessible from this part of the Castle, he told me.”

They made their way across, stopping for a moment to talk with the Swine Gargoyle at the right of the front-end of the bridge. “Oh, it was horrible – she decided one day she was sick of the view. So she asked a student to levitate her across the bridge so she could look into the hall sometimes – but the student fumbled the charm and sent her arcing into the ravine. Oh, my poor sister...” Harry gave his condolences to the gargoyle, promising her to look for her sister if he had free time. But, looking over the edge and into the ravine, with the small stream and its very many sharp rocks, he wasn't really holding out any hopes.

They made their way into the dungeons easy enough – but here, they found they'd forgotten to ask Nearly-Headless Nick how to get to the classrooms from there. They walked around aimlessly for a while, before Harry spotted a painting of a viper, coiled up on a stone, sunning in vividly-painted rays of sunlight. The damp and cold of the dungeons didn't seem to have impacted the quality of the work and it was lazily lapping its tongue through the painted air as it snoozed. “Wait here a sec, guys.” Harry said, stepping up the painting down the corridor.

“Good morning, friend.” Harry spoke, the susserous sibilances of the serpent tongue greeting the sleeping viper, rousing it from its slumber. “Morning, speaker. How can False-Life-Me help?” Its sleepy eyes slowly opened, their bright orange stark against the black scales of the body. “My nest-mates and Death-Survivor-Me need to find the Space-of-Foul-Scents. Can False-Life-You help us?” The serpent slowly nodded, understanding the question clearly. “Yes, friend, the space of which friend speaks can be found many moments to friend's right. Friend has to turn way right twice and then turn way left twice. That is where the Space-of-Foul-Scents is found.” Harry nodded, memorizing the directions. “Thanks, friend. May many prey pass friend's path.” The viper nodded once more, laying its head to rest and resuming its slumber.

When he returned to the group, Neville looked like he had seen a living nightmare and Ron looked
ashamed of something. Only Hermione had to nerve, apparently, to talk to him about whatever had ruffled their feathers. “Harry, you didn't tell us you could speak to snakes?” Harry was a bit flummoxed by this, to be honest – he couldn't see why that would be weird. “Well, why would I? I don't have need to talk to them often and you can learn any language. I mean, we have magic – so it's not like talking to snakes is really that extraordinary, is it?” Ron shook his head violently, disagreeing with everything Harry said.

“No, it isn't normal! Even amongst wizards, talking with snakes is a rare gift. People who can do it are called Parselmouths – and the only Parselmouths remembered were all Dark Wizards. Salazar Slytherin was a Parselmouth, as was Herpo the Foul!” Ron was almost shaking with anger, hatred for these historical figures. “So? What does that have to do with me?” Harry asked, genuinely perturbed by Ron's inexplicably behaviour and hatred towards Parselmouths. “It has everything to do with you if people find out you're a Parselmouth. People already think you're the Heir of Slytherin – remember the way he spoke to our group? The Statue didn't identify anyone, except me, Hermione, and Luna. So everybody's guessing it's you that's Salazar's Heir!”

“And the problem with that is?” Harry asked. “The problem is that everybody will think you're like those filthy snakes down in their dungeon. Everybody hates them – as they should! They only think about themselves!” Ron almost shouted in anger, causing Neville to recoil behind Hermione. Harry had quite enough of that. “Really now, Ron? I wonder how that is – having to think about yourself and only about yourself?” He had drawn himself up to his full height, and even though he stood lower than Ron, his presence was a lot more solid. “I had to think about myself every day, with every conversation I had with those excuses for people I lived with. I had to connive, scheme, lie my way out of my cousin's beatings – which he thought were fun. Or out of my aunt's endless chores – which were more akin to slavery than simply doing your part in a household! And don't even make me mention all the shit my uncle pulled on me!”

Taking a deep breath, trying to calm himself down, Harry took in Ron as he stood before him. The redhead looked angry still – yet also ashamed. “Ron, what kind of life did you think I lived? There seems to be this idea I had a swell time with my magic-hating freak-beating relatives...” Harry left the other questions hanging, feeling tired and deflated. He was so sick of this. “Euhm – well, after You-Know-Who disappeared, everybody was wondering where you had gone, you know. People were asking the Ministry what happened to you, to the Boy-Who-Lived. I mean, nobody knew anything – and my dad works in the Ministry. All he ever heard was that Dumbledore had said you were with family, who loved you, who would raise you all quiet-like and such...”

Ah, Harry thought, the old man's meddling hand again. “Ron, I spent ten years in the company of a cousin who saw me as a running punchbag, an aunt who saw me not just as a butler but more as a slave, and an uncle who saw in me the very devil trying to tempt them into selling their souls to me. How do you think that was?” Harry turned around, walking down the hall. “I know where to go, so if you wanna be on time, just follow me. We can discuss this later...”

Chapter End Notes

Girl 1 (Alicia Spinnet) & Girl 2 are talking about Robert Hilliard, a Fifth-Year Ravenclaw, and Herald of Ravenclaw before Hermione.

The Fat Lady was known as Lady Elizabeth Spriggson, Baroness of Suffolk, Lady of Anglia – she is related to King Richard the First, also know as Lionheart. She was born circa 1565 and graduated Hogwarts in 1583. She was a Gryffindor, first Prefect,
then Head Girl, and served as Herald of Gryffindor during all of her six years in Hogwarts. She has no living Heirs, and the Seat of her Family has not been in use since the late 19th century – but hasn’t been removed either because her portraits are still extant. She used to live in Ickworth Manor, before it was torn down and replaced by Ickworth House in the 18th century. As such, Ickworth House stands empty, unseen by Muggles and tended to by House-Elves still loyal to the Family.

(Her name is an homage to the actress who portrayed the original version of the character in the first Harry Potter movies – Elizabeth Spriggs. She died shortly after, and was replaced by the actress who played the Fat Lady in all later movies.)

Lord Abraxas I Malfoy, born 1591 – died 1773, ancestor to Lucius Malfoy and Draco Malfoy, was a Royal Chancellor to James I and Charles I. After Cromwell took to power during the Interregnum, he actively aided in the Restoration of the House of Stuart. He became, again, Royal Chancellor, to three successive royals – Charles II, James II, Mary II. When the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy was signed in 1689 and fully enacted in 1692. Once the Statute came to be enforced, he swiftly cut all ties with the Royals, after aiding the newly-founded Ministry of Magic in removing any evidence of the presence of Magicals in the royal circles of influence.

Afterwards, Abraxas was responsible for funding the founding of the first solely-Magical villages, pouring major amounts of money into the creation of new businesses and the relocating of old businesses to these new villages and the newly-hidden Diagon Alley. Through this, the Malfoys laid the foundation of their later non-Muggle wealth within the Magical Community – and thus their respectable influence within their community.

Ah, Master of Arts Argus Filch, Head Custodian of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Having earned a Masters degree of Arts in Muggle university and having studied the magical Arts in the wizarding communities, he is one of the most qualified people in the wizarding world for the restoration and reparation of damaged Magical art works. Poor Filch – image having to be responsible for a castle full of art that is also a school. A school full of messy stupid unconcerned children D:

Why would snakes have need of personalized names anyway? A description of your life in three words or less would suffice – as would descriptions of places that have meaning. Laboratory is an abstract concept – Place-of-Foul-Scents is an accurate descriptor that needs no definition.
The room that was the Potions Laboratory was wide and open, but also cold and damp. Shelves lined the walls, but not all of them. And the icy cold that radiated from the freezing flagstones was not mediated by the dozens of pickled specimens that lined the shelves. Dead eyes stared unblinking at the students and Harry felt almost sure that some of those eyes turned to follow them around. Twenty large cauldrons stood dotted around the room, each with a work-table besides it. The chairs were high, with no back-support, and very uncomfortable. Large chimneys opened up above each cauldron, with a noticeable updraught drawing air into them. The group of Gryffindors were all waiting outside of the room, none could cross the threshold yet. Finally, the bell tolled to announce half past nine – and in swooped Severus, from a door in the back of the room. Waving his hand towards the door, he called the children in. “Get in – now! Get seated each around a cauldron, in groups of two. No dawdling and no touching anything!”

Harry went to sit besides Ron, observing the blackboard and quickly reading through the potion described on it. “You are here,” Began Snape, now fully in his role as teacher. “To learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making.” He spoke softly, in barely more than a whisper – but they caught every word. Snape, apparently, had the keen gift of keeping a class silent without effort.

“As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this to be magic. Yet, while I don't expect you to really understand the subtle beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, or the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins – bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses... I shall still teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory – lo, even stopper death... If, and only if, you are not the type of dunderhead I usually have to teach!” That last came out much stronger and harder, almost making some of the students jump up from their seats.

He then began the roll-call, calling out ever name and jotting down if they were present. There was only slight hesitation when he came to Hermione's and Harry's names. And when he got to Ron's name, a most exasperated sneer shewed on his face. “Ah, Weasley – if you have the aptitude to get under my skin and blow up my lab like your wayward devil-twins, I might have to isolate you from your peers for their own protection. Ah, but maybe you are more alike your dutiful brother who is now Prefect – in which case, I am certain you shall be able to handle my... more difficult curriculum.” Ron looked red, and Harry wasn't sure if it was anger or shame.

“But no matter,” Snape drawled. “For the lessons of this month, I do not think such changes necessary. Now, Miss Granger.” Hermione perked up. “Seeing how you are now the Herald of Ravenclaw, I can assume you to know it all. So, tell me, what would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?”

Explain to me, in short, what the Draught does?” Hermione quickly responded back.

“It causes the consumer to fall into a deep coma, so similar to death as to be mistaken for it. It is best-known from the Muggle-tale of Romeo and Juliet.” Snape nodded again. “Again, correct, though the anecdote was unnecessary. Now, what other ingredients are part of the Draught?”

“Valerian root, Sopophorous beans, and sloth brain, sir.” Snape nodded again. “Correct again, Miss Granger. Five point for Gryffindor.” This caused a quiet stir – Ron saying to Harry that Snape almost never gave Points to Gryffindor, but Harry couldn't keep his attention to Ron as Snape suddenly addressed him. “Mr Potter – our new celebrity.” The sneer on Snape's face made it seem as if Snape detested him, and had Harry not known the man for a good number of weeks by now, he would have believed it. Now, however, it looked more in joke than as if in seriousness. “Tell me, Mr Potter, where one might found a Bezoar?”

Harry knew this – he knew that he knew this. But took a few seconds before it came to him, by when Snape had arched a brow in curiosity. “A goat's stomach, sir.” Snape nodded, walking away and making a round along all the cauldrons as he spoke again. “And what are the effects of a Bezoar, Mr Potter?”

“It's an effective antidote to many common poisons, sir.” Snape nodded again, stopping a moment to tower over Neville and leer down upon the nervous boy. “Correct again, Mr Potter. We might make a Potions Master of you yet.” Moving along again, Snape suddenly addressed Ron. “What's the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane, Mr Weasley?” Ron began to gasp like a fish, opening and closing his mouth in abject ignorance. “Don't know, Mr Weasley? Tut-tut, I would have expected more, hadn't it been for your twin-brothers.”

“As for those who don't know, monkshood and wolfsbane are the same plant – different name. Well? Why aren't you all copying this down?!” He snapped at the rest of the class, who all took out their parchments in haste and began scribbling down Snape's notes.

“Today we shall begin the process of making a perfect Cure-For-Boils. The ingredients are listed on the blackboard, as are all the steps you need to take. If in doubt, consult your books – and if your potion is looking the worse-for-wear or outright wrong, raise your hand and ring the bell that is hanging over your work-station. Be mindful of the ingredients, and how you use them. The ingredients can be found on the shelves behind me – take out only what you need for a single dose. And don't mix them up! I will not clean up after your mess, should you manage to blow yourself up!”

After that, they all went to work – Harry fetching the ingredients while Ron began to copy down the steps they needed to take. Going over the copies together, Harry sent Ron to work preparing the snake fangs by crushing them into a fine powder. Harry, meanwhile, prepared the cauldron and began to slice the Pungous Onions very fine. When the Base Potion was boiling, they carefully added the six crushed snake-fangs in four equal measures, waiting for each measure to dissolve completely before adding the next. Before heating their cauldron, they added all the sliced onions. They then waited for the mixture to slowly turn red, waving their wand over it when it had done so. Then they had to wait for forty minutes until it turned green.

Chatting a bit with Ron, as they waited, Harry kept an eye on Snape. The man swept around the classroom in his long black cloak, watching everyone weigh their ingredients and berating their behaviour when it was liable to get them blown up. The only people not criticized as much as the others were Harry, Ron and Hermione. She had teamed up with Lavender Brown, and occasionally had to stop her from doing something wrong.

Eventually the potion had turned green, a bright neon-green at that, and Harry threw in the stewed
Horned Slugs. Now they had to wait for it to turn pink, after which they had to take it off the fire before they added the Porcupine Quills. All seemed to be going well – until clouds of green smoke, a terrible odour and the hissing of a melting cauldron disturbed the relative quiet. It seemed that Neville had managed to melt Seamus’ cauldron into a twisted blob of shrieking and molten metal, the potion spilling out across the flagstones and burning holes in people’s shoes. Within seconds, everyone near them had all scrambled up on their stools, trying to evade the acidic failure. Neville, who had been drenched in the potions, moaned in agony as painful boils erupted all over his body.

Snape rushed in, fury on his face. “Idiot boy! I take it you added the Porcupine Quills before taking the cauldron off the fire?” He veritably snarled, Vanishing the residue with a wave of his wand. Neville whimpered as the boils started rupturing across his arms, to which Snape rounded up on Seamus. “Take him the Hospital Wing – take the Floo-Hearth there! Go, now!” Seamus took a whimpering Neville by the arm, careful not to touch any of the boil – and they quickly left through the Floo. “What are you all looking at? You’ve got your own cauldrons to keep an eye on! Continue.” Snape turned back to the mess Neville had left behind, Vanishing the melted cauldron and repairing the damages done.

Half an hour later, Harry’s and Hermione’s group delivered two perfect examples of Cure-For-Boils. The rest of the groups, however, had differing rates of success. Most managed to deliver a pale-blue stoppered potion, while some had managed to create black or even white potions – all a far cry from the perfect ocean-blue potion they’d been supposed to create. Snape had nodded at the potions Harry and Hermione delivered, giving each another five Points – but not until he’d taken ten Points due to Neville’s brewing-disaster. When Ron argued about how it was unfair, Harry just shrugged.

“He still gave us enough points to balance Neville’s mistake. And he was right to take points – the instructions weren’t complicated and the clean-up, not to mention treating Neville for the side-effects, is a pain in the head.” Ron begrudgingly agreed, as they made their way to the next class – which was History of Magic.

And that class was a complete and utter bore. Harry had hoped to get some background information about the Wizengamot, Wizarding Laws, anything like that. Instead, he got a ghost long dead, which had trouble realizing what the actual year was and had such a droning voice that half the class had fallen asleep halfway through. And how professor Binns had not noticed forty snoring students, Harry couldn’t even fathom. Lunch after that was a welcome break, if only to regain their waking senses – staying awake in Binns’ lecture was impossible!

As they were eating, owls swooped into the Great Hall, dropping off packages and letters everywhere. And though Harry found it wonderfully quaint to see, that impression faded fast when his lunch suddenly became inedible due to a surprise addition by an owl that swooped over to deliver a letter in Harry’s lap. A bit annoyed, he shoved the plate to the centre of the table, where it instantly vanished. Percy had shown them that trick – it was a way to prevent the tables from cluttering up, and each Vanished plate was replaced by a well-cleaned new one in its place before you.

Opening the letter Harry had received, he was pleased to see it was from Xenophilius. It was a first rough outline of their interview and harry couldn't immediately find anything wrong with it. Re-sealing the letter, after penning a few changes in the corner, he whistled. Hedwig, resting in the rafters above from her delivery, quickly swooped down again, landing before Harry on the table. Hermione, not having seen Hedwig up close before, was instantly awash about her beautiful feathers and large eyes. Binding the letter to Hedwig’s leg, as he explained how Hedwig was a Star-Skeever and what those are, Harry let Hermione gently stroke Hedwig’s feathers and scratch her head. Hedwig was instantly enamoured by the attention she got, and gave a rumbling purr at
Hermione's gentle administrations.

Hopping into the air, Hedwig left to deliver the letter. Harry, seeing her off, stood up, clutching a copy he had made of the letter. “I'm going to talk to Severus for a moment – I have something to discuss.” Hermione nodded, while Ron was too distracted trying to inhale his overstuffed plate. Obviously, the redhead didn't want to bother with chewing his food – to which Harry just snorted and shook his head in disbelief.

Striding over the the staff-table, Harry gave a polite nod to both Severus and McGonagall. “Sir, can we discuss a few things later on? I received a letter from Mr Lovegood, concerning the stuff we'd talked about.” Trying not to give away too much, as Harry suspected Dumbledore had an ear in every faculty-member beyond Snape, he tried to keep it vague. “Of course, Harry. After dinner, wait for me in the Entrance Hall, by the statue of Architect and we'll go to my quarters together. I'll bring you up to the Tower afterwards.” Nodding that it was fine, Harry returned back to his seat and his friends.

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“I must say, Severus, that I hadn't expected you to treat Mr Potter so civilly.” Minerva said, watching the boy walk away from them. Snape cleared his nose with a loud sniff, returning to the food on his plate. “Why-ever not, Minerva? I have been looking over the boy for more than a month now – how else would you expect me to treat the boy?” Minerva gave a small laugh, enjoying her salmon in tomato-sauce in leisure. “Oh, Severus, you always go on about how much you loathe children. How could I expect you to do anything but loathe the boy?”

“I loathe thunderheads who do not heed my daily cautions when they are brewing, Minerva – that does not mean I loathe all children. Draco is a perfectly fine child, as is Harry. They take my warnings seriously and listen when I need them to.” Snape explained, regarding the piece of boiled potato in his fork with intense scrutiny. “It is cases such as the Longbottom boy I can not stand. The foolish child managed to melt his cauldron when they were making a Cure-For-Boils earlier today. He was covered in boils, head to toe, and they advanced rather aggressively and quickly into ruptured pustules. I had to sent him off to Poppy to get treated, with another student – while I cleaned and neutralized the mess they left behind. I sometimes wish I could switch places with Binns – what I would not give for a class full of sleeping children that can't blow themselves up...”

Minerva nodded along, knowing all too well what he meant. “I understand your grief, Severus. It is quite the same in my advanced classes. How often they want to show off and end up Transfiguring their objects in semi-eldritch abominations that either cause damage or lasting trauma.” Severus gave a small laugh at that. “Oh, I remember, Minerva. Wasn't it you that made a habit, seven years ago, of keeping the worst Transfigurations in a cage to show how not to perform your lessons? I recall it was a particularly bad year, with lots of first-years that had no inclination of talent towards Transfiguration. Incidentally, wasn't that also the year that braggart Lockhart published his third book?”

Minerva shuddered, almost gagging in response. “Oh mercy, Severus – don't remind me. All those students trying to emulate that peacock's claim that he managed to Transfigure a Hag into a Veela, and so saved the town. Oh, those poor mice – I felt really bad about keeping them like that, but it had to be done, Severus. Otherwise, they would've done worse, I assure you.” Severus nodded, he could all too easily imagine that. “Indeed. I have the same problem with OWL-students trying to brew Felix Felicis, every year again, thinking they have got the skill to circumvent the six-month brewing process without ill effect. Last time a student did it, Poppy had to sent them over to Saint-Mungo's – poor child is still there, last I heard.” Severus shook his head sadly – it had been a student with quite some promise. They might've become a Potion Master by now, hadn't they...
fooled around with the notoriously difficult potion.

“Hmmm, dreadful business that. I bring it up to Albus, every year again, but never does he see the need to regulate the way students can perform their practical lessons outside of the hours or classrooms. Certainly, if he did, Poppy would have much more free time – and we would have less worries to deal with each year ...” Minerva said, shaking her head, cleaning the last sauce of her plate using a piece of bread. Taking out the pocket-watch whose twin he'd given to Harry, Severus checked the time. “I best be going down – I have to prepare the next lesson. It's a double class, so I have given them the Wiggenweld Potion to brew. With almost ninety students, I can't chose potions that have too great a difficulty-rating, unfortunately.”

Watching Severus rise and walk away, casting a glance at the Potter boy – who gave a wave back, Minerva pondered how it had come to this. Albus had asked her to keep an eye on the two, citing concern about Harry's behaviour and Severus' trustworthiness, but nothing she had seen had given her similar concerns. They very much seemed just like a normal child and parent-via-adoption, trying to figure out their relationship and social dynamics. Maybe Albus was getting a bit on in his years, as the Daily Prophet had claimed, she thought with a sad frown.

After lunch came Herbology, taught by Professor Sprout in Greenhouse One. She began by calling down every name on her list, as it was a joint-class with the first-years of Ravenclaw. She explained what the class entailed, the sort of spells they would learn or revise, which plants they'd deal with, etcetera… She gave out a summary of all they would cover this year, encouraging them to study all these items in their free time as to prepare for the actual lessons. She then began by making the children pair up together, and test their grasp of the spell Incendio, which could prove useful when dealing with aggressive flora of all kinds.

Most seemed to get the hang of the spell quickly, though a few struggled. Seamus managed to create, not a thin wisp of fire, but a rather abrupt fiery explosion – which left him without eyebrows and a face covered in soot. Luckily that appeared to be all the damage he had done. Neville, too, struggled, but professor Sprout's gentle voice and patient help managed to get him to cast a semi-successfully Incendio before the lessons was over – which made Neville beam in pride at the unusually fast success.

Hermione got it almost immediately, helping Ron afterwards. The same was true for Harry, who then helped one of his classmates, an Indian girl called Parvati. She was glad with his help and soon managed to cast a frail Incendio – it wasn't much, but she was still pleased, going off to her twin-sister to help her afterwards. Less than a quarter of the class still hadn't managed the spell by the end of the lesson, which professor Sprout warned wasn't unusual. Rather, she was surprised by the amount of students who had managed to pull it off at all – it usually took two or three lessons.

After that came two periods of Transfiguration – and it was a gruelling class. Professor McGonagall was as strict and keen as Snape had been, and she had about as much patience for lolly-gagging as he had. She called names, ticked off those present, gave a sad humph at Neville's absence (who had returned to Madame Pomfrey for a check-up on the boils he still had) and began her lesson. “Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts. Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned.” And to aid to her warnings, she flicked on a projector in the back off the class and began showing a litany of horrific accidents that happened when people abused Transfiguration or didn't pay attention. Suffice it to say that, afterwards, everyone was bound to pay all the attention they could!
She then changed her desk, into a pig and back, demonstrating the level of control and prowess she would strive for over their six years – while noting that they wouldn't quite be doing that yet. She gave each student in the class a match and instructed them in how to turn it into a needle. By the end of the lesson, less than ten students had managed to exact a change in their matches – usually only in colour or general shape. Only Harry and Hermione had managed to turn their match halfway into a needle, making it pointy, sharp and looking metallic. Ron and several others had managed to affect more subtle changes, which were still noticeable to McGonagall.

And quick as that, as fast as the day begun, it ended. Stepping out of the Transfiguration classroom, into the Transfiguration Courtyard, Harry breathed in the fresh air, looking up into the sky where the sun was no longer visible from their position. Clouds gave the evening an overcast gloom, lit from above by the low setting sun. Looking over at Hermione when she called his name, he followed their group towards the Great Hall. As they entered, Harry noted that not all students were present yet. Apparently some took the opportunity to eat their dinner near the lake, on a lawn that wasn't as steep as the rest of the terrain bordering the lake.

The Headmaster wasn't present either, probably up in his office doing god-knows-what. But Severus was there, as well as all the other professors. Even Filch was here, with his cat Mrs Norris on a small stool besides him. And it suddenly struck Harry that the Fat Lady had mentioned Filch was responsible for maintaining and repairing the paintings. Harry had managed to locate the painting of Lord Abraxas, but his discussion with Ron had prevented him from sharing the message that the Lady had given. Perhaps he could ask Filch if he could help with the painting? It couldn't hurt to ingratiate himself with the custodian.

Harry spent most of dinner observing the teachers present, summing up in his mind all he had learned so far. Madame Pince was the Head Librarian – she had several assistants, usually students from the seventh year, but also a few full-time employees. Harry hadn't heard more about those, though. And Madame Pomfrey was the Matron – she too had a few assistants, also seventh years.

Professor Sprout was amicable enough, as you could expect from the Head of House Hufflepuff – she was kind and patient, tended to the greenhouses with help from Hagrid, Filch and several sixth- and seventh-year students. Her schedule was filled with maintaining the greenhouses and the ornamental garden behind the school year-round. But, from what Harry saw, she did her work splendidly.

Binns wasn't present – not odd, considering ghosts didn't need to eat and rumour had it that Binns didn't know where he was half the time. And Harry had heard from Percy that, while the other ghosts went through walls because it was convenient, everybody was pretty sure that Binns went through walls because he could only remember the doors that used to be there. And, considering Percy's claim that there were doors that only appeared on certain days or only opened when you 'tickled' them, Harry could very well believe that.

Quirrell was a weird one. The Ravenclaws had said that his lessons, while informative, were kind of a joke. He stuttered, constantly lost his train of thought, and was easily intimidated by sudden questions that had nothing to do with the immediate subject of his monologues towards the students. He had shown them a spell or two, as a demonstration, and though he said they would be going through an obstacle-course of sorts for each spell they learned, Harry very much doubted it. What was this – a video-game?

And then the headache struck again, as Harry was looking at Quirrell and the teacher turned to talk with Severus. The moment Harry gazed at the back of Quirrell's turban, the ache flooded in and triggered a memory, of a dream. A faceless voice and a voiceless face – was Quirrell in it? He couldn't be sure, but the extent of the dream lay just behind his conscious memory, teasing its
importance from just below his subconsciousness. And then another image struck Harry – the stone with a hole in it. He had shown it to Hermione, and she had recited some legend about hag-stones – stones that revealed the truth or hidden secrets when you viewed the world through the hole. He took out the stone, palmed it for a few minutes, waiting for Quirrell to look away and nobody to pay attention to him.

And that last wasn't easy – people constantly ogled him, as if he were a curiosity in a zoo. But, after about twenty minutes, Harry saw his chance. Quickly lifting the stone, he gazed at Quirrell through it – only to nearly drop it when another face gazed back at Harry from where Quirrell sat! It was a horrible face – with red eyes, and a nose like a snake, with only slits to identify it. Pale as snow, with blue veins just beneath the marble translucent skin. What was that face? And what did it have to do with Quirrell? Harry returned his attention to his plate of food, keeping his questions in mind for when he'd be talking with Severus. Something wasn't right here!

With difficulty, Harry managed to 'forget' the Quirrell/Two-face problem for a while, doing his best to enjoy the plentiful diner. And when the clock tolled, the plates vanished and all the students slowly began to rise, with some groups staying behind for stuff such as the Chess Club, Harry waited until he saw Severus rise as well. Going to the Entrance Hall, he waited for Severus to join him. Giving a nod, Harry fell in line besides him and they went on their merry way down into the dungeons. Instead of going over the Viaduct, Snape led them through a small nondescript door on the bottom of the Grand Staircase, at a lower level than either the Great Hall or the Entrance Hall Vestibule.

“Usually, this does not connect with the Dungeons proper – only Slytherins and professors can use this route. And you, of course, Heir Slytherin.” Severus explained, rolling his eyes as Harry's chuckle merely confirmed the Heir-comment. “You think it's funny, Evans? If someone guessed it and manages to prove that you are both the Heir and the Herald, you might have to face being ostracised by your peers. My young serpents, unfortunately, already are getting used to that.”

“What do you mean? “ Harry asked – this was the first he heard of Slytherins facing such behaviour. Severus gave a deep sigh, pinching his nose as they made a series of turns in the small corridors they were traversing. Left, Right, Right again, back left, skip four junctions, turn right down a stairs, … It was quite impossible to keep track off and Harry wondered if that maybe was the point of it all.

“Slytherins get the worst reputation of all Houses – I am most certain you have already experienced the comments directed unto us?” Snape asked, to which Harry nodded. “Yeah, Ron seems annoyingly biased – as if Slytherin is synonymous to evil and immorality.” Snape nodded his head, eyes closed as they rounded another corner, passing through bare-hewn rock.

“Yes – it is unfortunately the norm nowadays. When I was a student here, it was nowhere nearly as bad. After the Dark Lord's rise and fall, the pressure from the Light Families to denounce Slytherin as all things that were wrong with the Dark Lord's ideologies had intensified. And though Albus claims he wishes for more inter-House unity, he does nothing to stop such biased prejudices from being enforced on children by either their parents or the Ministry's guidelines.”

Yes, Harry could see that – it showed in how Slytherins were badmouthed by almost all the older students in Gryffindor. Granted, it had been only a day – but each older student had made at least one disparaging remark about Slytherins. And such behaviour of Albus or the Ministry would also not surprise Harry – both had been more than complicit in ignoring the abuse the Dursleys had dealt Harry. And he would never forget that. It was a rule that Aunt Petunia, unknowingly, had taught him – don't waste your anger, but hold on to it.
And she was good at holding unto it, once unleashing it on Harry, one summer's evening, by spanking him when he was six, after he had accidentally broken a vase. Dudley had been taxing her patience that day, as had Vernon's behaviour due to a deal at his work that had fallen through. And from Dudley and Vernon, through Petunia, all that anger and dissatisfaction found itself delivered unto Harry. He hadn't been able to sit down on a chair without wincing in pain for a whole week. And Harry had held his anger then – letting it out, piece by piece, throughout the next year by sabotaging Petunia's efforts to win that damnable garden-prize. So sad how all her flowers had been over-fertilized, or accidentally mowed – or crawling with bugs. So sad, Harry thought with a satisfied smirk, revelling a tiny bit in that particular memory.

“I have been trying to make Ron see how wrong he is, but it's like he can't do anything but prattle off whatever his parents and older brothers say to him.” Snape nodded, as they emerged in a part of the Dungeons that Harry recognized. They weren't far from the painting of the snake. “Mr Weasley is the youngest son in a household of six sons and one daughter. Ronald might have had his mother's undivided attention for but a few years, before Ginevra was born. After that, she'd have been doting on her only daughter. I remember that Molly always wanted a daughter, so the boy probably feels like he's a cast-off, just another number in a series. And, Heavens forbid, I can not fault the boy for feeling so. Draco already is a tremendously insecure child, if I have to take a reference-point – so I can imagine that it would be doubly so for Ronald.”

“So it might be best to remain patient with him, Evans – show him that he is one-of-a-kind, someone unique. It will reassure him and help him to perceive himself as not another son of Molly, but as truly himself. Considering how all his elder brothers outside of the twins have all become Prefects, with William and Charles even becoming Head Boys in their respective years, would you consider his jealousy unfounded? He is the youngest, all the elder brothers have accomplished more and thus gotten more attention, and his younger sister is more beloved than he is, in his own point of view.” Snape drawled, with great care hidden beyond those coldly spoken words. And Harry could see it. He could recognize it in how he had personally envied Dudley so very often.

They came to a rest before an unassuming section of wall – which swiftly became less unassuming when Snape spoke in a clear voice. “The Tides are changing.” Instantly, without warning or even seeing it happen, the wall was replaced by an empty doorway which led down. Following Severus, they entered into a large spacious chamber which had several high arched columns and vaulted ceilings. Towards the far back were high Gothic windows which gave a clear unobstructed view of the lake's depths. Long strands of seaweed lazily waved about, with small shoals of fish darting by occasionally. An enormous hearth, decoratively engraved and looking quite ostentatious, was centred in the left wall, with a roaring fire warming up the room. Round lamps of green glass were suspended from the ceiling in elaborate chandelier-type arrangements.

Harry let his eyes roam, about the walls with carved relief, with images of serpents and monsters decorating the cold green-hued stone. High above, precious pieces of coloured marble, terracotta, and glass, made up beautiful mosaics which were of exquisite quality and beauty. They seemed almost lifelike – and the shimmering reflection of light against the water behind the windows illuminated the mosaics in such a way that it seemed like they were moving and alive!

Carved chairs and sofas were placed across the room, with students occupying them. Immediately, Harry could notice a hierarchy in how they were seated. Older students were seated around the hearth, with younger students between the hearth and the doorway, and the youngest all the way in the back nearest the windows. As they entered, a few heads looked up to see who it was, at first disinterestedly – but when they recognized Severus and Harry, that quickly became open curiosity. Snape didn't have to do anything – his presence seemed to arch from person to person, as they all snapped to attention once they heard and realized Snape had entered.
“Good evening, Slytherin. Normally, I perform the welcome-speech at the end of your first day here, but recent circumstances necessitated a timely change of plans. As you all know by now, for the gossip-mills have surely been turning overtime like never before, a new Herald was chosen for Slytherin yestereve – as well has the Heir of Slytherin returned to our school at last, after many many years of absence. Almost six decades have passed when last an Heir stepped through these doors – a new Heir stands before you here now. How this came to be is no matter to be discussed today – for our Founder Salazar has never been wrong in identifying his Heirs from the riff-raff that passes by his eyes in these halls over the countless years. Then, as you first-years all surely know by now, we Slytherins are despised by the other Houses – seen as the cause of all misfortune and ill deeds. As such, we must always – always! - form a unified front before them. We stay in groups, always accompany our friends, defend our House!” Snape called out clearly, clasping a hand on Harry's shoulder.

“And that also includes the Herald, no matter the House they are actually Sorted in. And so too the Heir, again no matter their heritage or actual House-placement. As such, you will always defend your Heir and Herald as if they too were a Slytherin – for they are a Slytherin. Our Heir's ambitions are no less great, his cunning no less able to be honed to a sharp edge, his vision no less grand. As such, when young Harry resides down here, you shall address him not as Potter – or as the Boy-Who-Lived, but as Evans. A name of his own choosing, which he thinks will show his ambitions more clearly in the end. You all know the importance of names, title, heritage. So I shall leave it to young Evans to introduce himself.”

Harry had realized immediately what Snape wanted him to do, knew how he could play along. So stepping forward, harry tried his best to speak loud and clear, just like Severus. He cleared his throat, holding his wand at the ready for when it was needed. He had a small inkling how to do this, how to impress a Slytherin, by now.

My name is Harold Jameson Philemon Peverell-Potter. Legitimate Heir of Houses Peverell, Gaunt, Fleamont, and Potter. The noble Goblins of Gringotts call me Master Loucetios, Lord of Lightning, whose Mark I bear by virtue of Fate. I am your Heir and your Herald, last-known descendant of Salazar Slytherin himself, greatest of the Founders Four of Hogwarts.” Harry raised his wand, pointing at the mosaics of serpents laid into the ceiling. :OBEY, SERPENTS OF STONE AND CLAY, OBEY THE CLAYSHAPER, THE SPEAKER, SALAZAR'S HEIR!:

Every student let out a gasp at hearing Harry's sibilant speech and some let all decorum fail when the grinding of stone over stone drew their attention to the ceiling – where they saw the serpents raise out of the mosaic and slither down the walls, gathering around Harry. Slowly, the stone snakes rose around Harry, facing outwards towards the other students. Opening their mouths, displaying terracotta fangs and showing their reflective green eyes, they stood stock-still, awaiting Harry's next command. Leaving a moment of dramatic pause, Harry watched their reactions closely.

“Evans,” Snape whispered, bending a bit to Harry's height. “Though I admire the showmanship, I would have appreciated knowing that you were a Parselmouth.” Harry nodded, whispering back. “I wanted to tell you, but the opportunity was there and you can not deny it worked...” Draco, knowing more than the others, recomposed himself the quickest, stepping out of the groups of students, Crabbe and Goyle following him wordlessly. He pushed past a few older students, knocking them out of their reverie as he proceeded. Harry, meanwhile, kept his attention on Theodore Nott – he had kept an eye on the boy during yesterday's Sorting Ceremony. He really ought to figure out a way to ingratiate himself with the boy, Harry mused...

Kneeling before Harry now, Draco took out his wand, presenting it to his Herald. “I pledge myself, Heir Slytherin, Lord Peverell-Potter, to you. My blood to your blood -” Snape startled, trying to
interrupt Draco's pledge. “Draco, no! You -” Harry held back the Potion Master, looking at his eyes for a moment and sharing an unspoken message.

Placing the end of his wand upon Draco's wand, Harry spoke clearly. “Rise, Heir Malfoy, Draco. You needn't pledge yourself to me – already we are bound. You are an ally, an equal - not a Vazal.” And that sentence sent a shock-wave through the Slytherin Common Room, with its direct implications and unspoken command. In a single sentence, Harry had elevated Draco to the same kind of position as the Herald was. Now even the sixth-years would have to consider Draco’s words – if not by loyalty to their House, then by ambition to rise in life, as Harry knew they all probably wanted to some degree.

It seemed that all the students finally found their voice again, hustling towards Harry – only to be rebuffed by the angry hisses of the stone serpents circling him. :CALM, THE YOUNG ARE NO THREAT, FRIENDS.: Slowly the serpents slithered away, disappearing in the dark corners of the Common Room, only the gleam of light in their glass eyes betraying their presences therein.

“Draco, please – I can not have this information leave the Common Room. Can you ensure an Oath of Secrecy from everyone?” Harry asked the blonde besides him, suddenly overwhelmed by the clamour of the curious children all about him and trying very much not to buckle his legs – this ostentatious presentation took a lot out of him. Draco nodded, hands subtly supporting Harry by the arm as Snape guided the raven-haired Heir through the throng of students, both trying to downplay Harry's exhaustion so he didn't seem weak. Harry would have to prove his strength numerous times in the next year, Draco knew – it was how Slytherin politics asserted permanence of dominance. After all, what would be the point of following someone who couldn't stay a step ahead or overpower their opponents by cunning or brute force?

Snape gently helped Harry through another doorway, somewhere to the right of the Common Room, just as he heard Draco call everyone to attention. Severus was certain that his godson would be able to extract an Oath out of everyone. After all, Slytherins had to be an united front. Harry vaguely recognized the room they were walking through as a Study Room and Library, not too dissimilar to the ones they had in Gryffindor Tower – though all in decidedly green and silver colours, tones and hues. How could they endure all the green, Harry pondered with mild unease – he was pretty sure he'd get sick if he was staring at green and silver all day in these copious amounts.

Entering into his personal study, which had been connected to the Common Room on Severus' command years ago, he helped Harry into a comfortable chair. “Do you wish to drink something, Evans?” Harry nodded, croaking that tea sounded good. A pot of tea was quickly provided, together with a pair of cups, milk and sugar. They'd settled in comfortably for two minutes when Draco entered the room, saying all the Slytherins had sworn an Oath of Secrecy. “Nothing of what was revealed here tonight will leave the Dungeons. If anyone tries to speak of it, it will make them start talking about something unrelated. It might be a bit obvious, but it will be efficient. And yes, Severus, before you ask, I also included a safeguard in writing down the information or otherwise sharing it by either confirming or denying certain things.”

Severus nodded, pleased to hear that Draco had considered most of the angles, though not all of them. Unless Draco provided him the exact phrasing of the Oath, he could not be sure it was foolproof. Oaths hardly ever were, after all... “I want a copy of your memory of the Oath, Draco, so I can review the phrasing – you know why.” Severus drawled, Draco nodding in agreement. Bidding Draco to be seated, Severus Summoned a third cup, filling it with the tea. “Now, Evans, what was it you wished to discuss before you, oh so eloquently, enthralled the whole of House Slytherin?” he asked it with an amused grin, eyes twinkling almost alike Dumbledore's.
“It's professor Quirrell, sir. I was given a gift by the giant squid, yesterday,” Harry showed the hag-stone, handing it over to Severus for inspection. “And Hermione managed to tell me what it was and what it is supposed to do.” Severus held the stone before his eye, looking through it at various things in the office – as if testing its power. “Every time I look at professor Quirrell, I get a headache – and during dinner today, the headache triggered a memory of a dream. I think I was dreaming about professor Quirrell, as if I was looking through his eyes – but it weren't his eyes, not really. So I looked at him through the stone and I saw a different face superimposed over his, sir.”

Harry gave a brief description of the face, which had the effect of turning Severus paler than usually and Draco almost dropped his cup. Thoroughly confused by their reactions, Harry asked what was wrong. “What you just described, Evans, in frighteningly correct detail, is the visage of the Dark Lord.” Severus explained, putting down his cup and wiping a hand across his forehead, where a sheen of sweat had begun to form.

Harry really didn't know how to respond to that – had he been wrong perhaps, when he saw the face? Was it not real, just a flight of fancy? Severus seemed to weigh those same options, having a thoughtful expression upon his face. Draco looked white as a sheet, which was quite an accomplishment considering how pale he usually looked – which idly reminded Harry about having read that having a pale skin was a typically noble trait in European countries, because it denoted they didn't spend much time out in the sun without protective clothing and such. In other words, that they were too good to work the fields for their pay. Why did that idle thought distract him so, Harry pondered?

His attention was drawn back by Severus, who had begun thinking aloud. “What we know, for certain, is limited at this moment. I know that Quirinus used to be the teacher for Muggle Studies, until two years ago. He took a year's Sabbatical, travelling across Eastern Europe – rumour has it to study Vampires and their nosferal ilk. So that would place his travels centred around the Bulgaria-Romania region. If the rumours bear true, of course. As for all else, I can not definitively say if Quirinus has changed. Certainly the turban is new – it was not something he usually wore before his sabbatical. But that proves naught – fashion fads come and go, even if some stay around longer than they should in our little community.”

Sighing, Severus pinched his nose. “For now, I shall make subtle inquiries wherever I can. As for you two, do not attract attention. If the Hag-stone's warning bears any literal truth, Quirinus Quirrell might very well be the most dangerous man in this Castle. Share this information with no one else – at least no one that doesn't know Occlumency and how to shield their minds. The Dark Lord, after all, was notorious for finding delight in cracking through even the most accomplished Occlumens' shields, often leaving them with naught but a hollow broken mind.” Harry and Draco nodded in unison.

“Draco, I have taught you the basics of Occlumency before, as did I teach you, Evans. From now on, you will spend every Wednesday and Saturday here after dinner, learning the more advanced techniques. Both of you have a good grasp of erecting mental barriers, either by sheer will or by utilizing your extensive imagination. We will strengthen those defences first, before I will teach you how to offensively oppose any who would force an intrusion upon your mind. For now, use the moments before your sleep to meditate and further strengthen the defences you already have, using the methods I have taught you. Understood?” They nodded in unison, eyes focussed and clear.

“Well,” Severus said, having cleared all that and having set a few goals for all of them. “How was the first day, Draco, Harry? I trust you had no issues of sorts?” Severus sipped his tea, waiting for them to answer. Draco shook his head. “Not really. We had a few pranks played on us, by those devious Weasley-twins. But nothing serious.” Severus nodded. “Hmmm, quite – those two
menaces at least have the sense not to harm anyone in their pranks. Count your blessings, Draco – Hogwarts has a history of pranksters quite literally not caring if their targets lived through their pranks...” Harry could sense the personal vendetta lurking beneath those words – probably in regards to James, his father. Snape still had not told what it had been that James had done to him...

“Same here, really. Just a lot of explanations about what to expect and such. I liked Potions, though – it was nice to focus on something concrete, even if it involved a lot of waiting for the potion to turn certain colours. Is Neville gonna be okay?” Harry asked, still concerned about the Longbottom Heir – those boils had looked quite severe and painful. Severus shook his head.

“The Longbottom boy will live. Poppy has deftly undone the damage – it is, unfortunately, almost routine for her now. Each year, I am forced by Ministry standards to use the Cure-For-Boils as a measuring-standard to determine the inherent proficiency of my students in the art of Potion-making. It is a sensitive brew, with quite explosive effects that are easily treated. They consider it a good 'lesson' if a student messes it up – though what the lessons is supposed to teach, I fail to see. Perhaps it is merely a way of subtle torture on me, considering they never managed to prosecute me as a Death-eater, due to Albus' influence. Crouch Sr. never quite forgave Albus for that...”

“Who is Crouch Sr?” Harry asked, head cocked as he enjoyed the tea. Snape gave a deep sigh, refilling his cup to the brim. “Crouch was the Head-Prosecutor during the Dark Trials after the Dark Lord's fall. He is personally responsible for the capture and sentencing of over three-quarters of all the Death-eaters imprisoned in Azkaban, with the help of Alastor Moody. He was quite zealous in his chasing down suspected Death-eaters, even going so far as to imprison his own son.” Harry gave a gasp. “Why?”

“Crouch Jr. turned out to be a spy within the Ministry, feeding the Dark Lord sensitive information of the highest order. Junior was an Unspeakable, a Ministry-employee who works in the Department of Mysteries. All they see, do and research is classified in the highest degree – often even to the Minister himself. Apparently, some clever wording of an Oath and circumventing of the Unbreakable Vow, allowed young Crouch to feed the Dark Lord with select bits of knowledge and information. It might be the main reason that He managed to evade the Ministry for so long, and was able to circumvent their protections.”

Harry nodded – he really needed to know more about this period, much more. Especially since most of it, in some way, was either because of his defeating Voldemort – or because it would affect him soon enough... “Have we heard more yet about Black's trial?” Harry asked, to which Severus merely nodded his head. “Madame Bones is still investigating the matter – it is on the back-burner due to the investigations around Albus, Gringotts, and the Wizengamot. I fear it might be months before we shall hear more on that matter.” Harry hummed, not liking the lack of resources on that matter. “We could ask my father.” Draco piped in, holding his cup in his hands, warming them with the hot tea. “He has connections in almost all the departments – he could start a subtle inquiry, via his contacts.”

Severus nodded. “That could work in our favour, Draco. Mind you, it is only to discover the particulars of Black's trial. Usually, such records are free to the public – but the Dark Trials have all remained classified, for now. It might cost your father a few favours – and I know Lucius rather likes to collect his favours instead of spending them...” Severus gave a smile, which was one of fondness and pride. Harry felt a bit slighted when he realized it was aimed towards Draco, not him – and why was he feeling jealous about that? Harry was confused about that – but shook his head to clear it of irrelevant thoughts. They needed to stay on track.

“Could Madame Longbottom influence the research too? She is bound to have friends and acquaintances everywhere, with her years and knowledge, right?” Harry queried, curious to see if
she could help as well. “She might, but if we wish to employ her aid, we need to carefully word our request to her. She may be getting on in her years, but with age comes wisdom – and with wisdom comes shrewdness and astute deduction. No doubt she shall eventually figure out what exactly we are asking – and I shall not put it beneath her to figure out what we wish to do from there onwards. Augusta Longbottom earned her years wisely, by not being stupid – or rash in her actions. Being overly cautious is an impossibility in her book. I wager she and old Mad-Eye get along great.” Snape sneered at the last name, disgust evident in his thoughts of the mystery person.

Draco shuddered, clutching his cup a bit tighter. “Father used to tell me stories about him – says Mad-Eye didn't hesitate to kill suspected Death-eaters during raids, when You-Know-Who was still around.” Severus nodded, putting aside his empty cup and flourishing his wand towards the hearth in the corner. Instantly, a warm fire had begun to heat up the cold room. Harry hadn't even noticed it had gotten colder down here. “Side-effect of living in the Dungeons, Evans.” Snape drawled, seeing the boy shiver. “And, indeed, Draco, Moody never hesitated. Of course, it was a time that neither side hesitated. But, I must admit, that the Ministry got quite overzealous in trying to exert some form of control over the whole situation. They made almost as many innocent victims, I suspect, as the Death-eaters and the Dark Lord over those long years...”

“I'm confused – was Mad-Eye, Moody, an Auror or a Death-eater?” Harry asked, with great confusion in his eyes. A mad man, running around, killing innocent people because he couldn't bother to ask whose side they were one? Sounded more like a serial-killer than a officer of the law in his eyes. Draco wanted to answer, but was held up by Severus, who raised his hand. “Mad-Eye Moody was, is, a celebrated Auror. During the War, he was renowned for weeding out, in his words, many Death-eaters and sympathizers of the Dark Lord. His means for doing so, however, have remained controversial. The last year was kick-started by a Ministerial Decree, issuing all Aurors free use of the Unforgivable Curses without prior consent by the Ministry. It was a last-ditch effort to cull the Dark Lord's influence – and it began the bloodiest period in the War.”

Severus sank into the chair, closing his eyes in exhaustion as he remembered those months. Oh, how he remembered the daily horror of finding old friends executed by an Auror – or Kissed by a Dementor as sentenced by the Ministry. When whole families were rounded up, regardless of creed, all because one of their members was branded a Death-eater or Sympathizer... Severus began, with pain in his heart and sadness over the memories.

“The Decree was issued in March 1981, declaring all Aurors had legal standing to employ the Unforgivables against any suspected Death-eaters. It was a direct response to the systematic extermination of the Order of the Phoenix, which was the largest non-Ministry opposition against the Dark Lord. What it meant, in practice, was that an Auror no longer had to petition for permission to use the Killing Curse, the Imperius Curse, of the Cruciatius Curse. Rather, any Auror was deemed fit to determine of the situation called for the use of any of the Three.”

“Long story short, Mad-Eye Moody, publicly endorsed by Crouch Sr. and a member of the Order, began to use the Three almost indiscriminately. If he suspected someone of knowing anything that could root out a Death-eater, he would torture them using the Cruciatius Curse – until he was certain he got what he needed to know or was convinced they knew nothing. Though by no means as horrible in his usage of the curse as some Death-eaters had been, such as Bellatrix L'Estrange – who is responsible for Neville's living with his grandmother, Mad-Eye still left deep scars in all of his suspects, both physically and mentally...”

“If he needed a spy, he would use the Imperius curse on a family-member of a known Death-eater and command them to infiltrate the ranks. The fact that less than ten percent of those he sent in survived the next month, never seemed to bother him. I seem to recall that his most infamous quote regarding that was that 'they were simply collateral damage'. In other words, a necessary sacrifice
“And when there was no doubt in Moody's mind that someone was a Death-eater or Sympathizer, and he confronted them and they tried to flee, he would strike them down with the Killing Curse without hesitation. Indeed, Alastor Moody, had laws been upheld, should be serving a dozen lifetime-sentences in Azkaban for his willingness to use the Three Unforgivables so liberally...”

Severus waved away some imaginary speck, clearly wishing to change subject ASAP. “But I think we have been at it long enough, Evans. I believe that it is time I return you to the Tower. We can talk again tomorrow, so write down any and all questions you figure out as you go along your day. Draco, you too might best return.” Draco nodded along, quickly draining the last of his tea. Harry set his empty cup down, careful not to chip the fine china. Rising with Severus, they waited for Draco. Opening the door, Draco stepped out first – followed by Harry and Severus.

They found several Slytherins still seated nearby, and they perked up when they noticed Draco’s departure. Standing up, two came up to them. “Professor, Heir Slytherin.” A girl spoke, bowing politely and with great deference towards Harry. “Is there anything that the Heir wants us to do? We're all bound to follow the Herald's vision, as members of the Duelling Club. Well met, Heir Slytherin.”

Harry nodded, bowing back slightly less deep than they had. “Well met, Duellist.” The girl gave a small smile, evidently happy with Harry's grasp of the etiquette. “Is there anything we, the Vipers, can do for you, Herald?” Harry pondered a moment, looking at Severus but for a moment – before he spoke. “You all know professor Quirrell?” Four heads nodded – because, duh, who wouldn't know him by now, Harry thought with a sour tone. “I would appreciate it if you could keep an eye on the professor when you can. Figure out his after-lesson schedule, but only from a distance. Do not give him any reason to suppose you're following him. So stick to observing him whenever you come across him after and between lessons. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Herald – Heir. Sorry, which title has your preference?” She asked with a shy grimace, to which Harry gave a small chuckle. “Heir and Herald would both be too obvious, I think. If you have to address me in conversation outside of the Common Room, refer to me as Loucetios – or Morganson. You decide. But outside of the Common Room, I think it best you contact me through Draco. I am already friends with him, was before we arrived here – so people won't think about it twice when we talk. I don't want to draw any attention by all of you suddenly flocking to me.” She gave a nod. “And when I'm here, I am Evans – and not anyone else.”

“Understood, Evans. I shall communicate it to everybody else. I must warn you, however, that even with the Oath of Secrecy, some shall try to undermine you by exposing you outside of our House. There are a few factions within the House of Slytherin, and some think of you bitterly, considering your early history, Evans...” Harry nodded – he had expected as much. It was not something he could quickly change, especially not right now. In a sense, he pondered, he was setting up the board with his pieces so he could start playing it proper. Now the only real question was if he had picked white – or black...

As he walked towards the exit, Harry turned to one of the serpents hidden in the shadows. :PROTECT THE CHILDREN, FRIENDS, FOR THEY ALL SPEAK FOR OUR FOUNDER AND ME: Nothing was answered, only did various pairs of eyes flash in understanding and vanish in the dark shadows. A grinding of stone on stone was all the answer Harry could hear, as he left the Slytherin Dungeon with Snape.

Albus was troubled. He had taken it up to himself to check in on the investigation towards the
Dursleys. He had hoped that the boy had been exaggerating, but unfortunately he was proven wrong. Psychiatric evaluations of Dudley Dursley and Petunia Evans gave evidence that Vernon Dursley had been a veritable tyrant lording over his household. Abuse towards his wife, prior to Harry's arrival, with implications that Dudley had been sexually abused as a toddler too. This had gone past parental discipline a decade ago, even before Albus had delivered Harry to their doorstep. And by doing that, it seemed, Albus had indirectly aimed Vernon's heinous deeds away from his family and towards Harry...

“Ariana, what have I done?” He mumbled, staring into the fire as the weight of his actions came crashing down on him in full force. “I can only hope that I can stop another monster from being born now...” And there, all alone in his tower high above the Castle, Albus cried silent tears, for the first time in forty years, as the thought of what was necessary – for the Greater Good...

In the depths of the Forbidden Forest, as midnight grew cold in passing, a lone Centaur watched with terror as a hooded horror sprang upon its prey and felled a beast of beauty. And as the Centaur whinnied, galloping off to alert its herd, an uncaring creature latched its mouth around an open throat and began to drink greedily at the silver life-water that bled out of it – and, in doing so, cursed its life all the more for it.

And high above, sensing the death, an Augery gave a deep keening cry to send off a noble soul - and fat drops of rain began to fall upon the forest's dry ground, casting those wondrous woods in a fog of mourning...

… And a boy, turned eleven two months prior, awoke with a scream from a nightmare-horror seen but unremembered, waking his dorm-mates with his high-pitched voice of terror.

Chapter End Notes

Cure-For-Boils

Ingredients
6 Snake Fangs
2 Pungous Onions
4 Horned Slugs
2 Porcupine Quills

Base Potion
3 Measures Flobberworm Mucus
8 Dried Nettles
1 Ginger Root
2 Pickled Shrake Spines

Steps, using Base Potion
Crush 6 Snake Fangs, Divide in 4 equal Measures
Slice 2 Pungous Onions, Very Fine.
Boil Base Potion, then Add 4 Measures of Crushed Snake Fang
Wait for Potion to turn Red, usually 10 Seconds at 210°C, or 5 Minutes at 100°C
When Potion is Red, Wave Wand over Cauldron
Wait for Potion to turn Green, usually 40 Minutes 210°C, 33-45 Minutes at 100°C
When Potion is Green, Add 4 Stewed Horned Slugs, one per one
Wait for Potion to turn Pink, then Remove Cauldron from Fire
When Cauldron Removed from Fire, Add 2 Porcupine Quills
Stir 5 times, Clockwise
Wait for Potion to turn Red, Wave Wand over Cauldron
Remove Cauldron from Fire, then Stopper your Cure-For-Boils

I hope my description of the Slytherin common room did it proud :D I'm gonna introduce all the common rooms eventually - and certain plot-stuff will be expanding upon them even further down the line ;)

I really want to expand on Albus' thoughts and logic in chapters such as these. He's not an infallible man and he was done a great injustice in the books by portrayed as infallible for the first five books, tbh. And considering how Arianna's death was definitely the catalyst to dictate his adult life, it's a shame she was never more fully explored upon.
Chapter XXXI

Chapter Summary

Hagrid discusses recent events with Dumbledore, Harry discusses creature-heritage with Neville, and Flitwick discusses Magical Theory with his students.

Chapter Notes

CAUTION! This chapter discusses several philosophical theories that can be difficult to grasp if you have never read about them before, can't follow philosophical logic easily/readily, or have difficulty interpreting very abstract concepts. You are warned :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hagrid was none too pleased, as he ascended the stairs all the way up to the Headmaster's office. The Centaurs had been scared out of their mind, by something, last night. They had warned him not to enter the forest, as something was hunting down Unicorns to drink their blood. And in all his years at Hogwarts, tending the grounds and protecting the forest, Hagrid had never known the Centaurs to be so afeared as to keep even him out. And, loathe as Hagrid was to admit it, this was not something he could handle.

Facing the gargoyle and grunting the password, Hagrid squeezed himself through the tight spiral staircase, finally entering Dumbledore's office. “Dumbledoor, sir, I'm sorry ta disturb ya, but somethin 'orrible is goin' on in da Forbidden For'st, sir.” Dumbledore raised his head, looking at Hagrid with a puzzled expression, quite unsure what could warrant Hagrid bringing such a matter before him “Hagrid, my good man, sit, sit. Let's have some tea, okay, as you explain the situation?” Hagrid sat down, the chair creaking dangerously loud under his weight, as Dumbledore threw some powder in the hearth and called for a large pot of mint-tea. Returning to the desk, Dumbledore set himself down and began to talk with Hagrid.

“Now, Hagrid, in all the years you have lived here, you have only twice before asked for my help regarding matters in the Forbidden Forest. Once, because a Welsh Green had chosen it as her hibernation spot and began to torch parts of it, and the second time, because a Dementor had made its territorial hunting-grounds. Now, what is it now that deserves my attention?” Dumbledore locked eyes with Hagrid, a twinkle in them, and a grandfatherly smile aimed towards the giant.

“Well, sir Dumbledore, sir, somewhat's huntin' unicorns, sir. The Centaurs tol' me this moorn, sayin' they's seen it kill one an' drink its blood for a spell. They's never got this happenin' befoor, sir, which is what why they's come to me ta warn me, sir.” Dumbledore nodded his head, gravelly – he understood how rare attacks on Unicorns were, despite the valuable alchemical properties of their blood. The fact that those consciously harming or killing an Unicorn were cursed was the main reason – it led to a half-life, where even the smallest pleasure would turn to ash in their experiences. Food would taste bland, spirits would fail to alleviate worries, bodily pleasure would forever become a numb joy. Indeed, there was little advantage to be found in harming an Unicorn –
unless your life was already forfeit and its blood was the only way to sustain it. “Could it be him?” Albus idly mused, mind running with a dozen scenarios and possible suspects.

“That is a grave matter indeed, Hagrid, and I fear it might have everything to do with the treasure we have been tasked to safeguard this year. May I assume that you have told no one about your guardian-pet?” Dumbledore asked to Hagrid, who shook his head. “None knows, sir, I's made certain of that. We and the profess's is all who knows how to git past Fluffy, sir.” Hagrid was sure that nobody knew about Fluffy – or how to get past him, and Dumbledore agreed, for now. But the point of the whole course of challenges, of course, was to tempt Dumbledore's target – to spur it into action, to yearn for the prize at the end, and to train the boy into confronting evil at the end.

A tray of tea and cups appeared on the desk, with a large selections of biscuits and cookies besides. Filling Hagrid's cup, after Enlarging it somewhat, Dumbledore enjoyed the fresh mint. They talked a bit over more trivial matters – Dumbledore needed a moment or two, three to sort out his thoughts and formulate a plan. “ - an' they's been growing like cabbages, sir. I's got seven roosters now, they's been crowing a storm ev'ry moorn, sir. And the hens be laying eggs like there ain't no tomorrow, what is making the Elves very happy, sir. All en all, I aint got no other complains, Dumbledoor sir.” Dumbledore nodded, sipping his tea.

“Very good, Hagrid, very good. As for the problem in the Forest, I will go talk with the Centaurs myself, probably tomorrow morning. Please tell them that. For now, stay out of the Forbidden Forest at night – or ask the Centaurs to patrol it with you. I think you'll find Firenze amenable to that proposal.” Hagrid agreed and they finished their tea, after which the half-giant was off back to his ramshackle hut and Dumbledore was left alone to his thoughts again. Thoughts that still milled about painful truths, damaged children, and foolish mistakes...

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

The day began early for Harry – too early, with a nightmare and all the boys in the dorm awoken by his scream. And Harry had failed to contain his fear, blubbering about wraiths ripping apart unicorns and feasting on their blood. He had gotten a few sideways glances, the type he knew too well – laden with insults and disgust, he knew it. Freak, nut-job, loon – he had heard them all before. It took him the better part of an hour to calm down, resettle and fall asleep again. And when he woke next, it was as if he hadn't slept at all. His thoughts were muddled, as if he couldn't wake up properly.

Breakfast was turbid affair, slow and uneventful – which did not help in clearing Harry's head. It annoyed him, as today would bring several new classes they hadn't had yet. Swapping his customary morning-juice for a double-joe of coffee, black and strong, was the only recourse Harry could immediately think of. It helped alleviate the mental fog that drowned his cognitive capabilities, somewhat, but it didn't banish it completely as he had hoped it would. Resigning himself to today's norm of clarity being a mental form of severe near-sightedness, Harry finished his simple breakfast and followed the others towards their first lesson of the day.

Which was a double-period of Charms, together with the Slytherins. They had trudged up the stairs in the Grand Staircase, exciting at the third floor, bypassing the out-of-bounds third-floor corridor Dumbledore had warned them against. They had to cross the ravine bisecting the Castle via the multi-floor Suspension Bridge – to which Hermione had complained that it wasn't really a suspension bridge, as much as it was more just a suspended skyway. Harry was sure most of their little group had tuned her out halfway through.

The classroom was located in the aptly-named Charms Corridor, whose high Gothic windows looked out over the Transfiguration Courtyard – which was also known as the Middle Courtyard
for some reason? Harry could see the large ash-tree sway in the wind, securely basking in the sun in its small corner of the courtyard. Students were busy even this early, bustling about in the cloister that surrounded the courtyard – they were probably going to Transfiguration class or were on their way to the Flying Lessons. As Harry watched the students, he noticed the ghost of a noble lady cross the air above the Courtyard, stopping momentarily to watch him in turn. And when she turned her gaze from Harry to Hermione, he swore he could see her smile. He reminded himself to ask one of the older students who the lady was – though he had a suspicion, judging from her reaction to Hermione.

They all filed into Classroom 2E, which had obviously been Expanded to fit the almost eighty students that filed into it. Harry was very sure that the almost forty meters of wall couldn't fit in here, without occupying the two classrooms besides it. After all, the whole corridor was less than a hundred meters – so three classrooms couldn't be longer than thirty meters each at most! And only when they had all seated themselves did the professor enter.

Professor Flitwick was a short man, who had to stand on a pile of books just to look over his desk. At the start of the lesson, he called out their names – and when he'd reached Harry's name, he had given an excited little squeak and had fallen of his pile of books, landing on the floor with a thud. Harry almost felt sorry for the half-man, but figured he deserved it somewhat – he hated when people got excited when they saw him. What were they getting excited about, after all? He was short, skinny and nothing too good-looking either. And all that fame because he survived a mass-murderer's attempt at his life? Ridiculous, he sneered, with a bitter taste to the thought.

Professor Flitwick then began by telling them the types of spells that the lessons would cover – which, as the name implied, were all the spells classified as Charms, but would also include a few jinxes, counter-spells, and even hexes. But, as Flitwick put emphasized, Charms would be the main-subject. He then demonstrated a few of the Charms, before asking the students who already knew a few spells to demonstrate their knowledge and give a practical demonstration for him. It didn't surprise Harry that only the Muggle-born students were woefully unprepared for this – and the sneers that some Slytherins gave at their inability almost made his blood boil. Calming himself, Harry waited until Flitwick stood before him.

“Well, Mr Potter, how is your knowledge of basic spells? Would you care to demonstrate a spell?” Professor Flitwick asked, looking excited at the prospect of seeing Harry's magic – Snape had told quite a few interesting titbits, after all, during their breaks in the staffroom. “Of course, professor. Can I pick a volunteer, maybe?” Had Flitwick been a bit less excited, he might have considered thinking about why the boy needed a volunteer, but alas! Excited, he answered. “Of course, of course.” Harry gave a grateful smile, standing up and looked at one of the Slytherins who had laughed at the Muggle-borns.

“Mr Akimbo, if you'd like?” Harry gave a bow, politely asking to boy to participate. And, at the very least, Uchi suddenly looked very nervous at this. “Euhm, sure?” He stood, rounded his desk and Harry gestured him where to stand. Nervously standing where Harry had pointed towards, Uchi stood still. And it didn't help the boy's nervous mood of uncertain expectations when Harry warned him. “Try not to throw up.”

“Wait, wha-” He didn't get to finish the sentence, as Harry flicked his wand and with clear strong voice cast his spell. “Concorpus.” And when Uchi began spinning in place, before slowing to a halt, holding himself up at the desk, desperately trying not to throw up, Harry didn't smile or laugh. He rushed over, holding the boy up and rubbing his back. “You good?” Uchi nodded his head slightly, trying not to upset your stomach any further. “Consider it a warning, Akimbo. Don't berate those who never had a chance to learn – I certainly didn't until two months ago.” And when Uchi raised his head, looking at Harry's eyes, he saw nothing but truth in them. “U-understood, Ev- Uh,
“Oh my, are you quite alright, Mr Akimbo?” Flitwick had worriedly flitted over to the pair, looking at the boy with obvious concern. “I'm fine, sir, just a bit queasy.” Harry gave a smile at that, knowing all too well how it felt. “It'll fade in less than five minutes. Trust me, I tested it properly.” Looking down at the professor, he continued. “I have my development notes with me, sir, if you'd like to research them. Professor Snape said it was a completely new spell, so I thought you'd be interested.” Professor Flitwick looked quite intrigued at that, nodding in agreement. “Oh, I would quite like that, Mr Potter. I have never seen a first-year student devise a spell completely on their own. I would like to see those notes before the end of the lesson, so I can make copies and study them in my free time. But, when I ask you to show a spell next time, please stick to Charms not of your own devising, if you'd like, Mr Potter. And do take care when creating new spells, Mr Potter – making mistakes in that field of research can often be... fatal, as certain of our students can explain.” Harry laughed.

“Of course, professor – I just thought that I'd make a bang while I was at it. And I know, sir – I have met the Lovegoods, so I know.” That made Flitwick first grin with some concealed pride. “Oh, impress me it did. I trust we shall all keep an eye on your progress, Mr Potter. And yes, dreadful business that.” Harry nodded, helping Uchi back to his seat, once more asking if the boy felt okay. “I'm feeling better now, Potter. Just - just don't that again without warning, okay?” Harry almost snorted. “But I did warn you, didn't I? And you managed not to throw up – which is more than Snape can say when I cast it on him during one of our practice-duels.” And if that last part was whispered and accompanied by a sly smile and a mischievous wink, it certainly didn't make it any less hard on Uchi's part not to snort and laugh. Snape throwing up after having been spun around like a jojo? Yeah, that story was gonna make a wave in the Common Room that evening – and Harry felt only slightly guilty about it in advance. Severus' dignity would survive, he knew.

The rest of the lesson was quiet, as Flitwick thought that Harry's demonstration needed no repeat by overeager students willing to trump his example. The half-man spent most of the remaining period and a half demonstrating the importance of a correct grip, stance and wand-movement. Demonstrating a few innocuous 'mistakes' of innocent Charms as examples of what a wrong grip or wave of the wand could bring, he then made all the students practice their stance. Correcting most of the pure-blooms, citing their stances were 'thoroughly wrong' or not quite correct enough, brought a lot of grumbling and unhappy glances towards any half-bloods or muggle-born who managed to get their stance correct within a few minutes. It was one of those cases were prior experience was a curse in learning how to apply the lesson correctly.

Hermione, as usual, was exemplary in her studiousness, copying Flitwick's stance and grip perfectly – earning a few baleful glares from stubborn Pure-blooms on both sides after they'd been told off on their own stances by the professor. Harry found it both hilarious and sad – there stood a dozen Pure-blooms, supposedly home-schooled by the best, told off for doing it wrong. And the person they were angry at wasn't themselves or their previous teachers, but the students who did manage to get it correct. Harry sighed, thinking it was probably a vanity-thing – being angry at having been proven wrong, after they'd spent several days boasting of their experience and 'expertise', only to then being shown up by someone who hadn't know about magic until a few months ago. Harry had often heard about the old adage of Hell knowing no fury like a woman scorned, but now he thought that adage might be better off being changed to “Hell knoweth no fury like a boastful child being proven wrong”...

Eventually the bells tolled, earning the students leave for lunch. And none too soon either, Harry thought. His stomach was almost roaring like a lion, especially now that his head was clear again – having demonstrated his spell helped immensely with it. He only hoped he wouldn't have to do something like that every time his head was fuzzy. It had never been a problem before, so probably
not, he though. Yet, you could never be too careful – as Severus had told him often during the
summer vacation. “Vigilance, Evans, vigilance will save your hide more often and with greater
efficacy than any spell learned or enemy defeated ever will.”

The whole school slowly streamed into the Great Hall, and the House-tables quickly filled up, with
only a few stragglers absent until later. Ron, as Harry had become accustomed to, began heaping a
veritable mountain of food on his plate, smothering it all under a copious helping of gravy and
various sauces. And, truth be told, those seated near Ron couldn't tear their eyes away from the
spectacle. Layer after layer of egg, scrambled, fried and hard-boiled, with strips of bacon between,
hidden pockets of hash-browns, cut-up sausages, an avalanche of beans and mushroom dices, all
slathered with gravy, and gravy, and even more gravy. It was like watching a heart-attack being
given visible shape – and it made Harry fear that Ron would never reach his fifties if this was
going to be his lunch every day for the next seven years. How could he even eat it all, Harry
wondered with small wonder and a copious dose of curious fear.

And, when the plate was almost empty by the time the bell tolled again, it filled Harry with both
respect and disgust alike. Ron, again, looked disgruntled – and Harry suspected it probably was
because he could still eat more. How was that even possible?! They stood up and began their trek
to the next lesson. After a minute or two, Harry pulled aside Neville and Hermione, keeping a
small distance between a strolling Ron who really didn't wanna go to the next class, but rather
finish his already-Vanished plate. “Neville, you wouldn't know, per chance, of any magical
creatures that are either always hungry or can never feel full, do you?” Harry asked the shy kid,
who looked decidedly less nervous around him now than he had done the day before – even after
having witnessed Harry's spell in class before. “W-well, you have ogres and ghouls – I mean, g-
ghouls can ke-keep on eating if they want, b-but they often can't cuz they don't ha-have much food.
Ogres are l-like ghouls, but they – they're bigg-bigger and m-more intelig-g-gent. Ogres used t-to
raid Mug-gle farms though, to eat all their live-stock and veg-vegetables.”

Harry nodded, wondering. “Do wizards and witches sometimes, you know, do 'it' with magical
creatures like them,” Hermione almost gasped, giving Harry a swat on his arm when she realized
why he asked. “Harry!” She whispered harshly. “You can't think -”

“They do.” Neville's answer cut off the rant Hermione wanted to launch into, making her shut her
mouth with an audible clack of her teeth. “Professor Flitwick is half-Goblin, apparently. And
Hagrid is definitely half-Giant. My grandmother has often complained about some great-aunt of
mine, who apparently is half-Veela. It doesn't happen very often, but it does occur from time to
time.” Neville's stutter was gone, as he fell deep in thought, trying to remember what he could.

Harry turned to Hermione, eyes wide and he pointed his head towards Ron. “It would make sense,
no?” Hermione grimaced, turning to look at Ron before facing Harry again. “I mean, I guess –
yeah, but you can't seriously think that -” Harry shook his head. “No, not per se, but maybe
somewhere back, way back – I mean, I have seen my family's history in Gringotts and there's loads
of names I never heard of or saw before. So, you know -” He left it unsaid, certain Hermione
would piece it together quickly. After that, they fell into a ponderous silence, watching their red-
headed friend from time to time, all the while walking towards the classroom of Magical Theory.

They ascended the Grand Staircase again, stepping off at the fourth floor, turning into the fourth
floor corridor that connected the Magnus Turris with the Lookout Tower. The corridor looked out
on the Paved Courtyard, where a few older students were playing some game Harry couldn't
recognize. Bright sunlight fell in through the high stained-glass windows, casting the corridor in a
beautiful mirage of colours and shapes. Harry had to admit that Hogwarts was an architectural
marvel – he had recognized half a dozen different period-styles, and he reasoned that the Castle had
probably been expanded and renovated throughout its thousand-year history.
They reached classroom 67 quickly, already with the professor present – it was Flitwick again. It was a simple square room, ceiling vaulted, with frescos decorating the walls and tapestries hanging across blackboards that were unwritten. They all got seated, and the professor once more called down their names. Then began three hours of rather stuffy theory, even though Flitwick tried to make it as interesting as possible, calling out on the students to actively participate when he asked questions or wanted examples of what they were discussing. The first lessons, Flitwick explained, would deal a lot with certain dogma and taboo's that had been discovered and decided upon by the most renowned mages and sorcerers in their history.

He started with the Laws of Transfiguration, which outlined the limits to which Transfiguration could be taken – such as size-to-size changes, density laws that bound volume to temperature differentials, and so on... It surprised Harry, as he had thought that magic pretty much had no hard-set limits, and that imagination was what determined how far one could go. And when Flitwick began to discuss Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration, which, among many things, stated that food could not be conjured from nothing, Harry frowned. That seemed rather contradictory to some of the things he already knew – after all, he had seen Gnalte and Snape make water from nothing, though he supposed that could be the mere and simple act of distilling it from the vapour in the air around them rather than conjuration out of nothing.

Still, it bothered him – and it kept bothering him throughout the lesson. Eventually he was so curious about the contradictory statement that he raised his hand. Flitwick happily noticed Harry's hand and bade him to speak. “Sir, you said that Gamp's Law had five exceptions. Food being one them. Why is this the case when we can create water from nothing?” This seemed to throw Flitwick off his lesson-plan, if only slightly, and the half-goblin took a moment before responding to Harry's on-point question.

“Well, Mr Potter, usually Conjuration is indeed simply a matter of will and energy. If you want something strong enough and have the magical strength to conjure it, you usually shall have no problem doing so. However, in cases such as the Aquamenti and simple things such as elemental products - by which we mean, for example, a pound of pure sulphur – we are not Conjuring them from nothing. Rather, we are usually Summoning them from a place of abundance where their absence can not be missed or noticed. For example, using the sulphur, if I conjure it, I am rather Summoning a pound of pure sulphur from a place where it is abundantly present – such as a volcanic vent or caldera. However, the spell takes into account distance and quantity – so if I want to summon a pound of sulphur here, many many miles away from the nearest active volcano, it would rather drain me – and if a spell has the possibility of draining one's magical strength to the point of terminal exhaustion, they usually do not take.”

“Which is an excellent example of the Narcissian Self-Preservation Mechanism – which prevents any sentient magical being or creature from performing magical feats that could completely drain its magical core and leave it at death's door, temporarily or permanently. The mechanism has come to be simply due to natural selection, whereby magical creatures not having this innate self-preservation effect have all long ago died off by magicking themselves to exhaustion and thus death. A clear example of Darwin's Law of Adaptation, children, which is a corner-stone theorem of many Muggle-sciences and has incredible uses for Magical principles. On that note, Darwin's “On the Origin of Species” and several other of his works, are mandatory reading for next year's Magical Theory, as we shall use it to explore the various self-preservation mechanisms that many Magical species have developped to safeguard their existence, protect their magical cores from exhaustion, and finetune their inate magics for everyday use.”

“Now, to return to your question about food, Mr Potter, it has to do not only with these prerequisites, but also about how an item is composed. Now, when I Conjure, say, a snake or a bird, I am Summoning them, again, from another place in the world. However, the truly skilled can
Conjure them from the place of all-being to which we also Vanish objects and creatures when we use the Vanishing Spell. But as they Vanish the bird, they also create a perfect imprint of its complete anatomical structure within your magical core. Thusly, next time you Conjure them, you truly conjure them from nothing, from the all-being. Using the imprint you have made with the Vanishing, you bring the bird back, exactly as it was.”

“Now, theoretically, you could also do this with food. However, there are certain qualities to living creatures that make it easier to Conjure them than non-living organic matter. For example, say you don’t focus enough – in any other spell it would create a potentially explosive effect, and I don’t need to paint a picture for you to imagine that happening to an animal. Instead, using some variation of the NSP-mechanism, the magic prevents you from casting the spell incorrectly and subjecting you to the potential trauma of a... ah, less than perfect bird, let us say.”

“Beyond that, matter can also shape itself to certain... ideals when it is supposed to become a sentient creature. The ideal idea of a dove just as much forms the actual dove as a perfect material re-construction does. The ideal makes it easier for the material reconstruction to take shape – and because we all envision a dove as alive, the idea would not permit a material reconstitution that can not result in a stable living organism that live out a natural life-cycle. In less words, the idea prevents you from Conjuring an anatomically-unstable dove, etcetera...

“Food, however, is less quantifiable. What makes an ideal bacon-sausage sandwich? The ideal differs from person to person – and this non-uniformity of idea between people as a whole prevents a really correct sandwich from being formed out of nothing. The bacon isn’t sentient, so it won’t help in reconstituting itself correctly, unlike the conscious part of the dove would. Furthermore, pure Conjunction is also out of order – the sandwich consists of too many unconnected elemental parts to really just take them from free-floating molecules all around you.”

“Now, let's say you use the Gemini-spell and try to copy the sandwich first. This will work, because the sandwich is a clear model to simply copy. The Conjunction-part is simpler – the spell works around the complexity by simply going layer per layer. First the elements that become mayonnaise, than the elements that become the bacon, and so on. Because the spell has a material imprint to copy from, it takes less energy. What is not present in elemental form, can be pulled from the all-being part per part. After that, it is simple. It is like the difference between copying a painting using paints bought in a store, versus making an original painting from self-made pigments. Less work, less difficulty choosing a solid workable foundation, and so on.”

“So, to give you a simple answer – the complexity of organic matter, the communal ideal form of the matter, the personal subjective ideal of a form, the origin of the matter, … All these together make it so incredibly complex and difficult to Conjure food from nothing that it, in practical effect, becomes an impossibility. It borders on the impossible, so far beyond the reach of any regular mage, that only the exceptionally skilled, the immensely powerful, can ever pull it off without either literally exhausting them to death – or resulting in a foodstuff that either poisons you, or resulting in unstable matter that instantly annihilates itself and you with it.”

“Therefore, edible food is one of the five exceptions – together with noble metals, souls, pure energy, and dark matter. All of these are an exception for any of the reasons I explained. Gold and souls are the more truly-impossible exceptions, since gold resists all forms of true magical influence and souls are not truly of our world and always partly grounded in the world-beyond. Trying to Conjure gold would require you to create it by conjuring separate heavy metals and instantly fuse them together into stable gold, an act which results in gold, but also enormous doses of heat and deadly energies from the fusion. You will have your gold, yes, but the place where you create it would become uninhabitable for millennia to come – and you would be instantly slain by the released energies. Souls can not be Conjured or Summoned because part of them lies beyond
this world, and thus practically they lie outside of our sphere of magical influence.”

“Pure energy and dark matter have a shared reason which makes them an 'impossibility' to Conjure. Pure energy, like the gold, results in the energy being released in all possible forms of energy, partly because energy is such an abstract concept that all types of energy are considered pure energy in the eyes of magic. And because of this, the types of energy are also releasing in the form of malevolent energies that can instantly cripple the body and prove fatal within minutes if not treated properly.”

“Dark matter does this exact same thing, by sheer virtue of its very essence. It is a type of matter that is antithetical to matter as we know it. Normally, it can not be influenced by normal matter or vice versa. But by using magic to summon it, it temporarily becomes like normal matter before reverting back to its intended self. This transformation creates a terrible explosion, a release of energy so great that it can undo entire landmasses. It is the reason that Atlantis, great and fair, no longer exists. A cabal of mages, intend on shifting the paradigms of Conjuration and disproving the Taboos attempted a stable Conjuration of dark matter, which resulted in an uncontrolled explosion so great that it literally warped the fabric of time and space around it. Not only was Atlantis sent back a billion years into our past, it was also devastated in an explosion that actually hollowed out the sea-floor around the entire landmass up to a hundred meters beneath the normal seabed once it had rematerialized from its journey back into time.”

“Of course, a billion years of tectonic plate-movement and volcanic activity erased that hollow – but we never forgot. It was an investigation that took three centuries before all the facts were known- and we will never forget. So take these words to heart. Now, I think I have only five minutes left either way, so I might as well just give you your homework for today and let you go. Please copy down the assignment on the blackboard and write me a ten-thousand word thesis on what to take into account when you wish to Conjure a hand-sized chunk of rhyolite, using the volume-to-weight magic-to-matter ratios I have supplied you with today!”

Chapter End Notes

I can tell you this – finding a model of Hogwarts that is correctly translated across all the movies and based on the books is impossible. As such, what I share in this fic, is a truly desperate(!!!) attempt at making it all correct. Please don't crucify me when it isn't as the books or movies said – I just want it to be internally consistent. 'T.T'

Uchi Akimbo (born 1978-1982) was a Slytherin student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the 1990s. During the 1996–1997 school year, he surprised Harry Potter in the corridor leading to the Hospital Wing, challenging him to a duel. I have made him a contemporary of Harry in this fic, being born in 1981, and in the same year as Harry and Draco.

FYI, a small explanation regarding Ghouls, Ogres, and their relations to eachother. In my headcanon, Ogres, Ghouls, Trolls and their various subspecies, belong to a separate branch of the Homini-tribe, having branched of from it ath the same times as the Homo-family (humans and our ancestors) and the Pan-family (chimpanzees and bonobo) did. A chapter is available in the Addenda-book. See this link for a graph of human ancestry; https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/36/Homininae.svg
The Lady is the Gray Lady, but I guess you figured that out, right? Right?

The destruction of Atlantis, via its temporal displacement backwards to ca. 1 billion BC, would deposit it roughly in the middle of Antarctica (which was located roughly in the center of the Atlantic Ocean during the formation/existence of Rodinia, the supercontinent that existed in this time-period). This unifies the Antarctica-is-Atlantis hypothesis with Plato's supposed location of Atlantis as being in the Mid-Atlantic, roughly overhead the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. The excavation of the landmass up to 100m below the sea-bed, coupled with a billion years of plate-tectonics, undersea erosion and heavy sidementation/volcanic deposits, would be more than sufficient to erase all existence of the continent from the geological records (unless you'd start scooping out all surface-areas up to 100m below their then-beds. This will also become important later on ;)

See this link for an artistic presentation of Rodinia's shape,
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a4/Rodinia_reconstruction.jpg

I made sense out of one of the most unexplained no-no's in Rowling's set of magic rules. And I hope you guys appreciate it X.X

Really, I find it an elegant combination of philosophical ideas (such as Plato's Theory of Ideals and Forms), the laws of physics (matter/antimatter neutralisation upon contact/reversion of polarity), and magical rules as set forth by JK in the books. I hope you thought so too

Tbh, I was worried for a while that Wizards and Witches knowing about antimatter/molecules would be too 'advanced' or too much out of canon. But I think that the really competent magicals (such as those employed by the Department of Mysteries) would be acutely aware of the theories that Muggles have developed (probably they would have developed similar ideas/theories much sooner, due to their advantage of having magic to perform certain experiments that were outside the realm of feasibility for Muggles until late in the 19th and 20th centuries).

See this link for the Wikipedia-page about Darwin's book,

Rhyolite is an igneous, volcanic rock, of silica-rich composition. It may have any texture from glassy to aphanitic to porphyritic. The mineral assemblage is usually quartz, sanidine and plagioclase. It is the extrusive equivalent to granite.
Chapter XXXII

Chapter Summary

Two fiendish rogues enter the scene, Defence Against the Dark Arts is experienced, and parental guidance is given.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Professor Flitwick's lesson in Magical Theory had set Harry on a veritable odysseyian journey of thought. He was running all the professor had told them through his experiences, though that was still a small pool. He wondered if these laws of improbability were really as fixed as they appeared by Flitwick's account. Had the demise of Atlantis really been because they experimented with those laws and had, unfortunately, succeeded, confirming what probably had been suspected by then? Still, there were too many unknowns. How advanced was Atlantis? What had been known about astrophysics and quantum mechanics by them, if anything?

Harry felt certain, dead certain, that Muggle knowledge could overcome these hurdles – mages of the past just hadn't had the knowledge that the elite scientists of the non-magical world had now. It was such an interesting idea, that a number of hypothesis began to form. Perhaps, Harry thought, he could employ Hermione's help and Snape's guidance. Getting some Muggle-born Ravenclaws on his side could help as well – but could he really afford to bother with all of that right now? There was still the matter of undermining Dumbledore, figuring out the whole Wizengamot-thing, learning his lessons, following classes – heck, Harry wanted to do some art and music extracurriculars as well! There was simply too much he wanted to do!

And then he had a thought – Flitwick had said that the Atlantis-event had warped time. Was influencing time in the realm of possibilities for wizards? Harry added it to the list of things he wanted to ask Severus that evening. There was so much to discover and know – it was a bit maddening, Harry thought. He gave a soft sigh, already extremely tired out. He shouldn't have done that spell during Charms, he mused – it had drained him a bit too much, probably because he was focussed on not going too hard on Uchi. All magical theory seemed to turn around intent and focus, Harry pondered – perhaps he should ask about that too. Another question down on the list, it was.

Harry cleared his head, forcing himself out of the train of thought he had fallen into. He still had one more period before it was dinner – and it was Defence Against the Dark Arts now. It was in the Dark Tower, which was at the end of the Charms Corridor they'd been in that morning. Making the long trek back to the third floor, their group was suddenly waylaid by the twins.

"Hya, Harry," Fred said. "And brother dear." Said George. "Seems like your ickle little firsties seem to be doing lotsa running around, like clueless chickens." They said in unison – how did they do that, Harry wondered. Ron grew a bit red around the ears as the twins began teasing them. "Of course, we are! How else are we supposed to get anywhere?" Ron said, a bit louder than he should have – making a few students turn their heads at his mild outburst, before they continued on after seeing the twins. Seemed they had a veritable reputation indeed.

"Now, now, little brother-" Fred spoke, slinging his arm around Ron's shoulders. "We're just
saying you could get anywhere you need to be a lot quicker-” George dramatically proclaimed, slinging an arm around Harry as he placed a hand on his own in mock aghastness. “and a lot more efficiently!” They spoke in sync, again. Harry felt a bit hot with George so close to him. He really wasn't used to non-threatening physical contact.

The twins guided their little group to one of the many portraits hanging in the Castle, back into the corridor with the classroom that Magical Theory had been held. There they came to a stop before the portrait of a portly man with a long curled moustache. He seemed to be wearing a black petticoat and a black wizard's hat. At the moment, he seemed to be sleeping, and a soft snoring could be heard from his portrait. A small plaque on the frame identified him as Brutus Scrimgoeur, 'Headmaster of Hogwarts, 1886-1903'. Knocking on the frame, the twins gently awoke him.

“Ahem, oh, well then – what's this then? You two again? If you're not here to talk Quidditch, we're not talking at all. Truly, you two are too presumptuous indeed!” He seemed to be quite disgruntled at their presence, which didn't seem to phase the twins at all – their grins didn't lessen at all.

“Now, Brutus-”
“Now need to be so snappy!”
“We brought you a surprise,-”
“In exchange for your help!”

A ponderous expression replaced his murmuring glare. “A surprise you say? Oh, well, I suppose I have always been a sucker for surprises. Well, what is it?” He snapped, quite eagerly – seemed he didn't mind the company if they gave him something interesting. Harry could understand that – he would probably be the same if he was a painting always looking out on the same scenes, even if he could travel between paintings.

“We have brought you,-”
“Oh tutor of ours,-
“So clever and quick,-”
“None other than-”
“The boy-who-lived!”

They stepped aside with flair, presenting Harry between them with a generous dosing of jazz-hands to his sides. And it seemed the surprise pleased old Brutus, as a broad smile brokered across his face and made his painting look several shades lighter within a flash of gleaming white teeth. Those couldn't be real, Harry idly thought.

“Harry bloomin' Potter! Why, my! What a lovely surprise indeed! Oh, Mr Potter, I have heard so much about you, quite indeed! I am so pleased to finally see and talk to you! Have you been in Hogwarts long?”

Harry looked at the twins, seeking a bit of guidance, but finding nothing but grins and a wink from Fred. And, nope, that definitely didn't help! With red ears, Harry turned back to the portrait. “Only since three days ago, sir. Euhm, we had class in a classroom nearby though, just now. But it's closer to the Grand Staircase, so that's why we haven't met yet.”

“oh, my boy, no problem, no problem at all. I am just so glad to finally see you in the flesh. One can't trust solely on words, after all – and the rumours about you are quite extensive indeed. And now I see that many of them are no doubt excegerated. But still, I am sure you will do splendidly, splendidly – here in Hogwarts! Now, what do you two devilish fiends wish of me?” Brutus faced the twins again, eyes a bit distrustful. Apparently he knew all too well about the many tricks they had up their sleeves.
“We just want to show dear Harry here—”
“And our lil’ bro and his small troupe,—”
“The shortcut to the Trophy Room and Charms Corridor,—”
“Good sir! Surely,—”
“That can be arranged!”

Brutus stood still for a while, before slowly speaking up again. “Hm, very well, sers Weasley. On one condition!” He harrumphed, putting his thumbs behind the waistband straining against his rather large belly. “Of course, good sir!” They cried in unison, bowing low in mock respect. “That you beat those Slytherins well and good in the first game of this year, boys! Remember—”

“Take out the Seeker!” Cried out three voices in perfect unison, with broad grins on the twins’ faces and a large pompous frown on the round face of old Brutus. “It’s a deal, sir!” the answer from the two was apprently good enough, as Brutus nodded and gave them the password. “This years password is ‘Carpe Diem’ – and don’t forget it or let anyone overhear you!” He then promptly swung open, revealing a dark passage behind his frame.

“Now, Harrikins,—”
“We have shown you this secret passage—”
“And in return,—”
“We want you to show us two—”
“That handy spell you demonstrated—”
“In Flitwick’s lesson this morning!”

Harry wasn’t quite sure he trusted them with the spell, but fair was fair, he supposed. And the fact that George had spoken his lines while running a finger along his jaw in playful banter really didn't help! These two damn well knew how unused he was to all this – there couldn't be any other reason!

“Very well – I’ll show it to you this evening. Do we have somewhere to practice spells in the Tower?” Two heads nodded together, with a mischievous twinkle in their eyes and broad grins. “Yup! Just come find us in the Common Room and we’ll take you there!” Well, Harry thought, might as well. “Okay. And thanks, Fred, George.” Giving a wave, Harry stepped into the passage -

And saw nothing, absolutely nothing. Thinking it best to just continue on, Harry held his hands before him, feeling a fabric of sorts after just a second or two. He pushed and saw light again. He had pushed aside a swivelling mirror, in a room filled with trophies from floor to roof. Hundreds of Cups, Medals, Trophies, Plaques, … all shimmered and shone in the feeble rays of sun cast through the grimy windows set high in the walls. To his left, he saw a long corridor with dozens of sets of armour to one side. Ahead, he saw another doorway, opening up into a different corridor. He saw a few students from his year and Gryffindor walk into a door there. They were near the Dark Tower!

Stepping out, followed quickly by a shaking Neville and a shut-eyed Hermione, Harry waited until Ron had exited before closing the mirror again. “Blimey! That's a bloody useful shortcut! Takes minutes of our walk that.” Hermione concurred, finding it quite useful indeed. Neville, however, would rather not use it again. “Twas s-s-so d-dark.” He stuttered, shivering like a leaf. “Now, now, Neville, it's okay. Next time, I'll hold your hand next time when we go through it, okay?” Nodding, Neville followed Hermione as she trekked towards the Dark Tower with Neville in tow, having seen the students as well. Ron turned to Harry. “Why were you embarrassed when Fred and George teased you?” Ah shit, Harry thought, of course Ron would notice that ridiculous display of loss of self-control around those two.
"I'm – I'm just not used to positive physical contact, okay? All I ever got before was a slap, punch or worse. Not really cultivating positive reactions to physicality, that..." Harry really didn't want to discuss this any further and followed Hermione without another word to Ron. Of course it was the positive response of the touching, Harry mused, not at all other stuff. He didn't have time for that – not now, probably not ever. He logically knew what was happening – he had read all of the books in his Muggle-school library after all, and he wasn't stupid. He just really wanted to postpone that side of growing up for a few more years, if he could. Which he probably wouldn't be able to do, he mused bitterly.

They all gathered outside of a locked door, which was marked as 'DADA Tower' – which struck harry as odd. Why would a door be labelled as the entire tower? It wasn't long until they'd all gathered and the professor opened the door from within. Stuttering professor Quirrell let them all in, explaining how the space they entered would be their very first test.

"H-here you will ha-have to c-c-complete this ob-stacle course, together or-r-r alone. All you n-need to d-do is reach the top-p-p-top of the room." And then he vanished in a puff of smoke, there one second, gone the next. And from above came a stuttering shout, turning all heads towards his new position. "As a r-reward, I shall give every stu-student ten point if they get h-here within half an hour. Don't-t-t worry ab-b-bout falling d-d-down – a Cushioning Charm s-s-shall keep-p-p you safe."

It seemed an easy enough task, Harry thought – until the stairs all Vanished and were replaced by floating platforms in the air. Quirrell stood waiting on a balcony at least four stories above them, turning a time-glass. Instantly, some of the children began scrambling up. It was an obstacle-course, alright, and when some students tried copying others by taking the self-same route, they would quickly find themselves jumping into empty air as the platforms shifted in position.

It was quite ridiculous, Harry muttered, trying his best to make headway. And when he saw a platform about to vanish and force him to change his route, he called out to it with his magic. It was quite a subconscious action, but with all his focus, he willed the platform to 'Stay!' - and it did. For an odd second, it seemed torn between two different places before it snapped fully into focus at the spot Harry needed it. He quickly jumped the distance and then unto another platform, until he reached a solid balcony about two stories high. That was usefull, he pondered, trying it again – with success, on another platform, and thus quickly making headway. Less than half an hour later, he was amongst the first ten to reach the balcony on which Quirrell was waiting.

"W-Well done, M-m-mister Potter. Ten point for s-such an int-t-tuitive command over the V-V-Vanis-s-s-shing platforms!" He gave him a small smile, turning his attention back towards the other students still struggling to make their way upwards. Yet, Harry swore, that Quirrell kept an eye on Harry from the corner of his eye. Harry spent the next half hour talking with the others as they arrived, one by one, until less than ten students were still struggling. Quirrell, apparently, had seen enough and switched the time-glass back about.

"Those s-s-still down there, s-s-stay on your platform. Time's-s-s- up." And the students fell upon their platforms, exhausted, and poor Neville was one of those, together with Hermione. Quirrell waved his wand and the platforms slowly rose to his level, allowing the students to get off and unto the balcony. "All into t-t-the classroom, p-p-pu-lease, children."

The last half-hour was spent with Quirrell stressing the importance of physical fitness and learning how to utilize any grasp of wandless and wordless magic they could muster and eventually master. "The principles of wandless and wordless magicks rely exclusively on caster's proficiency with the spells intended. Practice a spell often enough and, like a physical muscle, casting it becomes easier with time. Eventually, due to sheer repetition and 'muscle'-memory, you will even be able to cast
the more difficult spells with neither wand nor word. A most usefull skill when dealing with those inclined to use Silencing Charms or Disarmament Spells.”

“Do not let the misguided fool you into believing that wandless and wordless spells are exclusively in the domain of those exceptionally gifted or powerfull. And remember the useful ways through which you utilize such a mastered gift – such as subterfuge by casting a wordless Disarmament Spell while loudly incanting another spell. Very useful for confusing an enemy and gaining the upperhand against them.”

Funnily enough, Quirrell barely ever stuttered when he seemed to be rattling off textbook-explanations. He gave a few examples of his own feats, such as when he had managed to subdue a zombie somewhere in Romania and been gifted his turban as a reward by grateful villagers – though he turned very quiet and deflective when Dean Thomas inquired about the specifics of how Quirrell had managed to defeat the feral and ravenous undead. After that, the theoretical parts of his lessons would always be regarded as somewhat of a joke – especially after the Weasley twins had gotten a taste of Quirrells awkwardness - though the practical parts where a right hit with every student, no matter the House or year.

Dinner was like the previous day – a veritable feast, though in lesser scope than that of the term’s beginning. Eventually, towards the end, several owls cam flying into the Great Hall, depositing several letters and newspapers to various students. Harry received his Evening Edition of the Daily Prophet, along with the Umbral Oracle – which was a night-time-printed special edition of the normal Daily Prophet which focused on Muggle news for Muggle-borns and on more gray subjects for pure-bloods. A few letters too arrived with these, and Harry gave Hedwig a few greasy slices of bacon, which she snapped up after which she flew off again – probably to eat her treats in peace.

Opening the Evening Edition first, Harry's attention was immediately taken by a large front-page headline.

“HIDDEN PAW STRIKES AGAIN – BLUE STAR STOLEN FROM MAHARAJA SING II!”

How curious, Harry thought, so maharaja's were still a thing in the Indian wizarding communities. He read the article, and though it was interesting, it wasn't that important. What did he care that a criminal was hoodwinking the rich and stealing from right under their noses without anyone noticing? Harry was pretty sure that his Vaults were safe enough, for now. The Umbral Oracle didn't have anything interesting either, except for a few articles about Muggle events – such as the deaths of a few American songwriters and musicians, and some articles talking about the threat of invasive African bee's in the USA or the events of the Gulf-war in the Middle East. All very much things that neither were of direct interest or concern to Harry.

Snape was waiting for him in the Entrance Hall, as before. And together they made their way down, into the Slyherin Dungeon again. But as they made their way there, Harry took more time to look at their surroundings and he began to notice the dozens upon dozens of serpents hidden everywhere. Hidden as part of decorative engravings on pillars, hidden in the swirling roughness of half-hewn stones, subtly hiding in the patterns of the floor-tiles, … They were literally everywhere in the dungeons, most obviously by design.

Once more they entered the Slytherin Common Room, Harry talking briefly with Uchi about their lesson together, but Uchi didn't want to hear any apologies. “Word of advise, Evans – we, Slytherins, we don't do apologies and such. You showed yourself the better wizard, if not by your flawless casting, than by your creation of a new spell. It takes a lot of talent to create new spells, so in the eys of the Slytherins, you simply proved your strength and innate grasp of magic. If you wanna know more, you should ask professor Snape. I'm sure he'll help you gladly.” Their
conversation, short though it was, had given Harry much to ponder. Slytherins evidently followed
the rule of the strongest – or the smoothest of tongue. That much now became clear – and Harry
knew just how to be smooth. Ten years with the Dursleys had helped nurture that talent, indeed....

Snape and Harry took their seats, with a pot of tea already steaming away on Severus' desk,
evidently provided by the Hogwarts House-Elves in advance, no doubt on Severus' explicit order.
Harry explained some about his day, asking a few questions that he had about the subjects of his
lessons. The tea was half-gone before Harry broached the real questions he longed to answer with
his guardian's help. He took out a small page of Muggle-notebook paper from his pocket,
smoothing it out after unfolding. There were quite a few things he had crossed-out before he had
settled on a rather succinct list of queries.

“Severus, I was wondering about something professor Flitwick had mentioned during our first
lesson of Magical Theory. He said that intent and focus were more important to a succesful spell
than actual incantation and wand-movement are. Why is that?” Harry asked, with great curiosity in
his eyes, wondering what Severus would answer.

Severus, in turn, pondered his words for a while, not quite certain how to best explain this to
someone with such limited experience. True, Harry had marvelous inate talent in understanding
how magic worked theoretically, but it was still very different from understanding the theory
through years of personal experience.

“It is... difficult to explain. Part of the difficulty lies in how you will recognize certain parts of the
explanation better once you actually experience it after several years of using magic on a daily
basis. But I shall try to explain it to the best of my ability using metaphors you are no doubt
familiar with.”

What followed was an hour-long explanation and discussion about how intention and focus were
as important in channeling magical energies towards a specific goal as the incantation and wand
movement were. “Consider the nature of ritual, Evans, where a familiarity is nurtured through
repetition of song and dance, channeled through incantation and wand movement instead.
Eventually, a muscle-memory of sorts is developped which channels energies as efficiently as
physical canals between rivers do.”

“Intent and focus initially are mere tools to aid magic being channeled through the words you
speak and the wand you wave. However, given enough experience and years, word and wand
become the tools and accessories to intent and focus instead. That, after all, is what wandless and
silent magic is all about. Muscle memory, aided by wand and word, build upon intent and focus,
allows you to do away with the support of your tools and utilize your innate magics solely through
intent and focus. This is why, initially, a wand is always needed to learn a new spell, and why
learned and aged sorcerers use staffs instead of wands.”

“The wand is swapped for the staff, not because the staff is a better tool to channel magic towards
a goal, but because now the staff becomes a tool to channel magic from the very earth into the
sorcerer, so that he need not rely solely on the magic he holds in his magical core. The staff
becomes a tool towards magical reserves that lie embedded in the foundations of the world and
which normally leak out to become ambient magic instead.”

Harry was entranced by the whole lecture Snape gave him, seeing all the potential it hinted towards
and sometimes explicitly mentioned. Given enough time and exercise, Harry would be able to do
things he could have never imagined. He made quick notes on the paper he held, intent on
researching certain terminology during his free time. There was so much to know, Harry thought
excitedly, so much to learn and master. And he could hardly wait!
Eventually, Severus came to the end of what he could explain, pressing it to Harry's heart that what he could not explain, Harry would come to truly understand through experience as he completed his education through the next seven years. Oh yes, Severus said, seven years, not six – because he was quite sure that Harry would probably wish to do a seventh year to gain a Mastery eventually. He could recognize that typical Ravenclaw-attitude in Harry which would lead to Harry wishing to learn all he could, when he could. And in the back of his mind, Severus was hedging a bet with his own subconscious that, probably, Harry would regularly become the best of his years.

After a comfortable silence of a few minutes, through which Harry quietly digested most of what he had been told or dutifully filed away later retrospection of the information with liberal use of his photographic Occlusion-augmented memory, the young Gryffindor spoke up again, a last question on his lips.

“Can Wizards influence Time?” Ah, Severus thought, of course he would have inflected that from Flitwick's little tirade on the exceptions of Gamp's Laws and similar measures. “Well, it depends, Evans. There are certain magickal artefacts that have been designed specifically to carry their Bearer through the river of time backwards, to a limited degree. We call those items Time-Turners, and they are often limited by a single-hour interval through which they operate, which severely limits the practical limit of their usage. You could, theoretically, use a Time-Turner to go back in time one year. But it would mean you would have to physically turn the Time-Turner twenty-four times for a whole year of days. Which amounts to almost nine thousands turns – which I do not expect anyone would find practical, no matter how determined they are...”

Indeed, Harry conceded to that – it sounded like an impossible task, wasting almost more hours doing the turning than you'd gain by being thrown back a year, he reasoned. Still, there it was – a way to direct the flow of time using Magic. And Harry was curious indeed.

“Where can I get one?” Harry curtly asked, knowing that it'd be an invaluable tool for his plans. Seevrus gave a laugh, almost snorting when he pinched his nose as he shook with myrth. “Oh, Evans, you're not gonna get one. All Time-Turners are property of the Ministry and their creation is a highly-guarded secret. Only the Department of Mysteries knows what goes into their creation and anyone found making a Time-Turner can expect a single-way ticket to Azkaban.”

Well, that definitely bummed Harry out, but his spirits quickly reneged. He was the sodding Boy-Who-Lived! He could butter up the Minister, had been doing so indirectly both under his actual name and under his nome-de-plume of Heir Peverell. And the Minister had been listening rather intently to all the rumours and subtle indirectness, with gushing adoration towards Potter and with wary respect towards Peverell. Snape had told him that Fudge was a sucker for powerful friends – and Harry was more than happy to use that to his fullest advantage.

“What are the legal ways one can acquire a Time-Turner then? I expect it'd be rather restrictive.” Harry said, twiddling his thumbs as he was thinking about what he could do with one. He was trying to make a list of priorities as he spoke and listened to Severus' answers. So much to do, so little time – he had always had too little time.

Just an hour more per day, Harry had always thought, and his life would've been so much simpler. Maybe now it could be? He wasn't sure and he didn't want to think too far ahead if it weren't gonna happen either way. He had long ago learned to give up planning too far ahead – life threw too many curveballs for that, unless your life was extra-ordinarily dull. And what Harry wouldn't have given for a dulll life before...

“One of the easiest legal ways would be, coincidentally, through your curriculum here at Hogwarts,” Snape began, explaining as he went along. “As you could apply for all elective studies
and extra-curricular activities. Hogwarts doesn't work with a system of exclusive courses, and was designed specifically around the ability of mixing your elective courses exactly as you want. Of course, this is a phenomenal headache for those unlucky enough to be your teachers, and it can lead to tremendously straining schedules. In such cases, the usage of a Time-Turner is sometimes allowed, though usually only from second-year onwards. It would be discussed with your Head of House, your legal guardians, the Headmaster and the Deputy Headmistress.”

“In your case, that would mean it'd be talked-over with by Headmaster Dumbledore, professor McGonagall – who would act in dual role, as your Head of House and as the Deputy Headmistress, and me, as your legal guardian. However, in your case, some hardliners might also wish to bother with those pathetic excuses of parental excrement that were the Dursleys. Though I do not see it coming to that, owing probably to Albus' interference – if he's able to.”

Their discussion went on for a while longer, before Severus declared it aptly late for Harry, sending him off to bed after returning him to the Gryffindor Tower as an escort. Harry immediately went to the dorm, shedding his clothes quickly in favour of his pyamas and settling into his bed. He had written down all the things he wanted to research, the letters he wanted to sent, … And as he closed his eyes, Harry decided that his first priority for now would be acquiring a Time-Turner. And he fell asleep with his thoughts on how best to phrase his future letter to Minister Fudge, and how to butter up the man and agree to Harry's request.

Chapter End Notes

Brutus Scrimgeour was Headmaster before Phineas Nigellius Black (X-1925), Armando Dippet (1925-1965), and Dumbledore (1965-X). So, using an average of 20-30 years but taking into regard semi-canonical timelines using the factual basis for many painting, I placed his tenure as Headmaster from 1898-1903 and thus Black's tenure from 1903-1925.

Thus, the list of Headmaster's would be as following, from most recent to oldest.

Albus Dumbledore (1965 – Present)
Armando Dippet (1925 – 1965)
Basil Fronsac (Returning from retirement, Appointed Headmaster by Ministry after Deputy Headmistress refused to take up the role even temporarily, from 1913 - 1925)
Phineas Nigellius Black (1903 – 1913)
Brutus Scrimgeour (Appointed Headmaster by Ministry, replacing Mordicus, from 1898 – 1903)
Mordicus Egg (Deputy Headmaster, taking over as Headmaster from 1896 - 1898)
Walter Aragon (1875 - 1896)
Basil Fronsac (1863 - 1875)
Dexter Fortescue (1851 - 1863)
Limebert (1837 - 1851)
Quentin Trimble (1795 - 1837)

Eupraxi Mole (1768 - 1795)

Dilys Derwent (First Appointed Headmistress by Ministry in stead of Wizengamot, after the end of a Goblin Rebellion and Foundation of the Ministry, from 1741 – 1768)

Dilys Derwent (1724 – 1741, as Acting Deputy Headmistress, as the Wizengamot could not appoint her officialy due to Goblin Rebellions)

Amrose Swot (Appointed Headmaster by Wizengamot, from1703 - 1724)

Vindictus Viridian (Deputy Headmaster, from 1702 - 1703)

Samuel Everard (Deputy Headmaster, from 1701 - 1702)

Vulpus (1692 – 1701)(His sudden death, along with that of his Deputy Headmistress, left Hogwarts bereft and forced a rotation of Deputy Headmasters by the current professors, until the Wizengamot appointed a new permanent Headmaster)

Elizabeth Burke (1624 - 1692)

Antonia Creaseworthy (1531 - 1624)

Fytherly Undercliffe (1503 – 1531)

Edessa Skandenberg (1408 - 1503)

Phillida Spore (1358 - 1408)

Heliotrope Wilkins (1266 - 1358)

Brian Gagwilde (Appointed Headmaster by Wizengamot, longest serving Headmaster, from 1075 – 1266)

Iolanthus Peverell ( Acting Deputy Headmaster, keeping Hogwarts safe during the Norman Invasion of the British Isles, from 1066 - 1075)

The Founders Four (990 – 1066)

See the following link for my addendum on Time-Turners, https://archiveofourown.org/works/24167596/chapters/58202089
Harry's lessons continue, as do his odd dreams...

The dream was fragmented – as was the person he saw in the dream. Harry was walking through a foggy landscape, copses of trees standing solitary in the mist hills, with nary a voice on the wind or a bird in the sky. He was alone – utterly alone. But a pull was there, driving him across the hillocks. Towards a copse of trees so high as to block out the sky above. The sun was blotted out by the grey clouds, hidden behind a curtain of sadness and a blanket of grief. Fear was buried beneath the earthworks, like sharp flints in chalk soil, and Harry travelled across it all, towards those dead trees.

Harry's heart was a flint, sharp edges cut from a smooth river pebble by an industrious mind that had wished him to become a tool – it was all so clear when he walked his dreams. Harry entered the trees, immediately surrounded on all sides by trunks of dead bark and dessicated lichens. It called him, ever onward, toward something unknown yet familiar. It felt like ashes of a dead fire, with a lone ember embedded within. Dead yet not dead – it just needed a bit of soul, to be breathed upon and given life anew. Harry walked, eyes forward but gaze wandering. He felt half-detached from himself, like a ghost untethered to its corporeal form. He couldn't turn around, but he could observe what was around him, as if his eyes were fixed in direction but not in position.

The trees faded, suddenly gone yet they hadn't stopped. It was if he shifted landscapes, like a frequency on the radio, transitioning towards a new channel while the old channel still echoed through the ether. And there he was now, that liminal space, that moment of transition. He could stop, turn back – he felt that, but the pull called him ever forward, like a sailor towards a siren's call, towards his doom. But would it be his doom? No, he was sure it wouldn't. Something was there, an answer to a question he hadn't asked yet, didn't know to ask yet.

He knew the answer would be useful someday, so he kept walking, walking, walking, ... Now he was stepping across a sea of sand, fine, gray, dead... And he was not alone – two shadows walked in his steps, but there was no moon or sun to cast them. No, there were no stars at all – only the gray sky and the endless horizon, where the fog of non-reality ruled like a king on its throne. The mist was not still, no, it swirled and cascaded, down dunes and into valleys, settling like a white ink on a black sheet, casting it all in a half-presence.

Harry walked and walked, he took strides and crossed miles at once, seeing the dunes slide beneath him. It called him further, and further, and further. But he was almost there – he could feel it in his chest, the tug growing stronger. Like magnets finding each other, they were almost together – whoever that second may be.

And then he finally saw it – a figure, like he was, half-present, detached, like a mirror-image made from leaking ink slowly fading away into the ether, changing channel across frequencies of reality. The figure was fractured, broken, torn apart. Jagged edges separated the body at odd angles, divided in seven parts. From the right armpit to its left hip, from its left shoulder to its broken
sternum, a second shoulder-break from right to left. The neck, bisected, with the head trisected upon it. It was like someone had tried to cut the figure in halves, each time leaving a larger half untouched, dividing the figure in half, quarters, eights, …

There was pain in those edges, as if torn apart with blunt knife and dull scissors. And what was untouched looked painful and inflamed. Harry could feel the agony each part experienced, each part separate from its whole, and the whole suffering for its partings. There was a wrongness in that division of whole – no, that division of a soul. For it was a soul, Harry knew. Memories and feelings swirled in that etheric impression of Being, of a person who hurt themselves, as if in an act of self-chastisement.

Did they do it to themselves? Yes.
Why? They were afraid.
Why? They're alone.
Why are you alone? Because nobody wanted them.

Harry didn't believe that – everybody had someone who wanted them. Event if it was just because you were useful, there was always someone who needed you.

They don't want to be needed – They want to be wanted.
Why? Because they were never wanted before.
Didn't your mother want you? Their mother died when they were born.

That was sad, Harry thought – and the other thought so too. A frequency of sadness echoed between them, a similar resonance of emotion.

Harry also wants to be wanted. Why?
Because Harry is also alone. Are you?

No, Harry thought, he had Severus now – but for how long? Would Severus wish to keep him? Or would Severus eventually tire of him? Harry knew that Severus wanted to help him, protect him – the oath he had given was proof enough. But people are fickle, Harry thought bitterly. Harry had once before thought he knew someone who had wanted them, but they'd dropped him after Dudley had started threatening them. If you really want someone, you don't drop them when you're threatened. No! You hold on tighter! You protect each other – that's the point of being friends in the face of danger!

Harry was right. Thank you.
Maybe Harry wants another friend?

Harry didn't respond. He wasn't sure – did he want more friends now? Maybe. He mainly just wanted people who'd like him, could help him, be of use to him. If they're were really meant to be friends, he'd keep them around after they stopped being useful. Harry knew he hadn't always been useful, so he couldn't put usefulness central to any friendship.

Harry is clever. Thank you.

Who are you, not-Harry?

Silence. Harry's gaze detached again, as he waits. His two shadows were shifting too now, slowly coming to stand between Harry and not-Harry. The mist was coming closer, closer, filling valley after valley. It was like a hazy wall advancing from all sides, as if the world was becoming smaller and smaller. And then not-Harry spoke, with a voice like a whisper on the wind, as if heard from
across a vast distance.

They were called Tom, long ago. Hello, Tom.
Hello, Harry. Why are you here, Tom?
We're not sure, Harry – we shouldn't be here at all, we should be in our prisons.

Harry doesn't like prisons, not at all. His cupboard had been a prison, until he had managed to negotiate his own room after three years of currying favours and threatening blackmail.

You shouldn't be in prisons, Tom! It's okay, Harry.
How is that okay, Tom? We need our prisons if we want to remain, Harry.

Harry wanted to ask more, but suddenly his two shadows rose up, smothering him in their dark embrace! Harry struggled, screamed -

And woke up in his bed, not screaming, but he was really sweaty. Throwing the blankets from him, Harry rose up, finding his entire bed soaked to the springs with sweat. Harry knew it couldn't be an 'accident' – the salty aroma of sweat proved that much. Grumbling, he tore off his bed-covers into a corner besides his Wardrobe, stalking down to the bathrooms with a fresh set of robes and underwear. His clock had told it to be just before six in the morning, so he might as well stay up.

He quickly showered, trying not to linger too long on the many scars he had on his legs, where all manner of minor accidents had left numerous small cuts and bruises in his young life. Drying off, he threw the wet towels and pyjama in the hampers. Harry knew that House Elves would clean everything up – it was the only logical way that a building such as Hogwarts could be maintained and so many students could be cared for. Magic could only do so much, and though the House Elves could certainly be replaced with simple magic for many simple tasks, Harry suspected that so many magical spells going on at once every where would wreak havoc in many ways.

Harry wrote a few of the letters he'd wanted to send while he had the time, placing them in his pocket. He would go to the owlery later, to send off the letters using Hedwig and several of the school-owls. He briefly contemplated using the owlery in the West Tower, but that would mean him going down into the Clock Courtyard and past the Sundial Garden. It would be a trek of almost twenty minutes. Checking the time and finding it still early enough, Harry decided to use the West Tower. So he went out and down, descending the Grand Staircase on a leisurely pace.

Harry was only stopped once, by a Sixth-Year Ravenclaw Prefect who was patrolling the Clock Courtyard. “Why are you up so early, Mr Potter?” She asked, looking at him with suspicion. She held her wand in her hand, had been doing so before she had noticed him. Looking up, Harry saw the first rays of sun piercing through the sky. “I had a nightmare, Miss. I'm off to the West Tower, have to sent out a few letters.” He held up the letters, discretely keeping the recipients hidden behind his fingers – she didn't need to know who he had correspondence with, Perfect or not.

“Very well. It should be safe now – the gytrashses at least should be gone now. I'll escort you there, Mr Potter, and back here afterwards. Please, follow me.” Resigning himself to his escort, Harry fell in step behind her. Most of the trek, she remained thankfully quiet, but she did occasionally ask a thing or two, trying to foster some friendly banter between them.

“It turned out that she was Penelope Clearwater, the young girl Percy had once mentioned during their short conversations. When asking if she and Percy were a thing, using his most polite voice and a few suitable euphemisms, she blushed quite heavily before she acquiesced the truth. “Yes, I am currently in a companionable courtship with Percival, Mr Potter, but we would really appreciate it should you keep that fact out of the grievous rumour-mill. We would very much like to keep a slow and discreet pace on our courtship – for now.” Fair enough, Harry had said, he
could keep a secret or two.

Beyond that, they didn't talk much and soon they'd reached the West Tower. Bidding Miss Clearwater to wait as he went up, Harry ascended the stone stairs. It positively reeked! Owl droppings and owl-balls littered the ground around the tower and the floor inside. The tower was completely hollow inside, with two parallel spiral stairs hanging from the walls, occasionally interspersed by a balcony. Balconies on the same heights connected together with a small stone bridge, where always stood half a dozen owl-perches, so that one could call upon their owl and attach their letters to them. Calling down Hedwig and about four other owls, Harry bound each letter to a claw. He gave each an owl-treat as a personal thank-you and left six Sickles in a small collection-bin near the door. As he exited, he watched the owls and Hedwig as they took off, disappearing in the distance towards the mountains, towards London far behind.

Clearwater returned him to the Clock Courtyard, where he gave her his thanks and went to the Great Hall. He was one of the first for breakfast – only professor McGonagall and a few other professors were there, Dumbledore amongst them. Harry begrudgingly realized he had to keep the man on his good side for now, dearly regretting his outburst two evenings prior. So, walking up to the Staff-table, he gave all professors a deep bow and greeted them with a jovial good morning. It earned him a small smile from Severus, a few blushes from Pince and Sprout, and a beaming smile from McGonagall and Dumbledore.

“Ah, Harry, my boy! Good morning! Good morning indeed! How are you, my boy? Up so early?” Dumbledore said, with his usual twinkle in the eye and grandfatherly smile on his lips. Professor McGonagall gave Harry a small appreciative nod as Dumbledore spoke.

“I was up early, sir, and had a few letters to sent out to a few acquaintances. And I came to apologize, sir. I fear I was rather abrupt during our last meeting – I can not excuse it, safe for saying that it was a sensitive subject I feel rather negative about, sir. I hope you'll forgive me.”

Dumbledore gave a nod and a smile, clearly appreciating the apology, but Harry couldn't help but sensing the man wasn't quite convinced Harry was being genuine. “No matter, my boy. Such things happen when one is young. Apology accepted. I hope that lessons are not too intimidating? I wager it'd be rather a great change from your usual life?” Dumbledore asked, eyes looking over his half-moon spectacles, smile still on the lips.

“It's rather refreshing actually, sir. There is so much I don't know, and I can't wait to learn it all!” It wasn't difficult to look excited – Harry was excited! He did have difficulty keeping patient, knowing all he would be learning. He hadn't been challenged in his abilities like this since he'd started school with Dudley way back when. And even then, he'd quickly found his study-materials to become dull – the disadvantage of being clever and studious, alas.

“Well, that makes me glad to hear, Harry. I do hope you'll stick to the rules, meanwhile – many first-years like to, ah, test the boundaries, after all.” Dumbledore chuckled, to which a few professors only gave a sigh in turn. Apparently Dumbledore found it all rather amusing when students broke the rules – obviously, he wasn't the one dealing with the consequences and potential clean-up afterwards. And that made Harry almost chuckle in turn – he could appreciate Dumbledore's reluctance in that. It could come in handy.

Bidding them all a good day, hoping their breakfast would be satisfactory, Harry turned back and took a seat on the far end of the Gryffindor-table, Dumbledore's eyes on him all the time, up to the moment Harry was joined by his friends, they all finished breakfast and went on their ways to their lessons.

DADA was not too dissimilar to the previous lessons, though they forewent the physical obstacle-
course and instead had a whole period of theory, during which they discussed the physiology of werewolves, their communicable Curse and the various cures that existed to treat werewolf bites. Harry found it interesting enough, especially when they began discussing the cures and the importance of the lunar cycle on when the ingredients for the cures were harvested.

“Indeed,” Quirrell stammered through the textbook passage, “When harvesting your aconite flowers under the rays of a New Moon, you thereby imbue the harvested parts with the nullifying power of that absent Moon. Which in turn thus strengthens the Curse-Suppressing properties of the Wolfsbane Potion, for example, and heightens its Potential in suppressing the Spirit of the Wolf in the Victim of this Curse. Thus, by being a considerate Potioneer, and keeping in mind both lunar and solar cycle during Harvest, you can effortlessly improve your Potions with ease.”

Harry had checked their lunar chart afterwards, finding that that very next Sunday would be a New Moon! His Astronomy textbook later supplied that the Moon would be under the Sign of Virgo that day, which would imbue any ingredients harvested that night with an affinity towards the pancreas and digestive tract. Harry mused about what that would mean, probably it would mean either an improved absorption of the Wolfsbane Potion when consumed – which could potentially translate in a heightened efficacy, he reasoned. Of course, he wasn't sure and he wrote it all down, intent to ask Severus during the next Potions class, which would be the next day.

After DADA had come a period of Charms, with Flitwick having them go over the theory of the Levitation Spell, Wingardium Leviosa. He had gotten them to read the chapter on the spell from their books and questioned several students, before he attempted to select the most promising ones into trying it out with their wands. Neither Harry, Fay or Parvati managed to make their quills as much as quiver, while Hermione flawlessly cast the spell and made the quill almost zoom about the room – which, of course she could! Truly, Hermione sometimes liked to brag a bit too much, Harry thought as he rolled his eyes at her showing-off. Seamus, inspired by Hermione's success, began waving and pointing his wand at his own quill, stubbornly refusing to give up, against Flitwick's warnings that he might poke someone's eye out when -

BOOM! The quill exploded in a fiery flash, singing off Seamus' eyebrows, again, and covering half the room in a fine dusting of stubborn soot which refused to rub off when students tried to clean it from their faces. Flitwick send Seamus off towards the Hospital, while Vanishing the soot from everybody's faces and repairing the burning-damage done to Seamus' desk. After that, there wasn't much time left, and Flitwick sent everyone off to lunch while grumbling and muttering under his breath about 'the stubborn pride of Ireland's children'...

Lunch was quick and unusual, quickly over. Hermione, Neville and Harry revised some of the lessons they’d had until now – Ron ignoring their hushes revisions whilst stuffing his face. Eventually, before lunch time would be up, Harry went to Percy, to ask a few things.

“Hm, yes, professor Flitwick does have Goblin ancestors, though nobody really knows how far back in his family they go. But his stature isn't necessarily because of his ancestry, Harry. The Flitwicks have always been a diminutive people, usually never really growing past the 1.5 meter mark. The professor is just more diminutive than usual – I think my dad mentioned once that Muggles have a whole terminology for people with extreme differences in size?”

Harry nodded, eager to explain what he knew about Muggle-genetics concerning height and stature. “Yes, we usually divide it into gigantism and dwarfism, each with a whole sub-host of more specific disorders that can cause either whole-body growth differences or more specific limb growth differences. It's a really fascinating subject!” Harry rattled off with a bit of academic zeal – he had always found it an interesting explanation for certain mythological creatures. Though, of course, he would have to revise that now, with magic being real and such.
But that hadn't been why he wanted to talk to Percy, so Harry tried to steer the conversation back on track. “I heard that some families have interbred with certain Beings and Creatures in the past – Goblins, Veela, Giants, … Is that something that happens regularly? And is it frowned upon?” Percy looked apprehensively for a moment, before his expression turned pensive. “Well... Pure-bloods usually frown upon it, because it 'dilutes' or 'corrupts' their blood, you see. But I know for a fact that certain... aristocratic and... ah, 'blonde' families have a bit of Veela in them.” Percy's eyes flicked towards the Slytherin-table and it didn't take Harry much to conclude that Percy was subtly referring to Malfoy's family. “Ah – I see.” Harry said diplomatically.

“Well, any other families that may have had such 'magical' ancestors?” And Harry let his eyes flick towards Ron, widening his eyes a bit when Percy didn't immediately take the bait. Eventually the Prefect took the hint, looked at his youngest brother stuffing his face, and realisation dawned on his face. “Ah – I see. Well...” Percy leaned a bit closer to Harry before talking in a low hushed voice. “Mother got bit by our household Ghoul when she was pregnant with him. It caused quite a bit of excitement – Dad was all in a dizzy and had her visit about ten Healers before he was satisfied with their repeated exclamation that all was fine.”

Harry gave Percy his biggest stink-eye and looked back at Ron from the corner of his eye. The glutton was tearing into a roast-chicken like a rabid animal – a few students had moved a bit further away from him. “Ah – well... He's fine, isn't he? Okay, he may be a bit... boorish, but otherwise he is normal.” Harry nodded – he couldn't disagree with that. Ron might be a bit gluttonous and overeager emotionally, but Percy's words had given him much to think about.

“So, it's a bit like wizarding 'lupus'?” Harry asked, hoping Percy would read between the lines and recognize the obvious allusion. “Well – no. That illness is a bit more aggressive in the changes it brings about with 'cyclical' regularity. Ron is just... Ron. He just needs to eat more than others of his age to feel full and he is a bit more volatile than children your age usually are. I mean, Ghouls are very simple creatures in what they want and when they want it – they make it very clear and they don't really do emotion-control like humans do.”

“Plus, on the upside, he grows much faster than others and, though he may look scrawny, you don't want to be on the receiving end when he raises his fists. I have seen Ron almost split a tree-trunk during a temper-tantrum when he was six – it took us a whole day to calm him down. But, other than that, he is very much just like you or me.” Percy explained, voice rather level, yet Harry could hear a sense of sadness underneath it all. He could imagine how difficult that could have been, having to keep happy a child that doesn't know it has the strength of two full-grown men. Molly must be a fierce and proud mother to successfully raise Ron along with all his older brothers.

“Thanks, Percy. I appreciate the explanation – and don't worry, I'm not gonna treat Ron any different. It's just that, now, I have a better idea how to deal with Ron when he becomes angry or hungry.” Percy gave Harry a kind smile. “Thanks, Potter – I know Ron can be a handful, so I appreciate it.” The bell tolled quickly after that, and Harry joined Hermione and Neville again, prying Ron away from his already-Vanished plate. “I'm still hungry.” Ron whined.

“Honestly, Ronald, you say that as if you never get to eat anything. Now, come on! We have to go to class!” Hermione was almost shrieking towards the end, finally taking hold of Ron's ear and tugging him along by his ears. “Ow, Hermione! Stop it!” Harry just chuckled and rolled his eyes, looking at Neville with a smile, who was chuckling as well.

Transfiguration was the same as before, with the class trying to change a match into a needle. It was boring, difficult and just frustrating. Professor McGonagall reiterated the virtue of patience in the Art of Transfiguration, once more repeating how they should focus on a mental image of the transformation they were trying to incur. By the end, Harry had only managed to make a very
pointy match – it was a poorer result than the previous lesson. “No worries, Mr Potter. Transfiguration can be annoyingly tricky the first times, especially when never before done. It might take a while, but eventually you shall all get there. I shall see to that.” And that didn't really help to settle Harry's nerves about it at all.

Finally, they were on their way to their first Flying lessons – something Harry had looked forward to. He knew he could fly, having done so at the Malfoy Estate – and he was looking forward to the boundless freedom it brought. Not having to bother with gravity, with his usual two-dimensional travelling of forward, backward, sideways... With almost a skip in his step, Harry dragged their little ragtag group forwards, eager to be the first on the Training Grounds and on their brooms!

Madame Hooch, with her neon-yellow eyes, spiky white hair and stern pinched expression, was something else altogether. She spoke in loud tones, yet with clipped voice and a rather limited vocabulary. It didn't seem like it was a case of her not knowing more words, more like she was very careful in choosing which words to use. She was quick-witted, to-the-point, and with little patience for tomfoolery. She gave the students, Gryffindor and Slytherin alike, a very short introduction to the mechanics of broom-flying, a short lecture on the correct ways to hold and mount a broom – during which she chewed out several Slytherins that they'd been holding their brooms wrong ever since they'd been taught by their parents or tutors.

“Holding a broom is not like holding a broom. You're not sweeping the floor with it – you fly! Now, backs up straight, hold out your hand over your broom-stick, and with a clear voice, command it to go UP!” The students, spread across four lines, all began commanding their brooms. It was a veritable cacaphony of timid “Up?” and loud bellowed “UP!” Ron's broom jumped up partway, never quite reaching his hands. Hermione's broom just... rolled about, wobbling across the grass. Neville's broom leapt up, hitting the poor boy straight on the nose, causing it to bleed profusely, to which Hooch quickly strode over to help Neville stop the nose-bleed. Draco's broom sprang into his outstretched hand, like a faithful dog eager to obey its master – it caused quite a smile on his rather angelic features. Harry's broom came to his hand on a leisurely pace, gently ascending and allowing Harry to almost grasp it with a lover's touch.

It felt like coming home, in a way, a happy warmth of comfort and familiarity settling in his stomach, completing him in a way Harry didn't know he felt incomplete. It was like the feeling he had when he flourished his wand, a feeling of extension and reunion, of the wand feeling like a natural addition to his corporeal form an a spiritual level. It felt just the same with the broom, sensing the undercurrent of his magic channeling through it, eager to obey his every command and help him get wherever he needed to be. He hadn't really noticed it much when he'd visited the Malfoy Estate and when Draco had taught him Quidditch, but he could feel it now – like singing in his veins, horses throdding in perfect pace together. He lacked the precise word to describe it – could only convey it in a myriad scenes, each a piece of the puzzle and yet none good enough to bring home the message. It just felt right.

And then Hooch was marching between the lines, inspecting the progress and correcting where needed. Those she deemed ready, she sent off to the other side of the large lawn, leaving a seventh-year student of hers in charge of overseeing those who were still struggling. She then joined those who she'd deemed ready.

“Now, we're going to practice a few very basic manoeuvres. Rising, lowering, speeding up, slowing down – the basics. Be warned! If you have any aspirations of trying out for a place on the Quidditch teams next year, you will have to master these basics and the basics required for Quidditch manoeuvres. Fail this class and any hopes you have will be dashed. I will not be complicit in you either making a fool of yourself, and besmirching my competence as your teacher, or your daredevil recklessness in attempting that which you can not perform without breaking your
Yeah, Harry was pretty sure he was gonna stay on her good side whenever he could. From the corner of his eye, he saw professor McGonagall and Filch, the caretaker, watching the lesson from the edge of the lawn. They were occasionally conversing when they saw the performance of a student and Filch gave stern nods and shakes sometimes. He wondered why they'd be observing them. Perhaps they were hoping that one of the students would turn out to be a Quidditch natural.

Once Hooch stopped by him, he dutifully performed the actions she'd explained to him. She gave him a well-deserved smile, finding no fault in his handling of the broom and execution of the manoeuvres. “Very well done, Mr Potter. You might be guaranteed a spot on the Gryffindor Quidditch team if you hone and practice your current talent. I shall keep an eye on you during my lessons.”

Eventually she stopped by Draco, finding only a few faults in Draco's flying and giving him ample amount of constructive criticism. When she stepped away, unto the next student, it was to leave a mildly disgruntled and subtly fearful Draco in her wake. Harry gave a sigh, knowing all too well it was probably due to Lucius' pressure on his son to perform outstandingly on all his classes - which, ridiculously really, was something impossible to ask of any child!

Swiftly the double period of flying lessons came and went.

Chapter End Notes

Genetic imprinting of contracted illnesses upon a host's DNA is such a fascinating subject - especially when you consider the practical uses of it in smaller microbial lifeforms and the consequences of it on larger mammalian hosts ;)
Chapter XXXIV

Chapter Summary

Another evening, a different kind of conversation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry and Severus didn't meet up that evening, Harry just followed his House-mates up to the common room after dinner. The previous days, he only went up once it was somewhere around half past ten or eleven, when most were already asleep in the dorms. So he hadn't had much time to converse with his House-mates after the Sorting, besides brief conversations and introductions during the lessons and free periods between. Now, he walked in with Hermione, Neville, and Ron, to mild surprise of the older Gryffindors, apparently.

"Oh, so the great Harry Potter finally deigns us worthy to grace us with his presence after dinner, instead of slinking back in when we're asleep?" One of the oldest boys chided, an indignant sneer on his features, voice dripping with contempt and enmity. Ron began sputtering, ready to defend Harry against the baleful scorn directed to him. Harry just clapped a hand on Ron's shoulder, willing the redhead to stay calm, conveyed without words or looks. And Ron listened, though he may not have known why – the ginger relied a bit too much on his instincts, Harry mused, which wasn't always a bad thing he thought.

"So?" Harry didn't say anything else – such baseless accusations weren't worth his time. Why should he have to defend his actions to someone who had no role or part in his personal life? It would be as futile as battling the winds for blowing against your face. And, clearly, as the older boy turned a bit puce in the face, Harry's response hadn't been what he had expected. What had he expected then? That the eleven-year old would grovel at his feet, make pleasurable obeisances to get in his good graces? He clearly didn't know who or what Harry was all about then.

"So? So?! I tell you why so! You obviously think you're better than us, don't you? Being all smug with those Slytherins, with Snape! Obviously we're not good enough for you, are we, Potter?" Oh dear, Harry resigned himself. "No. I'm not better than anyone else. But I am better than you – because I'm not attacking someone younger than myself when they're busy planning their life. Now, whether you mind it or not, I want to spend time with my friends – not have my life dictated by a bully."

It was spoken with a cool lilt, Harry's face an expressionless facade, as if he was ostensibly bored to the bone by the behaviour of his senior. He turned on his heels, herding the others up to the boy's dormitory, not wishing to spend a moment longer in such boorish company. A lot of sputtering, girl whisps in the back, and ill-concealed raucous laughter all told of the scene Harry left without intent to lay a single glance on. The senior was being jeered, chastised and emboldened by both his peers and all the younger students. And Harry, really, couldn't care less – he had friends to talk with.

It didn't take long before, as Harry expected they would, Ron and the others spoke the question they'd undoubtedly had on their mind since they'd partook in the Sorting ceremony.
“Why didn't you tell us who you were, on the train?” Harry knew why – to him it was clear as a day, the reason, but not everybody was him. Lucky that.

“Would you have come to see me for me and not as the Boy-Who-Lived, had you known?” The answer kept them mercifully quiet as they mulled through the scenario it proposed. And Harry knew that most wouldn't have seen Harry as Harry. No, they would have seen the Boy-Who-Lived, Vanquisher of the Dark Lord, the Saviour, the Chosen One. All perfectly nice epitaphs, Harry was sure, but each title had loads of baggage that came with.

So he lived through the Killing Curse, which apparently was not to be survived – well, evidently it was survivable. I mean, he was here, wasn't he? The mere fact that he lived elevated him above the statute of a normal human, making him almost immortal in their eyes. What a load of rubbish, he thought bitterly. He bled easily enough – and he had bled often with the Dursleys. And what can bleed, can die.

Was Harry really the Vanquisher of the Dark Lord? No, he didn't think so. Too many incongruities had come to his knowledge. Quirrell's 'second' face being the most obvious one – what, like a face exactly like the Dark Lord's hovered over Quirrell's own when looking at him through a Hag-stone was normal? Obviously not. The Dark Mark was another clue – Snape had told him what it was. What it signified, how the Dark Lord used it, the sort of magic it was made with. The Mark was so closely entwined with the Dark Lord's aura that Harry very much doubted it would have survived so relatively unchanged had the man actually died. Plus, it didn't feel 'dead' – it felt more like a serpent hibernating through a long and bitter winter.

Harry was sunken deep in his second thoughts when Hermione's talking shook him from it. “Probably not, no.” It took him a second to remember she was answering his question – and Hermione's long pause showed she'd probably gone over a dozen scenarios he'd asked them to consider. “You're right, Harry. We probably would've begun to trouble you with inane stuff, like your scar, if you could remember You-Know-Who.” And she gave him a big smile. “Instead, we got to learn that your favourite colour is blue, you hate spinach, and your favourite word is 'tripe'. And I like that more.” Neville and Ron were of the same opinion, happily nodding along with Hermione as she spoke.

Harry gave them a bright smile back. “Likewise, Hermione. I, in particular, like knowing that you have a younger sister, that Neville's favourite plant is dittany, and that Ron really doesn't care for the orange sweaters his mom knits him every Christmas.” And when Ron gave Harry a playful punch on the shoulder for that, it only served to make the four giggle like the children they were – happy, unconcerned. And Harry felt happy with that. He hadn't often got the opportunity to be really unconcerned around the Dursleys, after all. There had always been some tension or another, mucking up any sense of peace he could've had there...

After that, they fell into some playful ribbing between friends, playing a rather innocent game of truth or dare – which usually ended at least one of the four howling in laughter and the others giving supportive smiles to one another. It easily was the most carefree evening Harry had ever had, as far as he could remember. And wasn't that saying a lot?

Somewhere in between the chatting and silly dares, Hermione found time to share with Harry all she'd managed to learn about the staff at Hogwarts. Neville had helped tremendously, she told Harry, using his timid and shy nature to bring the more friendly professors at ease around them when they asked the rather less innocent questions. Hermione's efficiency at planning their subtle questions apparently had ensured a maximum of answers with a minimum of questions. Riffing through the small stack of paper she'd given him, Harry had to admit he was very impressed. The questions had been rather innocent indeed, but they'd been phrased in ways that encouraged the one
answering them to share more details than strictly needed. “Are you sure you weren’t supposed to be in Slytherin?” Harry asked Hermione, rather tongue in cheek, a knowing smirk on his face as he looked at her.

“Well,” She began, biting on her lip, looking positively guilty as if she was a kid caught with her hands in the cookie-jar. “The Hat was very stubborn.” Harry looked at her with wide open eyes – the Hat wouldn’t have, would it? “No.” He said, almost breathlessly as Ron began spluttering wordlessly. Hermione gave a small nod. “It wanted to put me in Slytherin or Ravenclaw first, it wasn't sure – but I didn't want either.”

“So, of course, you began a discussion with a millennium-old magical artefact, hoping to persuade it to sort you into Gryffindor instead?” Harry said, feeling like he could burst out laughing any moment. This really was too good. “Well, no – I wanted to be in Hufflepuff. Hufflepuff is the House where you can make friends with everyone. I never really had friends before... so I wanted to be in Hufflepuff...” And how that was tugging at his heart-strings, Harry conceded with a sense of angst and longing. It was quite similar to his own situation before, he realized – too smart for their own good, too witty and manipulative to make real friends. He scooted over to her and gave her a tight hug, hoping to convey his sense of familiarity through it.

“But instead you got Gryffindor.” Neville said softly, almost whispering. “Probably because you argued with it. I told my gran about the Hat – it argued with me as well. And she said that the Hat is a bit of a stubborn know-it-all, who likes having the last word.” Ron gave a laugh at that. “Sounds about right – I mean, it was the hat of Godric Gryffindor after all. And people say that he was as stubborn as the deepest Goblins were.”

“Deepest Goblins? What do you mean by that, Ron?” Hermione queried, curiosity taking over from her. Ron gave her a small hug after Harry released her, before he answered the question. “Deepest Goblins are the Goblins who never see the light of day. The Goblins you see at Gringotts are sort of diplomats – the Deepest Goblins use them to speak with Wizards and Witches, so that they don't have to. My father told me that some of the Deepest Goblins don't even see the Gringotts Goblins as real goblins, but instead as a sort of half-breed that isn't pure. Because in their ears, real goblins don't venture to the surface – or don't even use candles to light up their tunnels. The darkness of the underground is sacred to them, somehow – they almost worship it like a god or something.”

Interesting indeed, Harry noted, definitely worth researching further. He might need to send another list of books to Flourish & Blotts for owl-delivery at Hogwarts. At this rate, he would be in possession of a veritable library by the end of the year. But, before he did that, he could just as easily go visit the library and see if they too had books about goblin culture. And if they hadn't, he could order double copies as to gift one to the library here – it could never hurt to ingratiate himself with Madame Pince by donating new books to her little domain of knowledge.

“By the way, Ron, what do Goblins do to express gratitude to each other? I have an accountant at Gringotts who's been really helpful the past months – and I really want to do something to express how helpful he's been.” Ron pondered a moment, before shaking his head. “I don't really know much about Goblin culture, but I can send a letter to Bill and ask him if you want?” Harry nodded – that sounded good. “If you'd like, Ron, that'd be really useful. Thanks.” And he gave the ginger a playful nod against the shoulder, earning a happy smile back.

Their friendly banter and talk went on for a while longer, even as the other boys started slipping into the dorm. Eventually Hermione rose, excusing herself so that the others could get undressed and into their pyjamas. “I'll see you guys tomorrow. Good night.” And off she was, slipping out of the dorm and down the stairs, back towards the common room. Harry wondered if she'd been
making friends with the girls of her year – he'd seen her talk to a few, but the hostile whispers that the older girls had murmured the day before didn't really settle well with him. He hoped that there were at least a few girls who could see her for who she really was.

Eventually, night came for them all and all that was heard throughout the tower was the crackling of the burning logs in the hearth, the rustling of pages from a few students already pulling all-nighters for their studies, and the soft – and often loud, snores of all asleep in their beds. Sir Nicholas, the Gryffindor ghost, drifted through the empty common room sometime around one o'clock, with the ghost of a grotesque toad in his pale hands, making his rounds to see if any students were making mischief. And if he saw a pair of identical figures sneak about towards the abandoned prefect's bathroom for some late night brewing and experimenting, he might have pretended not to see them. After all, he was very old and very occupied planning his death-day party coming the end of October – and you really never could start too early with planning parties, after all.

Somewhere else in the castle, the Grey Lady, joined by the ghostly apparition of a soldier, made her rounds through the Ravenclaw tower. They passed by the figure of a young girl, pale blond hair and radish-earring the only obvious things, and promptly ignored her. Perhaps it was the fact that the soldier was in heavy monologue, discussing the foodstuffs he sorely missed – or perhaps it was because the girl didn't want to be noticed. No matter what the reason, they promptly passed her by and didn't notice the door opening as she left.

Elsewhere yet, the Bloody Baron patrolled the dungeons, a gaggle of gloomy Nuns following in his wake, a trail of Latin chants whispered as they passed. And none paid mind to the figure of Severus Snape stalking through the corridors, cloak billowing behind him, alike a bat hunting for prey – or in his case, hunting for students out of bed and on the wander for kicks. An unhappy sneer on his lips, a hard glint in his eyes, he flew through the hallways and nothing escaped his notice.

Hufflepuff's dungeon was equally deserted, though maybe not as quiet. The younger years were silent enough, but the dormitories of the older years were more... occupied. The Fat Friar dutifully avoided the older year's dormitories – after all, his vows of celibacy remained even after death. And he had no intention of accidentally walking in on one of the famous circle-jerks of the male dormitories of Hufflepuff. Really, he didn't. So he kept patrolling the common room and the dungeon outside, going through the kitchens as well, giving his compliments to the Hogwarts House-Elves as he passed them by. Such dutiful creatures, always eager for his honest compliments.

And in a tower high above the Grand Staircase, alone and not wishing any visitors, Dumbledore paced his office for hours on end, loudly speaking his thoughts, asking the paintings of Hogwarts’ previous Headmasters and Headmistresses for advice whenever he wished it. Fears and troubles raced through his old mind, with regret at past events muddling the train of his thoughts further. Once, his mind had always been clear and steady, able to perceive the underlying currents of history as it happened before him. But now he was old, and tired. He's had a long life, one marred with tribulations, youthful errors, foolish mistakes. And it was no longer as clear as it had been for ages past. Some paintings whispered in concern about their current successor, but none dared to voice their concerns out loud. They all knew that Dumbledore was both stubborn and had a vindictive streak. Best to stay on his good side, they reasoned. And so they kept their tongues, and spoke of nothing, while an old man continued to sink into despair as his careful plans were torn to shreds by unknown persons and stubborn children who didn't know what was best for them.

On the third floor, in a corridor locked off for students, another person was stalking around, inspecting each door and each room. It didn't take long before they left, with an arm hanging
limply by their side, grazed by the teeth of a terrible beast. They hadn't expected something like it and had been caught unaware. But it was nothing that essence of dittany couldn't fix – and this person had lots of that in stock, for many reasons. But too was their mind on another thing, on another hunger of sorts that gnawed at their stomach and burned in their bones. A curse was coursing through their veins, and nightmares troubled their sleep. They were not at well, no indeed – but they would persevere. Their goal was too important.

And as all this went on, three people dreamed that night – they walked a scene that was less dream and more like looking through a pinprick hole at what was to come. An old Divination professor rose from her slumber and spoke in hoarse tones a Prophecy – only the third she ever spoke. But none was around to hear it and so it went unheard and unremembered – if it weren't for a small orb that came to be in a dark room deep beneath London.

A young boy, with platinum hair, dreamed of a wedding, many years further still, where green eyes met grey, as vows were exchanged, between a serpent and its commander.

And another child, with raven hair, once more dreamed of a broken soul, seven parts that were not whole, and of soft conversation about many things that would not be remembered the next morning.

Chapter End Notes

In the first drafts of the first book, Hermione was supposed to have a younger sister who was thoroughly Muggle. I want to take this and twist it to my own ends for the story, so it's going to be fun - eventually.

And what is this? Hermione an almost-Slytherin? As if the canon doesn't give us a sly witty heroin, indeed ;)

The Deep Goblins are inspired, as a concept of culture/species, by Terry Pratchett's 'Deep' Dwarves (who never venture into the light of day and serve as "priests").

Lots of hints in this chapter - lots of hints.
Chapter Summary

We need to talk, in light of recent events.

Unfortunately, J.K. Rowling has made some very derisive about the LGBT-community, in particular towards trans people. Now, not withstanding her rather... blasé earlier comments about certain subjects (such as her rather tame post-book reveal of Dumbledore's sexuality, which was more insulting than if she'd never told of it all, in my opinion), we cannot condone, personally, any person who makes such outdated and rather crude remarks. By not acknowledging the rather rich and varied nature of human sexuality and sensuality, she used a privilege which those of the LGBT-community can never use – she (as a member of the majority) lorded over a minority her opinions as if they were unmistakable and immutable fact. She thereby put down any valid concerns, dialogue and discussion such a deep subject requires.

I cannot condone her biased views, her crude attempts at 'mainsplaining' her opinion, her putting down any criticism on her opinion, ... But that doesn't mean I have to reject her works. Her creative writing, providing us with a safe space in which we can transport our imagination and, for a time, ignore the world's troubles, still provides wondrous and lush world for us to visit at any time.

However, we must acknowledge the faults in her works – and these can be mainly found in her rather sparse diversity of characters, backgrounds, etcetera... Yes, we have people of Indian, Asian, Irish, Russian, ... descend in the main-books – but never are these people characters that are in the spotlight. Rather, with few exceptions, they are merely background characters, meant to 'colour' the scenes in which they participate. And when they participate as a character rather than as an observed object, they are reduced to rather crude and insulting stereotypes. The Irish boy who has 'explosive' magic, the extremely-accented Russian/French, the rather one-dimension Parvati-twins, ... They are not true characters – rather they are fascisimiles, 2D-objects cast as a 3D-person but with as much depth as a shadow.

Certain themes are rather thinly-veiled (lycanthropy as an allegory for AIDS/HIV) and when you look at these books through an objective lens, with knowledge of what those themes stand for and how poorly the depths of such themes are really explored, it rather seems as if she wanted to imply a depth that was never there. And in my opinion, that is most insulting to any reader. And the way she uses thinly-veiled themes such as racism, eugenics, genocide, communicable diseases, ... is an insult to all the people who have a very intrinsic connections to those themes, either via past or present experiences.

I am a neurodivergent person, who is not heteresexual. I have experienced rape, the uncertainty of not knowing if I contracted HIV through that rape, and know of other such experiences in my family. And to know that J.K. Rowling, would she write me as a character in her books, would reduce me to a background character, a fleeting shadow on a wall, as a crude allusion to a theme that must be discussed in depth and with honesty, that pains me.

I don't know when I will continue writing this story. I want to continue, I want to finish the idea I had in my head – and I want to include such deep themes in ways that those themes deserve. So
when the next update comes, know it will have much more thought put in it than J.K. Put in those
damning tweets...

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