Few are the ones to know that the last wizarding war was about to take one step too far just before its end on the 31st of October 1981. Sympathizers are not so inclined to blindly follow the Dark Lord when he starts including their youths into his plan… But why would you expose your upcoming insurrection when your leader is already said dead?

The world is far from being as black and white as Dumbledore tries to make you believe. There is a lot of things Albus Dumbledore doesn’t know after all…

For example, what if Ron Weasley was not Harry Potter’s first friend? What if Harry already had a best friend he met long before Hogwarts or knowing he was a wizard? What if Harry already had plans before a half-giant comes in and crushes them?

Luckily for him, the wizarding world grants little importance to what Harry Potter wants and a lot to what was expected of him. And how could Harry keep in touch with his best friend when the Statute of Secrecy forces him to lie to the only person he ever trusts anyway?
Most children experienced their 7th birthday dressed as their favourite fairy-tale or movie character, playing around with friends, drinking carbonated drinks and eating chocolate cakes that their mother had made with love.

Harry Potter was not like most children.

He learned that today was his 7th birthday two weeks ago when his 1st-grade teacher listed all the names of the students whom birthdays would happen during Summer Holidays. He was surprised to see his name and the date next to it on the blackboard.

*Harry Potter – Friday 31st of July (7)*

However, there had been no cake, extravagant amount of presents or happy song waiting for him this morning. His aunt woke him up at 6, as usual. He had five minutes to use the bathroom and take a cold shower. Then he helped out making breakfast for his uncle and cousin. His aunt gave him a half-burned toast and a glass of water before telling him to gather all the dirty laundry in the house.

At 8:30, after his uncle went to work and while Dudley was finishing eating his scrambled eggs and bacon in front of the TV, he did try to be brave and dare to ask for a glass of orange juice. Maybe his aunt had just forgotten, maybe she did not know, she was not at school after all…

The horse-faced woman looked at him and sneered: “And why would I give you that?”

“Because it’s my birthday?” he announced hesitantly. “I’m 7 now and I thought… maybe I could try it?”

His left cheek was still red from the slap he got for his ‘insolence’. Then he had to drink a full glass of vinegar since he said he wanted to try something new on his birthday. “Orange juice is not to be wasted on freaks like you!” his aunt had declared before ordering him to go outside and water the garden. He would have tried to rinse his mouth with the garden hose but he was too afraid that his aunt might spot him and made him drink another glass of disgusting liquid… So the aftertaste followed him all morning long.

Lunch passed without the woman calling him inside to eat. No food today then… He guessed he might have deserved it. Harry hoped she would not tell her husband but that was very unlikely. He did not really want to go back inside. He would probably see nothing else than the selling of his cupboard for few days starting that night…

“Hey, guys! You know what? The freak said it’s his birthday today! Why don’t we play with him as a gift? Ready for an epic Harry Hunting game?”

He heard his cousin before he saw him with his friends. They were finishing ice creams by the house which made him remember how hot, thirsty and hungry he was… but he did not have time for that. He needed to run and hide now!

His flight drove him to a bushy garden one block down the road. His shadowy shelters made him feel kind of safe. He saw his cousin and his friends passed by the house without stopping and let out a sigh of relief. If days with no meals were to come, he had no energy to waste with an endless run.

Now, he only had to wait for them to get bored and go do something else. It should not take more than an hour… He still had chores to do before his uncle’s return.
He watched the house whose garden he was hidden into. It was smaller than the Dursley’s. One story. Probably only one or two bedrooms. It should be quicker to clean it… The garden really needed to be tended to though… He could not stop himself from thinking about stuff like that and realized it was probably strange for a kid his age.

There was a teenage girl smoking by the back door. She had not seen him. He tensed when he heard a car stopping in front of the house. The teenager said something, threw away her cigarette and went back inside. A woman with strict grey clothes got out of the car and opened the rear door. First, no one got out but the woman kneeled near the car and small shoes appeared in Harry’s field of view.

A small girl finally got out the car. Harry estimated that she was around his age but shorter than him and he was already the smallest kid in his class so maybe she was a little bit younger. She had shoulder length light brown hair and the sun gave it a dark blond shade. She was stretching the long sleeves of her grey hoodie with her hands, she seemed nervous.

The woman shook hands with the man and woman who just got out the house and smiled at the teenager who stayed by the front door. She introduced the girl but the kid’s shoulders tensed when she touched her. The girl stubbornly kept her stare low and the adults laughed amused. Harry thought it was probably how he looked like when someone came visiting Aunt Petunia.

Stay silent, do not talk or stare back, you are nothing, you are not here and if you believe it strong enough, they might forget you even exist and won’t hurt you.

“You’re sure he went this way?” The sudden and loud voice of his cousin startled Harry and some dead leaves crunched under his feet.

“Yeah! I saw him, I told you!” The small group of boys was back at the house level. “Can we help you kids?” The owner of the house asked with a strong hearty voice.

“We are looking for my cousin!” Dudley answered with his fake sweetest tone. “We were playing but we lost him. Name’s Harry. This small, black hair and with glasses. Have you see him?”

Harry tried to make himself as little as possible. However, when he looked up to see if he was screwed, his heart skipped.

Silver eyes dived into his emerald ones. The same kind of fear and passive resignation. An understanding.

He felt goosebumps forming on his forearms. His feet positioned themselves, ready to run again if he had to but he could not stop looking at her. She did not blink either. He needed to go, he could not stay here! Contradictory feelings were crushing his heart.

“What is it June? Have you seen something?”

The adult voice seemed to finally break the spell and the girl looked away shaking her head silently.

“Sorry boys! We have not seen him.” Harry watched Dudley’s gang leave from the corner of his eyes. “Let’s show you your room and finish our talk inside, okay?” The girl followed the adults toward the door but just before she entered, she turned one last time in his direction.

“Thank you.” Harry mouthed silently. A ghost of a smile answered him before the door closed.
The rain seemed to never come to an end in Surrey that August. It did not prevent Harry from doing his outside chores and it did not prevent his relatives from forgetting about him and locking him up outside either.

After one hour of shivering under the small back door eaves, Harry decided to go to the local park to find a better shelter into the big pipe in the playground. He was surprised to discover he was not the only child outside despite the weather.

“Hi.” He announced himself softly. He immediately recognized the silver eyes that turned toward him. “Do you mind if I stay with you?”

The girl shook her head and moved a little to give him more dry space. Harry sat down on the opposite side of her. An awkward silence settled in between them. She eventually turned her face and looked silently at the rain still pouring outside the pipe.

The girl was drenched and shivering but Harry guessed he was probably in a similar state. She had fair skin, paler than his. He thought she kind of looked like a doll even if she was not wearing a dress but the same hoodie as the last time he saw her…

“Did you get locked up outside too? My relatives went to the cinema and forgot I was in the garden…” Harry was not usually the talkative type but the girl’s presence made him somehow uncomfortable. It felt weird to just stare at her saying nothing like that.

She faced him and shook her head again. “I run away.” She murmured just when Harry was starting to wonder if she was mute.

“Why? Your family is not nice to you?” Harry felt stupid. This was none of his business, why was he so eager to know if she had a better or worse life than he had?!

“There are not my family… it’s a foster home. I… They… I just needed to go out.” She explained looking away.

“Oh.” Was the only intelligible answer he managed to breathe out. Did something happen to her parents? He could not ask. He certainly would not want to tell a stranger his parents were drunkards and were dead from drinking and driving with him inside the car and that was why he lived with his hateful relatives… “My name is Harry Potter, by the way.” He said evenly.

Her silver eyes looked at him once more before slipping away. “I… They call me June Islington.”

“It’s not your real name?” Harry guessed.

She shook her head and her arms tensed around her knees, “I don’t know my real name…” she whispered so low he barely heard.

Harry just stared for a second. He could not bring himself to pity her though, her words echoed too close to home for him to feel sorry. “Don’t worry! I didn’t know my real name either until I started school last September.” He said maybe a little too happily bringing her gaze back to him. “They’d always called me ‘Boy’ or… ‘Freak’ so I thought I didn’t have a name or that my name was ‘Freak Boy’.” He let out a small bitter laugh. “But during my first day at primary school, the teacher called me ‘Harry Potter’ and that how I knew my real name.”

“So I will know my real name when I will start school?” June asked eagerly. It’s was the first real emotion he saw her. Her eyes were shining and really looked like liquid silver at this moment. “They told me I will go to St Gregory’s Primary School in September.”
“That’s where I go!” Harry smiled. “Which grade?”

“That’s where I go!” Harry smiled. “Which grade?”

“First.”

“I’ll be in Second grade. But you can still come to me anytime if you have questions!”

She gave him a real smile this time and Harry could only grin back.

Soon they started talking about school. About the teachers, the cafeteria, the playground. They did not even realize the rain had stopped until hours later.

Harry was overexcited when the 1st of September finally came. School meant fewer chores, fewer beatings from his relatives and fewer chances they decided to lock him up in his cupboard for more than a weekend!

School was Harry’s safe haven. Even if Dudley and his gang were there too, this year he would not be in the same class as his cousin! Plus, June would be there.

He had met with the girl a few other times during summer. They never stayed together for long because Harry was too busy with avoiding his cousin and doing his endless list of chores but it was still enough time to say ‘Hello’ and talk a little bit.

He knew she was stressed out about today, but all 1st grades were. He tried to reassure her as he could. However, he could not admit to her he was a little anxious too because he was afraid she would leave him once she met new friends…

It was too late or too soon to worry about that anyway! Harry tried to stay attentive during his first class, to listen to his new teacher, and to remember the name of his new classmates… He knew none of them would want to be his friend. Dudley made sure of it last year… What if Dudley went after June for staying with him?

10 AM break came. But he did not find the young girl in the playground. It was not really a surprise, 1st grade often stayed in class to learn more about each other during the first day of school. Yet, he felt disappointed when the ring told him to go back to class.

Harry did not try to find June during lunchtime. It was too dangerous to stay in the cafeteria. Dudley would be there and other kids would make fun of his lunch. Aunt Petunia only gave him the crust of Dudley’s sandwiches but since she made four of them, he thought it was kind of a good meal compared to what he had sometimes. His classmates would never think the same way though – he bitterly learned that fact the previous year.

He had settled against a secluded tree, as far as possible from the cafeteria. Nobody came there during lunchtime. That was why he tensed when he saw a shadow approaching his hiding spot. He relaxed quickly, however, as soon as he realized the shape did not match his cousin’s.

“Hi,” June said with a low voice.

She was wearing a pink dress which did not fit well with her Converse shoes. “My foster mom made me wear it.” She explained when she noticed his look. “I hate it.” She sat next to him and took out her lunch. She had two big sandwiches with salad, a yoghurt, apple juice and a banana. “Do you want some? She put too much, I cannot eat it all and she gets mad at me when I don’t finish.”
He nodded and she gave him one sandwich and the apple juice. She did not comment on his lunch. They ate in silence. Harry felt like this was the best meal he had in a long time. He still tried to refuse when she gave him the banana. “Won’t you get hungry later?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No way, I’ve already eaten yesterday night and this morning too… it’s a lot.” He silently agreed to that. He had never understood how his cousin could eat this much… He felt pretty full already from the sandwich but he was not sure he would eat that night… He could keep the crunches for breakfast the next morning or late night snack if he was hungry! “Thanks.”

When he finished, June took out a card game from her pocket. “Do you want to play?” she offered.

“I’ve never…”

“It’s easy. Kate said that you just have to pull a card and if the number is higher than the other you win. And King is better than Queen who is better than Jack. And One is called ‘Ace’ and it’s stronger than everything else! The player who wins more battles wins the game.” She explained, repeating what her foster big sister told her.

Harry nodded and they started playing. However, the young boy quickly understood his new friend was avoiding a subject. “How did it go?”

June paused and answered without looking at him. “You were wrong. The teacher called me ‘June Islington’ too and when I told her that was not my real name but I did not know what my name was, the other kids made fun of me… They said it was strange and asked where my parents were…”

“Oh… I’m sorry” Harry said honestly feeling his words. He did not want for June to be rejected by her classmates like he was. “I don’t have parents either.” He offered.

She finally met his gaze. “I know. They told.” The ghost smile was back but he understood her feeling. He felt relieved too when he had realized he was not the only one. “I hate this name,” she added nonetheless.

“Why? I think it’s cute.”

“It’s just that they found me in June in the Borough of Islington last year…” she muttered. “I hate it”. Oh… now he got it. This name was awful and just a way to remind her that she was not like other kids. “I would have hated to be called ‘November Surrey’.” He confessed to her with a small smile. “What if I found you a new name?”

“You can’t change it, the teacher said it was the name on the paper.” She frowned.

“But I don’t have to follow the paper, I’m not a teacher. I can give you a nickname so your friends don’t call you something you hate.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know…” Harry looked around him before staring down at the card he had in the hand. “Ace?”

“Ace?” she repeated doubtfully.

“Yeah. Do you like it?”

“Isn’t it weird?”
“No, I think it’s cool! Like a superhero name. I mean… it’s stronger than everything else! And you are still here even if you don’t have parents, you survived! My cousin Dudley is not even able to lace his shoes without his mom… You are definitely better than them! Superheroes never have parents anyway!”

She laughed. She actually laughed at what he said and it made him smile. “So… can I call you Ace?”

She nodded. “I like it.” She grinned back at him. “Do you like ‘Harry’?”

He laughed but confirmed. They resumed playing until the rings called the end of the break. It was definitely the best lunch break he had ever had.

“Tell me. Is it true that the teacher’s hair turned blue last year?” Ace asked a few days later during their lunch break.

They shared her lunch every day since the first and Harry did not know if his friend knew how much it meant to him. They did not talk about it a lot but he was feeling that she understood.

“Yeah… He was pestering me because I haven’t done my homework – even if I did but Dudley had taken it so I couldn’t handle it in class, and suddenly his wig turned blue! Oh, it’s a wig by the way, not his real hair.” Ace laughed at this precision. “I got grounded for a whole week after that, my aunt thought it was my fault…” he muttered under his breath.

“Well did…” she was cut short by the large shadow of a group of kids stopping in front of them.

“Hey you, first grade! You should not talk to a freak like him, he is no good.” Dudley exclaimed haughtily.

Harry froze. He forgot to warn Ace that this could happen and that she should not talk back. Dudley was probably three or four time her size… She stood no chance and he did not want for her to get hurt because of him.

“Are you Dudley Dursley?” Ace breathed lowly with a timid tone Harry did not know her.

“Uh.. yeah.”

“It’s really a beautiful name…” she said with a soft smile. “Harry told me you are the strongest kid in the whole school, is it true?”

Dudley actually blushed. Harry did his best not to burst out laughing. “Uh…yeah… Thanks… What’s your name?”

“Oh… It’s June Islington. I moved in this summer. You can call me June.”

“June…” the bigger boy repeated dumbly.

“Yes. Nice to meet you. Do you want something else?” she wondered with another smile and fluttering her eyelashes.

“Uh… no… sorry…” Dudley stammered even redder than before. “You, stay away from her and don’t tell lies about me!” he warned Harry before running away. His gang followed quickly.
As soon as Harry was sure his cousin would not be back, he burst out laughing. “What was that???”

“Oh… that? Kate told me to act like this if a stupid boy bothered me.” She explained with a mischievous grin. “I didn’t expect it to work this good, though.”

Harry laughed again and she followed him. “So… did you?” she asked after some time.

“What?” Harry dried the tears that had formed in his eyes.

“Turned his wig blue.” Ace reminded him.

“Oh… I don’t know. How could I? I mean, yes, he was pissing me off and I wanted something to happen but… I didn’t do anything! It’s like when my hair grew back overnight after Aunt Petunia shaved my head… It just happened.” He looked at her a little worried. “Don’t you think it’s weird? That I might be a freak since strange things tend to happen around me?”

She shook her head. “No. I think it’s awesome.” She smiled and laughed and all the tension in Harry’s shoulders disappeared.

A few weeks into October, Harry came back to the Dursley’s and found the woman that brought Ace this summer waiting in the living room with a clearly annoyed Aunt Petunia.

“Hi, Harry. My name is Mrs Travers, I work for social services. Do you mind if we talk a little bit together?” the woman said inviting him to sit on the couch.

Harry eyed his aunt who sneered at that gesture but did not say anything against it. “I will be in the kitchen. Come My Little Popkin, I made your favourite chocolate cake.” She said taking Dudley with her.

“Harry.” Mrs Travers called him softly. “I’m here because it was brought to my attention that you became quite close with June Islington. Do you mind if we talk a little bit about her?”

“Has something happened? Is she in trouble?” He asked anxiously. They had eaten together today but Ace had not said anything…

“No. No. Don’t worry. She is not in trouble, I promise.” The woman reassured him. “I don’t know how much she told you about her past but she hadn’t had an easy life and I want you to know that you can call me if she does or says anything that bothered you, ok?”

Harry did not know what to respond. He did not understand what was expected of him. He did not want to put Ace in trouble. “Did she tell you about her past?” The woman tried again.

“She… She said she was found in June last year in the Borough of Islington. Are you the one who gave her that name?”

“No… It was not me.” She sighed. “Harry, you have to understand, when we found June, she was very very sick. She was hospitalized for a long time last year and she was not able to talk, that’s why we started to call her June because it was easy… Then she told us she didn’t know her real name and it just… stuck, I guess. Anyway, that sickness can come back any time. If you see her trembling a lot, you have to run get an adult. Ok?”
“Why?”

“It’s what we called a seizure. Only an adult could help her, it is very dangerous Harry. If it happens, you absolutely need to find an adult immediately and to tell them that your friend is having a seizure. Can you do that for me?”

He nodded anxiously. Was Ace in danger? Could he lose her from that ‘seizure’?

“Thank you, Harry. That’s very brave of you. Now, did she tell you anything about from before we found her? Or perhaps do you know if she likes her new family?”

She did. He knew she used to live with an ‘evil and crazy old witch’ – that was what she called her – who hurt her like his relatives were hurting him. But she also said it was a secret because she was afraid people would force her to go back if they knew. And she quite liked her foster home even if her foster parents were a little overprotective and it pissed her out sometimes – that was why she ran away that rainy day. But she really liked her new sister Kate.

But that was something told only to him, not something he would repeat to that woman simply because she asked! He summoned all his courage and did something the Dursleys had always forbidden, he talked back. “Why don’t you ask her directly? She is my friend. I won’t call on her.”

Harry closed his eyes, waiting for the hit to come but he only felt a soft hand landing on his shoulder. “I understand. You’re a good friend Harry.” Mrs Travers told him with a soft smile. “I’m relieved now that I know that June had such a brave boy to look after her. I’m sure your relatives would be very proud.”

She was not mad. He did not expect that. Adults always got mad when children talked back…

“I’m glad she found such a good friend in you. I still left my number to your aunt. You can call me anytime ok?”

Harry nodded without realizing it. Should he tell Ace about this encounter?
Chapter 2

The summer of his 8th birthday was the best summer Harry ever had. The Dursley’s went away on vacation for three whole weeks so he got to stay with Mrs Figg which meant almost no chores – even if he still had to tend to the Dursleys’ garden, no Harry-Hunting and all the time he wanted to spend with Ace.

They even managed to convince Ace’s foster parents – the Smiths, and Mrs Figg that he could spend some nights at the Smiths’. It would be Harry’s first sleepover ever! He was excited but had to remind himself not to show it too much so the Dursleys could not take that away like they did everything else.

Just like her name, Ace’s birth date had been chosen by social workers according to the day they found her in London - June 23th... Dudley’s Birthday. Harry’s cousin had been so happy to learn about it! However, Ace firmly rejected the idea of celebrating with him since it was not her true birthday. Instead, she had decided she would celebrate her birthday the same day as Harry’s, the 31st of July, the day they met. Her foster parents agreed to this new tradition since it was also the day she arrived at their home.

On the D day, Ace’s foster mom had taken them to the grocery store and bought all the ingredients for a big strawberry shortcake – Ace was not a big fan of chocolate. Harry and Ace had been cooking for the whole afternoon. The adults watched them from the couch, amused, making sure they did not hurt themselves even if Harry had become quite good at cooking under the Dursleys’ care. However, Mrs Smith refused he put the plate into the oven himself.

The time flew by. Why did time spent with his friend always flow so much faster than the time spent watching pictures of Mrs Figg’s cats? Harry thought it was unfair! But eventually, the cake was baked and decorated by Mrs Smith while they were outside, and Harry sat in front of burning candles for the first time in his life.

Harry and Ace both blew the candles at the same time and laughed about it until a sudden flash startled them. They turned their heads in synch and realized that Kate had her brand-new Polaroid Camera in hands. She gave Harry the picture with a smile. “That’s my present for you!” she announced.

The boy looked at it astonished. This was his first present ever. The first time he had a picture of himself too. He wanted to thank her properly, but the grins of Ace’s foster parents made him suddenly very nervous.

“Harry… June told us that you did not want some big present, but we didn’t want to give you nothing since it’s your birthday and your relatives are not here to celebrate with you… we didn’t want you to feel lonely so, even if it’s nothing big, here you are.”

Two parcels were put in front of him and he felt his eyes stung a little. Seeing a large box being put in front of an equally uncomfortable Ace did make him feel better though. She started with a smaller package from Kate though.

It was an electric blue nail polish “So you will stop looking at mine as if you will kill for it one day!”. Mrs Smith frowned and grumbled something about being inappropriate for a primary schooler, but
Ace did not care and thanked her foster sister all the same.

“Your turn!” She declared sending her mischievous smile to him. Harry sighed discreetly and complied. The first present was a notebook and colour pencils while the second was a small flashlight. “June told us you might need it…” Mr Smith uncertainly explained.

Harry eyed his friend. She knew about the cupboard. She knew the Dursleys would not change the lightbulb. He got that it was not the whole explanation she gave her foster parents though. “Thank you.” He mouthed before repeating it more loudly for the adults.

He felt like crying. Was receiving present that difficult all the time? He could not help but think about Dudley and his bi-annual explosive tantrums for his birthday and Christmas. It was certainly not that difficult for him!

Ace’s enormous present was, in fact, a glittering princess dress that she probably hated already which made Harry laugh. She still thanked her foster family. “Don’t you want to put it on?” Kate teased her camera in hand. At this moment Harry was pretty sure Ace’s stare could have killed her sister right there. “That’s not a good idea, with the cake, she might stain it!” He saved his friend when he understood Mr and Mrs Smith found the idea entertaining too.

“Here’s my present” he announced to change the subject. Ace took the little parcel with a smile. No one commented on the fact that is way poorly wrapped in old newspapers. She opened it and stayed silent for a moment. He had drawn a little bookmark reproducing all four shapes Spade, Heart, Diamond and Clover, he spent two or three art class making it. “It’s nothing big sorry.” He explained shyly. “It’s just that you’re always reading and all during breaks, so I know you love to read and…”

“I love it.” Ace stopped him. “Thank you, Har’.” She smiled, and he blushed hoping everyone would just stop staring at him. A torn envelope entered his eyesight just above his knees. He could not stop himself from smiling at the idea that Ace was worse than him at wrapping.

“What is it?” he asked recognizing the crest of their school in the paper.

“The reason why I was reading all the time… They agreed that I’d be able to skip a grade… I will be in 3rd grade with you starting next September! Surprise !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” His mind turned completely blank when he processed her words. He looked at her, at the adults, none of them was laughing, they all seemed so… proud?

He was gobsmacked. “That’s… bloody brilliant!!!” he finally managed to breathe out earning a slight frown from Mrs Smith.

“I know! I totally Ace-d it!!!!” Harry was so happy he could not find the energy to mock her bad pun. She was his bloody best friend and they would be in the same bloody class starting September!!!!!!!

After that, Harry swore that this first birthday cake was the best dish he had ever had in his whole life! Well probably. He could not stop himself from smiling like a fool and Ace joined him whenever their eyes met.

Later Mrs Smith announced it was time for bed. Ace’s bedroom was small and had two beds: one for her and one for her foster sister Kate. Mrs Smith explained that Kate was at a friend’s house that night – “Boyfriend” Ace corrected in a whisper, so he could use her bed. Harry had taken the best shirt and trunks he could find, borrowing directly from Dudley’s closet when he was cleaning his cousin’s room, so he did not stand out in front of Ace’s foster family. He knew Ace did not care but he did not want them to have the wrong impression.
They used the bathroom and brushed their teeth and said ‘yes’ every time Ace’s foster mom made them promise not to do something. Then they finally retreated to their room and the best day became the best evening ever. They talked, they laughed, and they even had a pillow fight. Ace was not mean – unlike Dudley, she did not try to choke him when she won. They just laughed again and again until they both fell asleep on Harry’s bed. One of Ace’s foster parents must have found them that way when they came in to switch off the light a few hours later.

Harry was sound asleep when a familiar dream hit him. At first, he was running, probably from Dudley’s gang, he did not really know why he just knew he had to run. Suddenly, a wall appeared before him, he could not run anymore.

“No! Not Harry!” He heard a woman cried.

A green flash appeared in front of his eyes, then a shadow and the dull sound of a body hitting the concrete. He looked down and recognized the long brown hair and her eyes turning from silver to cloudy grey.

Harry suddenly opened his eyes. He did not place the room at first then the memories of the previous day made their way through his brain and he managed to force himself to calm down. Next, he thought about his nightmare and suddenly had a hard time breathing again. He tried his best not to make a sound but that was when he realized he could hear muffled mutterings that were not his. He put his glasses on and looked down at his friend.

Ace’s face was covered with sweat, she was browning so hard he hurt, her whole body was tensed, and she started trashing the bed. “Please… no… cru… I prom…so…ry… I will… be better… I… no cr…shio… please…” she pleaded in jerky whispers. He did not get all her words, but it was enough to know she was having a nightmare. Her shaking was getting worse and worse. “Please…”

“Ace! Ace! It’s me, Harry! Wake up!” he tried to bring her back to consciousness. When he touched her chin, her eyes finally burst open and she bolted up straight in the same move, startling the death out of the young boy. Her breath was erratic, and her body kept on quivering violently.

“Ace? Are you okay? Are you having a seizure?” She was not looking at him. Her gaze was terrified and far away. She grabbed her own arms as if she wanted to stop them from shivering. “Do you want me to go get your foster parents?” This time she shook her head and finally looked at him. Tears started to flow on her chins. “I’m sor..ry” she sobbed, and Harry felt his heart breaking. It was the first time he saw her cry. She leaned toward him and he instinctively took her into a tight hug. Neither of them had really ever been the tactile type, with both their history, they tended to avoid human contact, but at that moment it felt like the only right thing to do. “It’s okay,” Harry whispered as calmly as possible. “I’m here. It’s just a nightmare. We are both here. We are both safe.”

They stayed like that for a long time and finally fell back to sleep when the sun rose. Ace’s foster parents let them sleep in and neither of them tried to bring up the subject before long.

“... So that is why Miss Islington will join our class this year. Even if she is a year younger than you all, I hope you will welcome her warmly!” The teacher explained to a class of 8-year-olds. “June, you could sit next to Piers Polkiss here. If you have any question just raise your hand. Then, let’s get started! Third grade is an important grade...”

Ace sat in the row next to his. She looked at him and smirked, so Harry grinned back. This was going to be a good year! His life might finally really start to go around.
Unfortunately, during his short life, Harry already had time to learn that you should never say or even think something like that so quickly.

It was mid-October when the headmaster’s secretary came to their class and asked for Ace to follow her. She told her to take her bag with her, so Harry knew she would not be back that day. He did not plan this might last for few days.

The rumour flew by the very next morning. Mrs Smith got into a car accident, she was presumed dead... Did that mean that Ace would have to go to another foster family? Would she leave him behind? Harry felt ashamed that those pity thoughts were the first ones to run in his head... It was so selfish, but he was so afraid to lose his one and only friend...

The next Saturday, four days after the secretary took Ace away, he felt so distraught he let Dudley’s bacon burn out of inattention. The unexpected doorbell was the only thing that saved him from a certainly vicious punishment. “Go!” Uncle Vernon ordered loudly letting his arm go from his firm grip.

Harry went and opened the door. Nervous silver eyes met his and before he knew it, Ace threw herself in his trembling arms. He hugged her tightly. He felt so relieved that she had not been gone yet.

A loud “Who is it?” came from the kitchen.

“Excuse me? Mr and Mrs Dursley. I’m Mrs Travers from Social Services. We met last year?” Harry eyed the stern woman, but Ace slightly shook her head against his shoulder. “I won’t leave” she promised in a whisper directly in his ear.

She let him go when they heard his aunt approaching and smiled tiredly. “What is it?” Aunt Petunia haughtily asked sneering at the two children still holding hands.

“Mrs Dursley, I know it is really last-minute notice, but would you mind if your nephew comes to Mrs Smith’s funeral? It would mean a lot for June.”

“Why would I accept something like that? I didn’t even know this woman and the boy still had chores and homework to do.” She stiffly refused.

“Mrs Dursley, I understand this is a busy Saturday, but could you please reconsider? Since little Harry had spent some of his summer at their place, he certainly knew the woman a little better than you did, at least as the mother of June. He might feel affected as well by this event and going to the funerals, being able to be there for his friend might help him come to closure with the situation.” The social worker tried again without noticing the sudden tension overwhelming the two kids.

“What do you mean he spent his sum...” Petunia started but Dudley decided to join them and inadvertently stopped her. “What are you doing? Oh... Hi June!” he smiled shyly.

He still had a crush on her. Always flushing and running away after a few words. It did not completely prevent him from bullying Harry, but it definitely shortened the abuses at school and made them a little rarer and less extreme. June was not in the mood for flirting around today though.

“What are you doing? Oh... Hi June!” he smiled shyly.

“Please...” she begged Petunia tears starting to fill her eyes. “Please let him come. I promise I will come and help with his chores afterwards. I will do everything you may ask! I promise. Please...”

“Ace...?” Harry whispered, startled to see his friend suddenly so desperate. The girl refused to meet
his eyes this time, still silently begging his aunt. Harry knew it was useless. The only hangdog look Petunia might bend to was...

"Let him go, mum," Dudley asked suddenly. "He is useless here anyway..."

Aunt Petunia stared at her son in awe as surprised by his seemingly selfless demand as Harry was. "What are you saying my little Popkin?"

Dudley crunched his teeth at the nickname. "Don’t call me that in front of her..." he hissed. "Just let Harry go. If June wants him so badly she can have him, I don’t want you to make her cry, that’s all..."

The horse face woman contemplated her choices for a few seconds before giving in. "Fine" she sneered. "Come, Boy, we might find you something decent to wear... you will not embarrass our honourable family any further!" She grabbed Harry’s arm and brought him upstairs while Dudley made a move toward Ace. Harry couldn’t hear what he was saying anymore but he felt the urge to escape from his aunt grip and go back to his friend. He knew it would jeopardize his chances to actually go with her to the funerals though and he could not sacrifice that. So, he bore with it.

"We will see what to do with you when you’ll be back, Boy! I’m sure Vernon will be thrilled to learn about your attitude. We will talk about your ‘secret’ summer accommodations and we will see who’s laughing..." Petunia ranted while looking for Dudley old formal clothes. "I hope you appreciate your cousin’s goodwill because I assure you that you will pay him back for a long time! My Dudley is so perfect! Your little friend may have tricked him with her cute baby face but believe me, she stands no chance! I will make sure my Dudders find the girl he deserves, and this little street rat will never put a hand on him!"

Harry silently bore again. He had to bear, Ace needed him.

"Put that on!"

Harry looked sceptically at the piece of cloth. He suspected Dudley wore this ensemble once when he was around 5... But it still fitted him better than most of his current clothes. He put on a pair of long black socks to go with his black shorts and white shirt.

When he got back downstairs his green eyes immediately met with Ace’s silver ones and he attempted a reassuring smile. She did not seem convinced. At least Dudley was gone, and Mrs Travers was still there so she did not let Ace alone with his cousin.

As soon as he was within hugging distance, Ace threw herself back to him. "I’m sorry... I’m so so sorry..."

"I want him back by noon," Petunia said to Mrs Travers.

Ace let go of him, holding his hands hostage again and never stopping to scrutinize his eyes in the quest for any sign of pain.

"I will make sure he does. Thank you very much, Mrs Dursley." The social worker complied politely. "Say ‘Thanks’ kids."

Harry felt Ace tensing up again but they both complied with neutral voices.

During the funerals, Ace and Harry stayed together in silence, only separated for a few seconds when a crying Kate and an equally distressed Mr Smith came to hug them both. Both Harry and Ace tensed at this sudden and unwanted intimacy, but they let them do. It was no place to flinch or make
a scene.

“You don’t have to go back.” Ace muttered while the crowd moved to offer their condolences to the family. “We can tell Mrs Travers, she will protect you if we say that they will hurt you when you go back.”

“It won’t do,” Harry whispered back. “Each time a neighbour called the police because they were concerned about me, the police said that there was no evidence. Some of them tried to interfere but they moved away after a few weeks. Two years ago, a school nurse expressed her doubts about me, it backfired big time and she got fired. My relatives told the school I was a pathological – whatever that word means – liar and that I hurt myself to give more credits to my stories. Nobody believes me anymore, they even have a medical certificate ready.”

“They will believe me!” Ace argued.

“They will make you go away like everyone else and I don’t want that!” Harry hissed back. “Even if it works, that would mean that they will make me go away and I don’t want to leave you behind either.”

“We could run away together...”

“It won’t work. They will find us. They’d always found me... I think I’m cursed.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. They can’t curse you, they are m...”

“Guys, come!” Kate stopped them. “We are going back to the house.”

They followed her in an awkward silence. “Will they make you leave?” Harry asked later when they retreated to Ace’s room.

She shrugged. “I asked Mrs Travers not to. That I didn’t want to change school, lose my friend. She wanted to talk a lot. Know how I ‘really’ feel and so on... I called Mr Smith ‘Dad’ a few times to please her... Pretended to cry... Hold Kate... Asked for you... I think it’s what makes her decide. Something about stability... I heard her talk on the phone. She said that I made ‘tremendous’ progress during the past year and that Mr and Mrs Smith were talking about adopting me... So, she wants to give it a try if my foster dad agrees... I tried to be the perfect little doll he wanted me to be those past few days... I don’t know more.”

Harry looked at her and something inside him squeezed. She seemed so detached as if she had buried deep all her emotions. It was not the shiny Ace he knew. “I’m sorry.” She said again, and sorrow pierced through. “I told Mrs Travers about last summer to convince her... I didn’t know she would tell your aunt... I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault Ace. I’m okay, she didn’t hurt me.”

“Yet! I know she will! You know they will! I don’t want you to get hurt because of me Har’! Are you sure we can’t try to...”

“I’m sure. Ace, you’re safe and that’s all that matters to me so don’t worry too much okay? They will not kill me anyway. It would cause too much trouble for them if they do.” He tried to joke but it felt wrong. He was not that sure to be right...

“Har’, you...”

Someone knocked on the door and Ace stopped talking. “Harry dear, it’s time to go home.” Mrs
Travers told them with an apologetic smile.

He nodded. However, when Harry tried to get up, Ace grabbed his hand. “Don’t” she hissed imploring him with her watery silver eyes. He had to fight his own urge and had troubles to swallow but he managed to free his arm. “I have to. It’s okay. It’s gonna be okay.” He smiled bravely but she did not buy it, she knew him too well.

“You can stay a few more minutes if you want. I’m sure your aunt would not mind...” Mrs Travers offered but he shook his head. “No, I need to go.” He said with determination before adding lower “Take care Ace.”

He heard her sob when he left the room and he could see her tears in his mind without having to turn his head. He saw Kate entering the room after them. She would not stay alone, she would be okay.

“She did come to love her foster mom very much, didn’t she?” Mrs Travers asked as they exited the house. Harry approved absentmindedly, his bravado was gone, and the fear came back full force when they arrived in front of 4 Privet Drive. He was not listening to the social worker anymore. She said something about looking after June and calling her if something was wrong. He nodded, told goodbye, and went back to his nightmare.

When he woke up later, he did not know how long had passed. He was so thirsty, his back hurt, his whole body hurt. Uncle Vernon had taken off the belt. That was the last thing he truly remembered. He hated that. His back hurt so much... and he passed out again.

The next time he woke up, the sound of his uncle’s departure to work from outside his cupboard told him it was Monday. It had been two days. He needed to go to school. Aunt Petunia would not let him stay home during a school day.

His cupboard smelled so bad...

He tried to stand up, but the excruciating pain stabbed in back to the thin baby mattress. “…got the flu... n’t go to school this week.” His aunt sharp voice made it through his numb mind. Dudley was leaving for school... He would not...

The front door was slammed. He could only hear his own breath in the stunning silence when sudden light blinded him. He could only see the shadowy form of his aunt. A bowl of liquid was put on the floor with a slice of bread. The door was closed again.

He welcomed the darkness and the absence of further punishment with a sigh of relief.

The liquid was just tap water and he drank it all before snapping up the small portion of hard bread. It was not enough but it was still better than nothing. He almost felt full when he finished his ‘meal’ and he dropped back to sleep.

Later that day, Petunia let him go to the loo and use the sink in the laundry room. He did try to clean his back with his shirt after wetting it, but he passed out from the pain. When he woke up again, he was back in his cupboard and from the TV sounds outside, Dudley was back from school.

The following days passed in a similar fashion. He felt really hot the third day and his mattress was wet and red and yellow from the sweat on his back. He thought he might actually die in his cupboard. Ace would be so sad when she will learn the news...

...
That day, his aunt put him in the bathtub and put something on his wounds that felt like burning.

When he woke up his throat felt rough from screaming and he felt like he got hit on the head, but his back did feel better now. He had a clean shirt on. His aunt might have thought his old one smelt too badly even through the cupboard door.

Everything was quiet, and he was hungry. It was probably the middle of the night.

He startled when he heard the lock on his door click. He sat up and tried to keep as calm as possible. He hoped he had not screamed in his sleep and woke his uncle up...

He was certainly not expecting to see his cousin with a big pack of biscuits and a Coke bottle. “Don’t tell my parents.” He muttered. “You need to stop being so lazy and go back to school tomorrow. She is worried sick...” He added without looking at him. “She promised me she would have her lunch with me for the funeral stuff Saturday but now she told me she won’t if you don’t go back. Teachers said she is not eating anymore. They said she will need to stop school and leave if she doesn’t get better... but they are wrong when they said this is because her mother died.”

Harry immediately understood the subtext even if he had never thought his cousin capable of using this type of language. “Yo-ur parents w-on’t let me...” He managed to speak back in a raw voice. His cousin fatty eyes flashed at him before looking away. “They will. Tomorrow. I won’t let you screw my life any longer. Do try to look better than this though. You’re an embarrassment to everyone.” The fat boy took out some sticking-plasters from his pyjama bottom and threw them at him.

Harry knew better than to thank him when he left leaving his cupboard door half open.

His relatives did not let him go to school the next day, but he did get to do a couple of chores in the afternoon and to be back to school by Friday.

“Show me.”

As soon as the ring started the break, Ace had grabbed Harry’s arm and taken him to a secluded bathroom on the third floor. Almost no one went there during break time. She even blocked the door with the trash can.

Harry hesitated but finally complied. He turned his back and lifted his shirt. He was expecting a disgusted exclamation or, at least, a gasp from his friend but she did not produce any commentative sound. He turned again, ready to explain but she shushed him off but shaking her head when he met her eyes. She hugged him tightly carefully avoiding the wounds she just saw. “I’m sorry” she whispered.

“It’s not your fault.” He said lowly hugging her back. “How is it going at home?” Harry asked to change the subject.

She shook her head again. “Later.” She said. “Tell the teacher I have a headache, so I went to the infirmary. Meet me here again for lunch!” She ordered quickly before running away.

Harry stayed back abashed. He tried to smell his back. It still smelled a little but far less than two days ago...

Ace did not make it to class after the break so, two hours later, Harry went back to the 3rd-floor
bathroom. When he went through the door the funny smell hit him first. He saw his friend sitting on the floor amid tens of orange flowers and mixing something in the janitor bucket. He knew the flowers from his gardening chores at the Dursley’s.

“Did you steal all the marigolds of the neighbourhood?” he tried to jock about it, but he sobered up quickly when Ace only silently nodded.

“Close the door and come here.” She ordered. He did as he was told. “Take off your shirt.”

“What? But...” Harry tried to argue but Ace was stubborn. “Trust me.” She just said, and he gave in. “Show me your back”. Harry sighed but followed her order again. He shivered when a cold mixture touched his skin and then flinched remembering the burning sensation of his aunt’s disinfectant, but Ace’s preparation did not hurt him. The tension slowly gave in and he let her rub his back.

“How did you find so many marigolds... it’s not summer anymore, they should be withered by now...” he commented after some time.

“Who cares... I found them, and the book said they are great for wounds.” She muttered back. “Does it hurt?”

“No, it feels great.”

“Good... I was not sure I got the right plant...”

“What???” Harry grabbed her hands and turned to face her. She was smiling.

“It’s not my fault! I didn’t know how to read back then! I just remembered the pictures.”

“Back then?” Harry repeated.

Ace nodded and gave him a sad smile before turning her back to him and lifting her hoodie. “What are you...” Harry stopped when he saw the scars on her back. They seemed old but deeper than most of the one he had. “The crazy old witch...?” He asked.

Ace nodded and put her clothes back in place. She gave him a sign for him to show her his back again and went back to nursing his fresh wounds. “I could not go out back then so I could not heal myself but there was this book about how to heal everything and this flower was everywhere... I thought it might help you...”

“You do realize that if you were mistaking, you could have killed me!” Harry falsely complained.

“You still can die.” She certainly not reassured him. “But I think you will be ok.” A white bandage was put on Harry’s hand and she told him to keep it there while she bandaged his back.

“Where did you get that?”

“I did have to go to the infirmary if the teacher wanted to verify your cover-up story...” she elusively explained, and he laughed softly. Had she always been so resourceful?

“Would it not been easier to steal some medicine from the infirmary instead of finding summer flowers in the middle of October?” he laughed after few seconds.

“I... didn’t think about it.” She admitted, and he laughed harder, hurting himself in the process.

“All done?” he asked when she finished but she shook her head. She took a blue felt pen and started to write something onto the bandage on his back. “What are you doing?”
“It will help you heal faster...” she mumbled while focusing on her writing. Harry tried to look at what she was writing in the mirror, but it did not look like real letters. She was just drawing some stuff on his back to make fun of him. “Done!” She announced proudly. He looked again: yep, it was just random blue lines on his back. She was cute when she reminded him she was just 7 like that.

“I can dress back now?” He asked with a small laugh. She nodded and got his shirt back from the floor for him. “Thanks!” He put it on but when he looked back at her, she seemed worried again. “What is it?” He asked softly. “I hope you won’t try to apologize again! I’ve already told you it was not your fault.”

“But it is!” she argued. “You were hurt because of me. Because I told...”

“You didn’t do it on purpose! And I knew what I was risking by going to your house this summer. They always happened to know this kind of thing anyway. I don’t blame you!” He tried to reassure her. “Speaking of that, what did you do to Dudley? He actually tried to help me the other day.”

“turns out he doesn’t like to see me cry and he’s really weak against my tears. But I will really have to eat with him if he truly tried to help you...” She smiled weakly before shaking her head. “I’d probably won’t survive it so do make sure to be near to save me in case I need to puke okay?”

“Or, you could just puke on him!”

“No way. He could take it as an engagement promise or something!” she joked.

“Well, you gave him your words, so I guess you have no choice.”

“Not today though.”

Harry smiled at that, feeling happy she would not just let him there after everything she did for him. “Do you have something to eat? I’m starving!”

She smiled back and took a supermarket sandwich out of her bag. She looked really relieved and it was all that mattered to him.

Chapter End Notes

Hi!
You probably noticed it while reading (I hope it's not that obvious though), English is not my native language so if you read something that seems off or a sentence which doesn't make any sense, please tell me! Also, if you like this story and English is your native language and you want to be my beta on this story, let me know!
Anyway, I hope you like this story! See you soon!
Life went on. Harry had no more time out of the house. He had to go straight back to the Dursley’s after school. Aunt Petunia waited by the clock. One minute late and it was no dinner that evening, more than fifteen minutes and his uncle Vernon would hear about it when he came back from work...

Ace did not fuss too much around this new rule. She did not want Harry to get hurt because of her so she always made sure not to keep him up after class. She sometimes had to interfere with Dudley, so he did not purposely slow him up either. Harry was grateful but also a bit shameful about the whole situation. He hoped he could be such a help to his friend as well and not just the burden he turned into...

Around the New Year, Ace told him that her foster sister left home to settle in with her boyfriend. When he asked how her foster dad was taking it, she did not really answer. Sometimes Ace seemed a little off. But she still smiled and laughed so he tried not to be too concerned about it.

Her lunch pack changed. They were not handmade anymore but just industrial snacks… Sometimes it could hardly be considered healthy or big enough for a growing kid, but he had no right to complain, Ace still shared with him whatsoever without waiting for anything in return.

Troubles found them when she started to wear her favourite hoodie several days in a row and other kids noticed it. On that day of April, it was Dudley himself who decided to confront them without knowing that Ace was already in a really bad mood for a reason even Harry did not know. “Hey, June! What with that look? I definitely liked it better when you dressed like a girl! Do you try to imitate the Freak style or something?” he asked pointing Harry with his chin.

“According to what I know, the clothes Harry is wearing were all yours to begin with... That means that Harry’s style is actually your style... well your style after having been horrendously destroyed somehow... How old are you to make your clothes turn out so distorted in a few months? 4? Anyway, since you qualified your own clothes as freaky, why are you commenting on my style? Who are you? My dad?” she replied loudly enough so that the whole playground could hear it.

Dudley’s face turned bright red and Harry could have sworn his cousin might have died if he did not miraculously remember how to breath 30 seconds later. “YOU!!!” he raged on pointing his fatty finger at him. “How dare you tell her you are wearing my old clothes?!!! Do you have no shame like your good for nothing parents or something??”

“Can’t be as good for nothing as your parents, Dudders!” Ace snapped back. “Tell me, is your mother not bored after Harry took care of all of the household and the cooking every day?? What is she doing with all that free time anyway? Making you a new half-brother or sister with the postman? And does your father know how to tie his shoes or had he had Harry do it in his place even before he turned out too big to see his own feet?”

Dudley’s face turned into an angry purple that truly reminded Harry of Vernon’s face before a really intense beating. Harry was petrified and did not even react when Ace grabbed his wrist. “Run.” She ordered in a whisper directly to his ear and as by magic, his legs followed the order.

And then they ran.
They ran as if their lives depended on it and maybe they did. They heard Dudley’s gang behind
them. It took Harry a few seconds to take the lead and navigate them through the playground to the
kitchen building. He cannot let the other get them, Dudley was so angry he might beat up Ace too!
Harry cannot let that happen! He needed to get Ace safe!

Harry secured his grip on his best friend’s hand and when he saw the big kitchen bins he shouted:
“Jump!”

Adrenaline and wind made their jump longer than it should be and Ace abruptly stopped when they
landed. Harry turned his face toward hers and noticed she was gobsmacked. He then looked around
at what she was looking at and realized what was wrong. How did they get to the kitchens’
rooftop???

From the ground, they could hear Dudley’s gang looking for them and going as far as into the
kitchen trash bins in their frantic search.

The wind caught them and brought them a feeling of freedom Harry had never experienced before.
Harry spread his arms and closed his eyes. Ace imitated him and started laughing next to him. It was
the first time she laughed that week. Harry smiled. It felt great.

“How did you do that??” Ace asked still euphorically laughing.

“I have no idea” he answered in a similar state.

Then, too soon, the school staff found them and called their guardians, and everything turned into a
nightmare again.

Harry tried to defend himself in the headmistress’s office that they did not climb the building on
purpose. That they were just trying to run from Dudley’s gang, but the stern woman was very pissed
and said nothing until his aunt Petunia and Mr Smith arrived.

When Harry explained again that they did not climb they had just jumped over a trash bin and
somehow found themselves on the rooftop, his aunt blanched. “You will stop saying nonsense right
now, boy! You’re grounded until further notice and we will see what your uncle has to say about
your petty excuses tonight!” She shushed him quickly. “Headmistress, I think some community
works would certainly help those young delinquents to come to reason.”

The headmistress sighed. “Next time maybe. For now, it’s just a warning for both of you. Miss
Islington, you’re one of our best elements and I hope you will know better than following
troublemakers in their idiotic acts of attention seeking.”

Harry looked at his friend through his fringe. She was staring at the floor and nodded at the
headmistress words. The hand of her foster dad was firmly pressed on her shoulder. He did not say a
word since he got here.

“Mr Smith, I get that you had got a rough year but please do not give up on your duty. I heard that
Miss Islington was starting to be targeted because her clothes were not as well... how to say it...
freshly renewed as they used to be. At 7, she should be able to manage her dress by herself but
please make sure to keep a laundry schedule, it might help.” She advised with a pitying smile.

“I did not know. I will make sure it does not happen again.” The strong man agreed sternly.
They were excused from the Headmistress’s office shortly and Petunia urged Harry to go home. He got his bag in the empty classroom and on his way back, he happened to see and hear Mr Smith. “What were you thinking?? Did you try to get yourselves killed? Did you try to kill yourself?? Do you plan on leaving me behind too???” Harry peeked at the corner. The man big hands were gripping Ace’s twig-like arms and were shaking her forcefully.

Ace seemed so defenceless, jerked around like an old dusty rug…

Harry was about to intervene when another firm grip on his shoulder stopped him. He hissed in pain when French manicure started puncturing his skin under his shirt like claws. “What do you think you’re doing, boy?! I said ‘Home’ now.”

Having to leave his friend behind knowing she was in trouble because of him was the worst punishment Harry ever had to endure. Of course, that night, his uncle ‘explained’ his opinion in this whole affair with punches and kicks but it hurt far less than not knowing what was actually going on in a house two blocks from his cupboard.

Harry was not allowed to go to school the next day. It was the last Friday before Spring break. He wished he had, though. Even if he had not slept at all the previous night. Even if he was hurting. Even if both his arms and legs were swollen. Even if he had not eaten for almost 24 hours.

Dudley left. And his aunt did not check on him. And time passed, slowly. Finally, it was 4 and Dudley’s exclamation of joy because school was over for 10 days jolted him off awareness.

“Oh!?” Harry cried out through his cupboard door. “Dudley! Please tell me, did A-June go to school today!!” He heard Dudley’s steps stopped before his door and then a sharp blow against the wood that made him jump back and hit the wall behind him.

“Like hell, I’ll tell you, you freak.” He heard his cousin’s voice hissed. “Be lucky I don’t repeat all the lies you tell her to mum and dad. You’d deserve to die like your useless parents for what you did!”

Harry spend the whole break locked into his cupboard with one trip a day to the loo and nothing more than water and some cold leftover to eat. Whenever he bumped into his cousin, he tried to get news and was immediately harshly thrown back to his cell.

He never got his answer.

Harry remembered the rest of this school year as remarkably quiet.

Ace had been back after Spring Break, and so was he, but somehow, their words did not come out as easily as they used to, as if they were both trying to avoid a subject they did not want to talk about.

Ace never wore her favourite hoodie anymore. She had pretty flower dresses that seemed somehow uncomfortable, but she did not comment on it, so Harry kept quiet too.

Harry was worried Mr Smith did something to Ace because he got her into troubles. Why did he always managed to get himself into so many troubles? Why those strange incidents only ever happened to him?? And why did his friend need to pay a price for it too?

It took Harry a few days to finally gather the courage to ask about it. The weather was sunny, and
they were sitting down to their tree. Ace had only taken a few bites of her lunch before giving up the rest to him. She had dozed off a bit and rested her head against his shoulder. “Ace… are you sure you are okay?” She did not answer immediately so he continued. “Your foster dad got mad at you, didn’t he? Do you want me to call Mrs Travers?”

The girl slowly shook her head before straightening up. “It’s okay. I don’t need her… he didn’t do anything big anyway, don’t worry.”

“What did he do? Did he hit you?”

“No. He is not like your uncle, I haven’t been hurt or anything, he just…” she started before stopping abruptly and sighing. “He was angry because the school thought he couldn’t take care of me because he allowed me to wear that stupid hoodie every day and… He just had me got a shower really and he…” she stopped again and looked away. “Nothing… He did not hurt me. Don’t worry.” She responded again with a smile which seemed far too false and tired for Harry to let it sly.

“Did you sleep last night?”

She shrugged. “It’s nothing… probably the full moon or something like that…” She grinned a little. “Kate always said that people tend to feel restless on a full moon. Did you sleep well?”

Harry nodded absently. “You would tell me if he ever does anything bad to you, wouldn’t you?” he asked again without taking in the change of subject attempt.

“Would you tell me if the Dursleys do something bad to you?” she asked back. Their eyes met, and Harry knew she knew already. “Dudley told me they didn’t let you out of the cupboard for the whole break… at all!”

“Why would he tell you that? Isn’t he supposed to hate you after what you said to him before the break?”

“I don’t know.” She sighed lying down and using his legs as a pillow “He told me his dad told him that if a girl insult or bully you or something it’s because she is in love with you but doesn’t know how to express her feelings…”

“It’s stupid.”

“I agree.”

A new silence settled between them. Ace closed her eyes and Harry absently stroked her hair. He did not know what to add. He just wanted to stay there with her and never go back to the Dursleys or to class or anywhere else… He felt safe with her as if nothing else mattered and he wished she could make her feel the same… And maybe she was. She seemed okay when she was with him. He hoped he would never have to let her go. Was it what family felt like?

“I will find a way…” she murmured sleepily. “I will find a way to get you out of there…”

He stopped his cuddling and she opened her eyes and silver looked up at him. “As long as you don’t put yourself in danger to do so, I won’t complain.” He answered with a smile. “And don’t worry, it was not as horrible as it sounds… At least it was not summer, so the temperature was bearable, and I still have the flashlight your foster parents gave me, so I was able to draw and to read to pass time. It was a quiet spring break overall.” He tried to reassure her with a soft lie.

“Do you need new batteries?” she asked very seriously.
Harry smiled again and spend the remaining of their lunch break relating how he stole some from the Dursleys without getting caught.

The Summer Holidays of 1989 were no holidays for Harry. His relative gave him a list of chores so long every day that he never had time to do anything else. He woke up at 6 am and did his chores until 10 pm when his uncle locked him back in his cupboard for the night.

He saw Ace a few times. Aunt Petunia would not let her help him in the garden, so she stayed on the other side of the fence, sitting on the ground with a book. The simple knowledge that she was there was taking some of the burdens off Harry’s shoulders. Kate gave Ace her old radio, so she would sometimes bring it and play it on the street when Harry was working on the front garden. Sometimes she would sing few songs and Harry would hum along. The time passed quicker when she was there.

On the morning of the 31st of July, Harry saw a single marigold behind the huge tree in the backyard. Next to it was a flexible water bottle which could easily fit in his baggy pockets unnoticed. “May you never be thirsty again. Happy Birthday - ♥ ♦ ♠♣” said the note taped to it. He could not put the smile off his face for the whole day knowing that he would no longer have to spend nights and days thirsty because his aunt would only let him have no more than two glasses a day. He could not believe Ace got that idea from a conversation they had once months ago.

As soon as he could that day, Harry sneaked back into his cupboard and took the big drawing he had spent few nights on. It was a drawing of Ace, with her favourite hoodie, smiling in the wind on top of the school building, arms wide open. He had added wings in her back – because it was how he wanted to imagine her. He really liked what he had done, and he hoped his friend would like the gift too. He folded it around the marigold in the garden and went back to his daily chores.

The next morning, there was a card from a card game instead of the flower. “Your drawings are always amazing. I love it, thank you.” was written around the ace of heart.

The winter during their 4th grade was really cold. Harry only owned a thin sweater, every other thicker clothes hand-me-down from his cousin was way too worn-out to wear at school. On the other hand, Ace’s foster dad kept on having her wear pretty flower dresses every day to go to school, so she was quite cold most of the time too.

Harry and Ace spent most of their breaks in the small school library doing their homework. Since the start of the year, Dudley had taken the habit of destroying every homework Harry brought back home to finish so the two friends decided to do most of their assignments at school and that Ace would keep Harry’s works until he had to hand it back to the teacher.

That day was no different than the others apart from the tenderness of Harry’s wrist which his uncle had sprained the previous day because Dudley forgot to write an essay for the English class and Harry did not… Ace had bandaged his arm earlier, adding her strange drawings on it as she always did, and he felt a little bit better already, but it was his right wrist so writing stayed painful.

“You’re sure you don’t want me to write it for you?” Ace asked for the fourth time after hearing him gasping.

“The teacher would tell that’s not my writing…”
“We can tell him you’re hurt that’s why I was the one writing for you…”

“It’s okay Ace.” Harry knew that the teacher would not believe the truth and he was not about to risk putting his friend in trouble because of it.

“No, it’s not, you made a mistake on question 4… Your whole reasoning is right, but somehow your final answer is false?” She moved her stool to have a closer look. “Har’… are you sabotaging your own work on purpose?” she asked in a disillusioned tone after a few seconds.

He shrugged. “You know what happens when I do better than Dudley… and Dudley’s pretty dumb so…”

“That’s stupid. They’ll also hit you if you do poorly, won’t they?” she retorted.

“Probably…” Harry admitted. “I just tried to be as close as Dudley’s grades as possible… that’s all. They won’t blame my poor results then since it would mean that Dudley did poorly too.”

“You should do better.” Ace declared. “You should give your best and better him in every class! I know you’re smart Harry. When we talk about stuff you’d always get it almost as quickly as me. You’re playing their game acting like that!”

He shrugged again at the compliment but did not argue the facts. “I talk to Kate you know… I asked her if there was a way for a minor to leave home earlier than at 18 and she said that with how smart I was, I could probably get into one of the best university if I worked hard at school. But we cannot wait until we went to college to leave them! So, there is a quicker option: going to a boarding school after primary school. In the neighbourhood, our best option is Sutton’s Grammar School.”

Harry watched his friend doubtfully. “Ace, it’s one of the best grammars of the country! And even if we got in, my relative would never pay for it…”

“They won’t have to if we get a scholarship! You’re an orphan so you are eligible and if your score high enough on the entrance exam, they could even grant you a full scholarship!”

“They won’t let me take the entrance exam!”

“They don’t have to know you’re taking it! I will apply too, and we can forge their signature on the application form! Once you get in with flying colours, they won’t be able to refuse or complain publicly about it!”

Harry looked at her friend. She seemed to have seriously thought about her arguments.

“So, what do you say? The entrance exam is in October next year. We have one year to get ready, but I know we can do it!”

If her idea really worked, Harry could be out of the Dursley’s at least 5 days a week, nights included. Maybe they could even stay there for some weekends. It meant that he could go to the same secondary school as Ace too and they would no longer be afraid to be torn apart if someone discovered that Ace was not really happy or even feeling safe in her current living arrangement.

“You’re crazy…” he sighed.

“No, I’m ultra-smart and that’s why you love me!” she smiled brightly understanding that he was in.

“So, let’s start by re-doing your homework from scratch and do it seriously this time!”

“I’m still disabled though…” he whined.
“Don’t you say you’re okay?” she mocked.

The rest of that year was a lot of studying and less laying around. All teachers praised Harry for his progress and even bragged to his aunt about it during Parents-teachers meetings. She could not say anything to cut short Harry’s growing popularity among the staff, so she just stayed silent.

Harry did get severely punished once they got home but the Dursleys had no argument to explain why it was so wrong that he finally did great at school. Of course, they accused him of cheating, but the teachers did not buy it this time and agreed that this was just hard work and nothing to be ashamed of.

Aunt Marge, Vernon’s monstrous sister, came to Dudley’s 10th birthday that year. Harry had to prepare three cakes that he would never taste and when lunch time was finally here, Marge simply launched her new bulldog at him. Harry had nowhere to flee and ended up climbing the tree in the backyard. The dog watched down the tree trunk all afternoon long. Every time Harry tried to get down it would bark aggressively at him and menace to bite him.

Harry was beginning to mentally prepare himself to stay the night in his tree when he spotted Ace on the street. “Need some help?” she smirked when she saw him.

“It’s not funny, it won’t move. I’ve been here since 11 am…” he whined.

Ace frowned at that. She approached the fence and kicked it loudly. The bulldog turned its disgusting head to her and bared its fangs. “Ace, don’t! It will bite you!” Harry tried to stop her.

But she did not listen and leapt over the fence. The dog growled loudly. Ace only stared right into its eyes. “Leave.” She ordered with a low voice. The dog hesitated when she took a step forward. “Go and leave him alone” she repeated without batting an eyelid. The dog wailed softly and took a step back. Ace stamped her feet to the ground and the dog finally fled.

Harry waited a few more seconds to be sure it would not be back before he jumped down to the ground. “ ‘Did not know you could bark so lovingly…” he joked as a thank for his friend.

She shrugged “One of my many hidden talents.” She smiled back. “Have you eaten today?” she sobered up quickly. Harry only shook his head. “I’m on it.”

Harry had only time to give out a weak “What?” but his friend had already jumped up the fence again and was now ringing the bell at the front door. Heavy steps were heard in the house. “What is it?” came the loud voice of uncle Vernon.

“Excuse-me Mr Dursley, is Dudley here? I know it’s his birthday today and I wanted to say “Happy birthday”…”

She had not finished her sentence that Dudley was already taking the place of his father at the front door. “June? What... what are you doing here?”

“Oh... Dudley, hi! Oh, you know, it’s nothing big... But my dad’s at work today so I’m alone and then I remembered it was your birthday too and then... well Happy Birthday! Sorry, I do not have a present though... I’m sorry...” Harry was looking from the other side of the garden. His relatives could not see him from the front door, but he could perfectly see Ace’s role play from where he stood. She was fingering her flower dress and looking at her feet with a perfect shyness on her face.
“You’re alone for your birthday?!” Dudley exclaimed completely shocked. “Did… did your father made a cake at least?”

Ace shook painfully her head. “He did not have time this morning and will be back late tonight… He said we will celebrate some other day.” She explained, disappointment in her voice and Harry could not say if this story was true or not.

“Do… do you want to have dinner with us? We still have cake! We could celebrate together!” Dudley offered with the most cheerful voice Harry had ever heard him.

“I… could? I wouldn’t want to be a bother to your parents… Is it ok Mr Dursley?” she raised a pair of shiny silver eyes to his uncle.

“Huh… yeah… I… I suppose we have enough food for an additional mouth. I will let my wife and sister know…” he said with some uncertainty in his voice. Harry saw that Ace made a discreet gesture indicating him to go back to the backyard while she entered the house with Dudley.

Soon enough Harry heard Marge heavy voice rejoicing over Dudley’s love life and he shuddered. What the hell was Ace thinking?? But a few minutes later, Aunt Petunia called him in. “Go wash, we have a guest.” She hissed quickly at him.

And then for the first time in forever, Harry was invited to the dinner table with the rest of the family. Ace was smiling politely at the adults and Dudley alike and sometimes she glanced at him and he recognized her victorious grin. He had to look down at his plate, so his relatives did not notice he was grinning too.

Eventually, and for the first time since he lived with the Dursleys, Harry got to taste one of the cakes he made for his dreadful cousin and he had to admit, he was quite a good cook after all!

That summer, Ace broke into the Dursleys’ house at night and she spent some evening with Harry in the backyard. They had to make sure not to wake his uncle and aunt up, but they still enjoyed this stolen time spent together.

On the night between July 30th and July 31st, around midnight, Harry heard a low knock on his cupboard door. He was abashed when he released that the door was open and his best friend was waiting behind it.

She had made a small birthday cake and they ate it together under the stars laughing. Ace never quite explained to him how she managed to open the door, but Harry did not really care. They had both ended their school year with straight As and their teacher were confident with their chances to be accepted in any secondary school in the country.

In one year, they would be free!

The last year of primary school went by quite unnoticed. Between entrance exams, conspiracy to forge their guardians’ signature or to convince a teacher or a neighbour to get them to the exam centre, Harry and Ace became even closer to each other.

From time to time, Ace would become really quiet for a few days and one morning, Harry noticed a bruise on her wrist. But she kept on telling him that everything was okay. Her foster sister Kate got
pregnant. Her foster dad began to drink more and more casually but Ace promised Harry that he was not hurting her… Most of the time… Nothing as serious as his own uncle did to him… He should not worry… He hardly even ‘touched’ her…

Harry hated not being able to do anything but when he said so, she would argue back that she felt the same regarding his relatives – and they actually hurt him!

Finally, there were days when Ace would just spend all their breaks napping against Harry’s body. Those days, she would often skip lunch to grab a few more minutes of sleep. He always let her, knowing that she probably did not sleep at night because she was afraid to wake up to her foster dad staring at her in her room. During those times, Harry would stroke her long hair caringly, waking her up when she started getting nightmares, calming her back to sleep and counting the days before they could both be free.

And suddenly, one day, Harry woke up to realise it was Dudley’s 11th birthday. The Dursleys had plans for the day and he was to stay with Mrs Figg – and, in reality, spend the day with Ace. However, nothing went as expected. He was forced to go with them to the zoo. It could have been a good day if he had not already made plans with people he actually wanted to spend time with… And everything ended up in chaos when the glass of the vivarium containing a talking snake disappeared. Why did this kind of thing only ever happen to him?

Harry knew the evening would be dreadful. He saw the glances between his uncle and his aunt. Nothing would be said or done in public but once home… Piers telling his uncle in the car that Harry was talking to the snake was the final straw. He knew from the way his uncle scowled at him through the inside mirror that he was definitely doomed.

Sure enough, as soon as they parked home, Uncle Vernon locked Harry’s in his cupboard, promising him no meals for as long as he would be judged necessary. Little did he knew that Harry was already rejoicing that he did not actually get hit at that time.

A few nights later, long after Harry heard his aunt and uncle go to sleep, the lock on his cupboard clicked. Harry got kind of used to see his best friend breaking into his relatives’ house in the middle of the night to see him, so he just weakly smiled at her. A drenched Ace stared back at him and gave him a sandwich and a water bottle without a word.

“Thanks.” He breathed accepting the welcomed gift. “Raining outside?” Ace nodded and sat on the floor next to him. She let him eat at his own pace for few minutes before finally asking the questions she was holding back.

“Why did you launch a cobra at your cousin? Are you mad??” she muttered.

“I didn’t do it on purpose… I was talking to the snake and the glass just vanished!” Harry defended himself.

“You were talking to the snake?” she repeated.

“You talk to dogs!” He retorted back, and she pulled out her tongue at him.

“Are you hurt?” She asked more seriously.

“Na! Just starving. Don’t worry. How did you know?”

“Dudley…” she shrugged. “Anyway, I got something for you.” She announced with her first smile of the evening before taking a thick envelope from her pocket.
Harry looked at it. There were his name, Ace’s address, and Sutton’s crest on it. The envelope was already opened but he did not care, he knew he could trust his friend on it. He sent her a questioning look and she smiled brightly. Eventually, he dared to read the letter himself:

“Dear Mr Harry Potter,

Congratulations! It is with great pleasure that I offer you admission to Sutton Grammar School for boys and girls Class of 1991…”

An unsuspected burden was lifted from his heart at the reading of these few words and he read the rest of the letter confirming that he could attend free of charge, housing and uniform included. When he looked back at Ace her silver eyes were shining and her smile could not have been broader. “I got in too. We’re both going out of here…” she confirmed, and everything settled down with those few words. Harry launched himself at her and hugged her tightly. He heard her laugh in his ear and he followed her quickly. God, he even felt some tears making their way down his cheeks.

Suddenly a crack reverberated upstairs and they froze. “Hide” Harry urged her in a silent whisper when he heard a click indicating that a light had been switched on. Ace went to hide behind the couch and he silently closed the door of his cupboard.

Heavy steps came down the stairs, a loud kick met the cupboard door. “Stop talking in your sleep or I gagged you!” his uncle angrily muttered before going to the kitchen to take a midnight snack. He went back to sleep quickly grumbling about the stupid freak that cannot keep quiet.

Ace waited for few more minutes before coming back to the cupboard. “That was close!” she joked, laughing lowly. Harry shook his head.

“It’s too dangerous. You’d have been in real trouble if he ever got you! We cannot do this anymore!”

“But…”

“No buts. Listen, we got in.” He hushed her giving her back the acceptance letter back. “We cannot jeopardize our safety exit for something as stupid as that. I don’t want you to come here anymore. They are pretty upset with me right now and I don’t know how long it’ll take them to calm down, but I want you to promise me that you won’t take that risk again this summer!”

“Har’…”

“Promise Ace.” He insisted, and she nodded reluctantly. “I will let a sign in the garden if I got out before the end of the summer, but you don’t need to check on me ok? We will see each other on September 1st anyway.”

“September 2nd… actually. September 1st is a Sunday. Are you sure you gonna be okay by yourself?” Harry nodded. “Kate is about to give birth, I might not be here for our birthday this year.” She sadly explained.

“It’s okay. I will survive. Don’t worry.” He reassured her, but she still seemed sad. “Let’s meet at the bus station before the public library on September 2nd, 8 am, okay?”

“Okay…” she agreed against her will. “But take care too okay? I don’t like that…”

“It’s gonna be okay. They will spend their summer bragging about Dudley’s entrance to Smelting’s anyway… No much time to torture me in that plan.” Ace did not smile at his dark humour. “I’ll try to talk to them about Sutton’s… I’ll let you know, okay?” He tried to reassure her, and she just nodded absentely.
“Take care” She repeated again before hugging him tightly.

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think about this story!
Harry did not know what to expect from his summer, but he would not ever have imagined it would turn out like that.

It was already the end of July and Uncle Vernon was reading his papers while drinking coffee. Aunt Petunia had spent the previous day dying some of Dudley’s old clothes in grey to serve as Harry’s uniform in Stonewall High. They seemed in a pretty good mood overall so Harry thought that maybe it was time to tackle the idea of his real secondary school arrangements.

“Aunt Petunia?” He asked politely receiving a sneer in response. “What if I cannot go to Stonewall because I was already accepted in some other school…”

Harry had expected his relatives to make fun of him and tell him to stop being ridiculous, certainly not to completely freeze, pale drastically, and look at him as if he had grown a second head.

“Wh…What are you talking about? Wh..What school?” his aunt stuttered.

“I… I might have taken Sutton Grammar School entrance exam last year and…” He began, lowering his head when he spoke in case they suddenly decided to lash out.

As he stated the name of the school he saw both adults letting out of their breath. “Don’t be ridiculous! As if you were smart enough to go to Sutton’s!” His uncle mocked him, going back to his paper.

“Actually… I did pass…” Harry explained cautiously. “And they grant me full scholarship, so you won’t have to pay anything and…”

The click of the letter-box and the flop of letters on the doormat cut him in his desperate attempt to find the right argument to convince them.

“Get the post, boy,” ordered Uncle Vernon.

Harry sighed but did as told, not taking up his relatives’ silent exchange as soon as he left the room. Three things laid on the doormat: a postcard from Aunt Marge, a bill and – a thick letter for Mr H. Potter addressed to ‘The cupboard under the Stairs’.

“Hurry up, boy!” shouted his uncle from the kitchen. “What are you doing, looking for your imaginary acceptance letter to Sutton’s?” Harry shook his head absently not taking the joking tone and gave the two first letters to Vernon.

“No… I’ve already got it two weeks ago…” he mumbled but nobody was listening to him anymore.

Harry examined the thick envelope in his hand. Could it be from Ace? She was the only one who knew about the cupboard… But it was not her style at all nor her writing… There was no stamp on it… How did it get there? He turned the enveloped, it was kept shut by a wax seal crest he did not know.

“Dad, Harry really got a letter!” came Dudley’s loving voice and before he knew it, the said letter
was jerked sharply out of his hands.

“That’s mine!” said Harry but his uncle twisted his arm when he tried to snatch the letter back.

“OUT! BOTH OF YOU!” the man roared cutting off Dudley who tried to steal the letter too.

The kitchen door was slammed in their face. Harry stared at it, massaging his aching shoulder. He was used to being treated this way but for his uncle to sack Dudley off too, it must be something big. Dudley did try to listen through the door, but Harry knew it was useless and would just bring more pain if he got caught.

He sighed and looked at his cupboard. No, Ace would never do something like that… It would so easily put him in trouble, she would not risk it. Who else could possibly know about his living conditions? He turned over that question during all day while doing his chores. How could someone know and do nothing? The only answer seemed to be bad news: someone who did not care or find it unacceptable… probably someone who could do worse… He ended up deciding that he would rather not know in the end, maybe he could ask again about Sutton’s in a few days.

That night, uncle Vernon asked Harry to sit at the dinner table after Petunia and Dudley had finished eating. He even allowed him to finish the plates which he had never done before. Harry forced himself not to frown while eating. Something was definitely off, but he would never waste an opportunity of a real meal during summer.

“Listen, boy.” Vernon started after few minutes before taking a deep breath. “About your room…”

“I didn’t talk about it! No one knows! I don’t know who sent the letter, but I haven’t told the social services, so it was not me!” Harry stammered out. That was it, it was his last meal??? He could still feel his shoulder aching from this morning. Would he rather throw him in the street? He would not take the belt… He was about to go to Sutton’s! With Ace! Be free, together! He could not die tonight!

“Calm down, boy!” His uncle sighed. “The letter was some joke from Dudley… Nothing important. Anyway, your aunt and I had been thinking… You’re really getting a bit big for your room so… we think it might be nicer if you moved into Dudley’s second bedroom. It would be better for your studies don’t you think! Especially if you really got to Sutton’s Grammar!”

Harry stared at his smiling uncle. He had never seen him smile at him ever before. It smelt fishy. It was not natural. What was in that letter that scared him enough to act like that??

“You would agree for me to go to Sutton’s?” he repeated highly suspicious.

“Well if you really got in and you said it was free, we would be really mad not to let you go! Why didn’t you talk about your ambitions sooner, er?”

Harry stayed silent and his uncle did not insist. Soon enough he was in Dudley’s second bedroom with all his stuff which were mostly gifts from Ace and pictures he had drawn over the years. The day before he would have given anything to get his relatives to agree to him going to Sutton’s but now, he was just deeply worried about what was in that bloody letter…

The next days went from strange to utterly chaotic. Letters kept coming every day, several times a day, hundreds, thousands of letters addressed to him and now ‘The smallest bedroom’. Harry did not manage to grab any of them long enough for actually being able to read it. Each time, he ended up locked in his new room and the letters had been burnt one after the other by his uncle.
Even Sunday was not as soothing as Uncle Vernon had hoped. Letters came flying from the fireplace. Harry began to really be afraid of those people who were ready to go to such an extent to contact him… What was so important that they turned to such degree of harassment??

Eventually, Vernon got them in the car and drove and drove. They ended up on a small island in the sea. Harry was too anxious to notice it was the first time he had ever seen the sea or gone on a road trip – if that was the right name for what they were doing.

Dudley reminded him it was Monday, meaning it was his and Ace’s birthdays the next day. Ace had told him she would probably not be there, and he asked her not to seek him, but it did not prevent him from feeling guilty about not being in Little Whinging with her. Falling asleep on the ground, his cousin snoring on the couch above him, he wished whoever was after him would just stop already so he could go back on his life and get ready for September. They agreed to Sutton’s, that was all that counted, and he had to keep that in mind no matter what!

However, nothing was ever that simple for Harry Potter and a bloody giant burst into their broken-down house in their stormy forgotten island that night. Harry’s sleepy mind could not get everything the giant was saying in his heavy accent, but he got that he was angry at his uncle for the way they treated him… That was a good thing, right? Wait… How did he know how they had treated him except letting him sleep on the floor? He was famous? How could he be famous since his parents died if he hadn’t even known his own name before he was 6? When suddenly: “Yer a wizard Harry!”

Yup! That was it. Vernon had probably hit his head last night and now Harry was having the strangest dream ever. Where did his imagination find this kind of plot? Where did he see this giant before? One of Dudley’s movie? A TV commercial? If you dyed his hair and beard white, maybe it was last year Santa from Coke’s campaign…

And then the giant finally gave him one of those bloody letters that had made his life into a rollercoaster for the past couples of days. This time, it was addressed to Mr H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. When he pulled out the letter he discovered that it was an acceptance letter to HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY.

Harry had never heard about that school and doubted it was anything serious with such a name, but he still had many questions after reading the letter. “What does it mean, they await my owl?” he asked the giant – Hagrid if he recalled correctly.

At this question, the huge man pulled a real living owl out of one of his many pockets and wrote a note in a hurry to some ‘Mr Dumbledore’? The owl left by the window but before Harry could ask any more questions, Uncle Vernon intervened loudly. “He’s not going.”

Hagrid immediately argued that a muggle – a non-magical person apparently – like his uncle, had no word to say about his education. Vernon very much admitted that he had known all along that his nephew was a wizard and Harry just stared at him without believing his ears.

“You knew? You mean… you believe him? Is he saying the truth? I’m a wizard?” he stammered.

And then Aunt Petunia suddenly freaked out about his mother. He had never heard her talking so much about her sister… His mother was a witch too and she met his father at that strange school? And then everything he thought he knew about his parents crumpled a little more when the giant said that they were no drunkards but heroes who had been killed by some psycho and no drunk car crash…

Gosh, he was making him think too much about his past… he hated this dream and tried to pinch
himself to wake himself up. It did not work.

And then suddenly, Uncle Vernon insulted this Dumbledore man and Hagrid pointed his umbrella at Dudley and Dudley grew a pigtail?! And his relatives fled to lock themselves in the other room leaving him alone with the giant.

Luckily, Hagrid decided it was time to go – back – to bed. Well he took the couch and Harry was back on the floor, but the boy did not complain and just firmly hoped it would allow him out of this insane dream. What did Ace always use to say? ‘You’ll be really mad when you start talking to pictures on the wall and believe they really answer you back’… Yeah, something like that… Well… He was ready to compete this time because a bloody giant taking out living owls from his pocket to send them in the storm and doing bloody witchcraft on his cousin was ten times crazier than talking pictures! No. Back to sleep and out this madness.

Of course, hope had always been useless to Harry Potter and the next day, the giant was still here and determined to take him shopping for school.

Harry sighed. “Listen, Mr Hagrid… I’m very sorry but… I don’t know this school and my uncle would never pay for it.”

“What are you talking about, there is nothing for him to pay. Do you think your parents leave you nothing?!”

“They…” Harry started before sighing again. “Never mind. I’d already had a secondary school. I got into Sutton’s Grammar School, it one of the best school in the country and…”

“Nonsense! You’re Harry Potter! You won’t go to some stupid muggle school! How would you learn magic this way?”

“I don’t do magic and I don’t want to leave my friend behind!” He explained honestly. “She needs me…”

“Nah! Trust me, muggles are best left on their own! And don’t worry ‘Arry, you will make new friends! Young wizards and witches just like you!”

“Are you… I mean… How can you be so sure I’m really a wizard…?” Harry tried again.

Hagrid laughed at him and dismissed everything he was trying to say. He had to go to Hogwarts, period.

Further protestations were soon put on the second plan as Harry stayed astonished for most of the day: wizarding bank, goblins, potions, wand, owl?! It turned out he really was famous because everyone knew his name and what he was supposed to look like. It was quite freaky when he thought about it. And Hagrid was not really subtle about it, saying his name loudly and clearly for everyone who did not recognize him at first glance to connect the dot. By the time Hagrid left him alone in the “robe” shop, Harry was feeling so uncomfortable he did not raise his eyes from his shoes.

He saw other children his age on the street, some with their parents, some gathering up with friends, talking lively… It felt like shopping streets during Christmas time. It was a pleasant feeling… Well… when you don’t have a screaming giant next to you to make sure everyone is looking at you! However, Hagrid bought him a beautiful snowy owl, saying it was for his birthday so maybe he was not that bad… Just extremely loud and annoying.
Before he knew it, Hagrid put him into a train back to Surrey. Harry was almost inclined to think that
day had just been a big hallucination if it were not for the massive trunk, the snowy owl and the
inquisitive gazes from the strangers in the train. Yeah… seemed liked Hagrid had some delayed
attention drawing effect as well…

Now that he had time to think about it, Harry could not get his mind out of Ace. Hagrid told him
about this “Statute of Secrecy” … he could go to prison if he told Ace about magic and the Ministry
could erase her memories… He did not want Ace to forget about him, but he did not want to leave
her behind without a word either!

Harry needed to speak to his best friend. Unfortunately, his uncle was waiting for him at Little
Whinging Station and he would not swing by the Smiths’ house. Before he knew it, Harry was
locked in his new bedroom with his owl, recent purchases and regrets as only company.

The Dursleys spent August trying to get rid of Dudley’s tail. Harry was left locked in his room and
decided to use that time to read his new books and familiarize himself with those new subjects. At
least the last two years studying for Sutton’s exam had taught him how to retain critical information
and understand most of what was going on even when some terms remained grey. He thought about
getting more ‘basic’ books on some subject and wondered if some of the teachers were expecting
them to prepare something before their first class. He did not know how to use Hedwig – he decided
to name his owl after reading the name in his History book – to get to Hagrid and get some
answers… He did not seem like the kind to have this kind of answer anyway.

Often, his mind ran out and he ended up thinking about Ace. How could he contact her? His
relatives would not let him out of the house and Uncle Vernon jammed the window, so Harry would
not let Hedwig fly around the house where neighbours could see her. Soon, Harry decided to write a
letter, but the words always came false and silly on the paper. He hated it that he had to lie to his best
friend. He hated it that he could not talk to her in person. He hated it that he would have to leave her
behind starting September…

Harry tried to talk to Dudley a few times to know if he had heard from Ace but, thanks to Hagrid’s
‘trick’, Dudley was now terrified of him. Harry did manage to corner him once, but his Aunt found
them, and he got hurled back to his room. He did not get anything to eat or to drink for 2 days after
that, he knew better than to try again.

One night near the end of August, Harry was not able to sleep so he was just thinking about his
aborted letter to Ace again when he seemed to hear a sound coming from downstairs. He bolted up
when he recognized the distinctive click of the lock on his cupboard. It sounds muffled and far away,
but he was sure of what it was.

Ace was in the house!

Harry jumped to his door, but his uncle had locked him in like every other night. Ace knew how to
rack a lock, she would probably be able to open the door but how to convince her to come upstairs?
Harry did not know. If he called for her, his relatives might hear him and find her and… He did not
want to think about what his uncle would be capable of if he found the girl trespassing… When
suddenly, he had an idea!

Harry went and grabbed his flashlight and lied down to the ground. He flashed the light three times
under the door. He tried to aim an angle that would allow Ace to see the light from the entrance. He
wished for it to work and tried again after waiting few seconds. And then he heard it, the fourth stair
creaked but also the click from his uncle’s and aunt’s room.
Harry froze, torn between making a scene to let Ace escape or running to his bed and pretending to sleep so his uncle would not beat him up in front of his friend. Fortunately, the heavy steps did not come his way – nor the staircase – but just to the bathroom and Harry could let go of his breath. However, the damage was still done, and he could not hear any other sound in the house after his uncle went back to sleep. He tried to flash his light again, under the door, through his window but Ace was gone… He lost his probably only chance to see her again before September…

Dear Ace,

I’m sorry for not being able to tell you this in person. It turns out my parents had registered me in some really private boarding school before they died, and I hadn’t been given the choice to turn down the enrolment. That’s why I can’t go to Sutton’s with you… I hope you will forgive me.

I really wish I could tell you more about that school but the person who came to tell me about it insisted that this knowledge cannot be shared with people who are not from the school without serious consequences and I don’t want you to be in trouble because of this… I know it all sounds like a lie and petty excuses, but I promise that it wasn’t my relatives who forced me to go there instead of Sutton’s! Honestly, they have been pretty decent this summer… Even if I haven’t been allowed outside… They moved me to D’s second bedroom that’s why I’m no longer in the cupboard under the stairs… I think you came to visit last week… I’m sorry I was locked in…

It was too dangerous for you to be there anyway! But I appreciate it… Thank you for caring. It really means a lot to me.

If you’re okay with it, I would like to keep in touch… I don’t know the address of my new school and haven’t written down Sutton’s dormitory address, so I will write to your foster dad’s house at the beginning and enclosed a reply address in my next letter! Could you please give me yours too then?

I really hope you will forgive me… I miss you and I don’t know how I will do without you but please, take care of yourself. I will try to come back for the holidays… I don’t know if I can, but I will try so, please… don’t hate me…

Love you.

H.

Harry was finally able to finish his letter to his best friend on the 31st of August. He hated it with all his soul. The words felt so empty, he was certain that Ace would feel it too… It would hurt her… He hated himself for it especially now that he came to be excited to go to Hogwarts!

He had read all his new books and definitely found the subjects fascinating… He could not wait to brew potions and cast spells and learn more about magical animals and plants. It was so much more interesting than grammar or maths or even WWII… Seriously, Goblin’s rebellion sounded like an epic chapter of The Lord of the Rings! Yet, Ace would not be there, and he felt so guilty about it he could not sleep at night.

“We leave at 8 tomorrow… be ready.” His aunt told him when she came to give him the leftover of that night meal.

Harry waited for her to close the door again before sighing. He had 12 hours left to find a way to give the letter to Ace and he had no idea what to do. He could not approach Dudley anymore and the risk of him reading the letter and deciding to destroy it was too high… He did not have a stamp to
post it… The only solution was to put the letter into the Smiths’ mailbox himself… or to let it by the bus stop in front of the library where Ace would wait for him on Monday – the day after tomorrow… How to be sure no one else would take his letter during this 24-hour time lapse?

No, the best solution was the mailbox. Plan B would be the post.

Even with his mind set-up, sleep was hard to find that night. He was not ready, but he would probably never be… What if he was really late in his studies compared to other magical children? He read the books but what if it was not enough? What if Ace keep coming at the house at night to search for him and Vernon found her instead? Would other children be nicer than the ones at his old school? Would Ace be mad if he made new friends? Were the teachers nice? How would they be graded? What if Ace made new friends? Would that hurt him? Would she forget about him? Would she decide not to come back since nothing was waiting back for her at Little Whinging?

Would he ever see her again?

His aunt alarm clock rang but he did not feel like he had slept at all. She opened his room door and he lifted his heavy trunk downstairs. When he saw that his aunt was alone in the kitchen, he grabbed the opportunity.

“Aunt Petunia?” he asked evenly, and she sneered. “May I go out for five minutes before we leave, or do you happen to have a stamp?”

“Your kind should pay like everyone else if you freaks want to use our public services.” The angry voice of his uncle came behind him. “And you will go nowhere. We will ditch you at King Cross and then we have an appointment for Dudley to repair what that monster did to him.”

“Please. I just have to put a letter in a mailbox! I have to tell my friend that…”

“You have no friend.” Dudley cut him following his father with a nasty smile. “As if June would still want to hear from you now that we have the proof that you really are a freak!” He then went on whining about how hungry he was whereas Aunt Petunia tried to explain to him that he could not eat this morning because he would undergo a surgery later that day.

Soon enough Harry was tossed in the car and they left for London. He tried to ask for a swing to the Smiths’ house once more. “Do I look like a taxi driver, boy??” his uncle snarled back, “Because if I do you will have to pay me for this ride. And with real money, mind you. Punch him, Dudley.” And then Dudley did as he was told and punched him in the arm.

Harry had never been to London – except for this one time with Hagrid but he did not really have his mind on his surrounding back them, the continuous shocking revelations the half-giant spat every five seconds had been too distracting for that – so Kings Cross was really a completely new universe for him. There were people everywhere!

The Dursleys did not bother going with him. They just left him in front of the station without shutting off the engine. “We don’t want to hear from you ever again!” joyfully announced his uncle just before the car went on leaving him alone.

Harry sighed. It was to be expected and honestly, he was rather glad it went this way. But still, he was now an eleven-year-old, lost in the biggest train station in the UK with a trunk he could not lift more than a few centimetres at a time and a bloody owl in a cage that draw thousands of funny looks to him…

“Brilliant…” he muttered to himself before going looking for a trolley.
Next step was to find platform 9¾ but it was still early so Harry decided to go to the post office box. He tried to ask a few strangers if they had a stamp to spare but they all looked at him, at his oversized worn clothes, his big trunk and his owl and then they sneered before going their way saying that they had “no time/money”.

He ended up thinking it was a lost cause. Maybe, if he wrote Ace’s address as the sender address too, the postman will still deliver instead of returning it? Without any better option, Harry decided that it was worth a try and posted his apology letter without a stamp.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Please tell me what you think?
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was now ten and the Hogwarts Express left at 11. Harry needed to find that stupidly named platform. Of course, there was no indication between platform 9 and platform 10. The station staff he asked thought he was making fun of him and hushed him away threatening to bring him to the police station and call his parents if he continued.

Harry was about to give up and think that maybe if he missed the train, he could go to Sutton’s after all, and forget that this bloody summer ever existed, when he caught the words of the group of people passing behind him.

“– packed with Muggles, of course –”

That was how Harry met the family of redhead wizards and witches. He thought it was a little bit strange for the mother to explain everything the children had to know to go to the platform when it was obvious that the three oldest were certainly not first years and thus had certainly already taken the train before, but it worked well enough for him, so he did not speak up.

Harry passed through the barrier as instructed and discovered that the wizarding side of the platform was as packed or even more as the Muggle’s one. Kids his age and older were holding to their parents or reuniting with their friends, heavy trunks were lifted into the red train, owls were owling around and when the loud whistle called ‘10 minutes before departure!’ everything turned to a whole new joyful chaos.

The redhead twins helped Harry getting his trunk and Hedwig cage to the train. They stared at his scar a bit too long and then asked him to confirm it.

“Are you-“

“We mean are you- “

“Harry Potter?” they both asked simultaneously.

“Yeah… I am he… I mean I am…” Harry answered nervously before trying to pet his mop of hair to hide his bloody famous scar away. Doing so, he glanced the blueing bruise he got this morning from when his uncle ditched him into the car and immediately attempted to stretch his sleeve to hid that up too.

He missed the silent exchange between the twins but looked back at them when two hands were presented to him. “Well it’s a pleasure to meet you!” the first said.

“I’m George and he’s Fred Weasley. You can come to us if you need anything, young Potter!”

Harry chuckled and shook both their hands. “You can call me Harry!”

“Then you can call us Forge and Gred!” they smiled back in synch before looking over his shoulder where Harry heard their mother calling them. “See you later!”

Harry watched them hopped off the train and going back to their family. This view made him smile and wish he had a loving family just like them. Even if she could never go with him, he wished Ace
was at least here to see him off just like their little sister… That was a selfish dream and he could not afford to feel gloomy again right now, he needed to find a compartment and to settle down before the departure.

A whistle sounded loud again when Harry finally found an empty compartment. He was not ready to deal with this unwanted celebrity just yet. Unfortunately, he was not left alone for long, soon enough the youngest redhead boy joined him and Harry immediately realised that he was far less subtle than his brothers.

“Are you really Harry Potter?? Can I seat with you? Can I see your scar? Wow! Do you remember that night? Do you remember You-Know-You’s face??? I’m Ron by the way! Ron Weasley!”

“Ergh… I was just a baby, you know? I only remember a green flash but I’m not even sure it’s from that night…” Harry tried to answer honestly without showing that these questions were making him really uncomfortable. He was not used to this rapid-fire kind of questioning.

“Awesome!” Ron commented with the biggest satisfied smile.

“Do all your family wizards?” Harry asked to change the subject before the other had time to start another round of unwanted questions. That’s how he learned that Ron did not have 3 but 5 brothers and that he came from an all-wizard family. He seemed to know nothing about the real – he meant ‘Muggle’ – world but was not that curious about it.

Harry thought that Ron really liked to talk. It was like he would never stop asking questions and increment Harry’s short answers with inputs from his own life. After one hour of this, Harry was started to get a little bit tired of it. He was missing Ace’s comforting and understanding silence. But at least he could use this non-stop chatting to have a better grab of the wizarding world and what was expected of children their age… Thinking of it, Ron seemed to be quite ignorant about most of their classes or the sorting ceremony which made him a little bit better about his own ignorance.

Around half past twelve, a trolley full of sweets came to pass their compartment. Harry took two of everything because… Honestly? Because for the first time in his life he could! And that was the best reason in the world if you asked him.

Ron was literally drooling when Harry sat back with his new sugary treasure. The smaller boy offered to share. He was hoping that the treat would keep Ron’s mouth shut at least while he was eating. He even exchanged some of his sweets against corned beef sandwiches, so he would stop complaining and because he knew his undernourished body needed real food more than candies… But nothing seemed to stop Ron’s babbling. It was like if the boy really liked the sound of his own voice or something… but looking at him speaking while stuffing pastries in his mouth? Harry did not know that people could be more disgusting than Dudley or Vernon while they eat…

Ron explained the origin and stories about all the sweets Harry bought. For a child from a “poor” family, as he said, he knew a lot of stuff about candies… He even had a collection of some of the item sold with them! All muggle sweets Harry could name were from Dudley’s addictions and sometimes TV. He hardly ate more than 3 or 4 in his whole life and that was always because Ace managed to get him some! Even if Ron complained about the lack of money in his family, Harry doubted he ever had to go to bed hungry…

Ron was listing all the flavour of Bertie Bott’s Beans he and his siblings ever had tasted when a knock on the door of the compartment saved Harry from his infinite boredom.
A round-faced boy came in – Harry remembered his face from the platform, he was with an old lady with a really strange vulture hat back there... The new boy looked tearful. “Sorry,” he said, “but have you seen a toad at all?”

Harry shook his head and Ron grunted a chocolate ‘no’ from which the boy winced. “I’ve lost him again! He keeps getting away from me!” he wailed.

“Don’t worry, he’ll turn up,” Harry said.

“Someone’ll give it back to you sometime soon… It’s not as if someone would willingly steal a toad!” Ron commented in disgust. “It’s so lame…”

The boy looked miserably at his feet. “I’m sorry… well if you see him…” he said before he left.

Harry glared at Ron who was just shrugging. How could he be so mean to someone who had done nothing to deserve it?!

“Wait!” Harry called after the boy. “I’ll help you find him!”

The brown-haired boy stared at him before letting out a shy ‘thank you’.

“What’s his name?” Harry asked with a smile.

“Trevor,” the boy answered to his feet. “He’s a gift from my grandmother for my acceptance to Hogwarts… She was so relieved I wasn’t a squib…” He explained but shut himself in a squeak, probably already regretting his words.

“A squib?” Harry repeated and when the boy looked up at him, he understood it should be some magical word. “Ah… Sorry, I lived with my muggle relatives up until this morning.” He explained feeling a little awkward.

“Oh…” the boy went back to look at his feet. “A squib is a person who is born from a magical family but who has no access or very limited access to his or her magic.”

“Like the opposite of a muggleborn?”

“Yeah… kind of like that…” The boy admitted after thinking about it for a few seconds. “I’m Neville Longbottom… by the way. You can call me Neville if you want.”

“Harry Potter. But you can call me Harry!” Harry smiled back. He noticed that Neville briefly stopped hearing his name, he did send a quick peek to his forehead, but he resumed walking with a shy smile without commenting any further.

Harry was relieved to realise that not all magical kids were like Ron Weasley and treat him like he was some kind of superhero.

“Where are we going?” Neville asked nervously after noticing that they were entering a very lively area full of older students.

“To ask for some help.” Harry grinned before checking one of the compartment – he remembered the number from one of Ron’s stories from earlier. He knocked and waited a few seconds before sliding the door. “Err… Sorry to interrupt… Can I talk to Gred and Forge Weasley?” he asked politely doing his best to ignore the too many pairs of eyes that turned his way.

Both ginger twins got up and came to him as soon as they recognized him. “Sure Harry, what can
we do for our favourite little first year?”
“Shouldn’t your brother be your ‘favourite little first year’?” Harry joked feeling the same kind of confidence he more often felt around Ace.

“Na… Ron is boring…” the first twin answered.

“You’ve probably already noticed it from the look on your face when we passed by your compartment earlier…” the second completed.

“And you’re definitely littler than him~” the other added.

“So, what can we do for you?” they finished in synch.

“Well… my friend, here, has lost his toad and I would like to know if you know a quick way to find it without digging up every single compartment of this train?”

The twins looked at Neville before exchanging a glance. “Sure, there is! We could summon it!”

“No, you can’t”, a girl said behind them. “You’d never summon a living thing! It could kill it! Plus, I doubt you two soon-to-be 3rd years could perfectly control the summoning charm…”

“Come on Angelina! Don’t you know who we are?”, one of the two twins smirked.

“Of course, we can perform the summoning charm!”, the other added.

“Accio Angelina’s pink bra!”, command the first, his wand in hand.

Suddenly, the tall black-haired girl who talked got up and crashed into the twin who moved his wand. “Oh… Turns out you’re wearing it today~ But what for? It’s not as if you need it more than the last time I saw you…” He mused. “You’re still as flat as…”

“FRED! I will kill you!!!!” the girl screamed pushing herself out of the red-haired arms.

“Hey! He’s George, I’m Fred!” the other twin – who did not cast the spell – protested.

“I don’t care! I will kill you both, so I’ll be sure I don’t miss!” she talked back, and the twins slowly retreated to the corridor before running away with the girl screaming bloody murder after them.

Harry gapped while watching them disappear. So much for the help then… He was about to excuse himself to the remaining people in the compartment before leaving when an older boy reached him.

“Don’t mind them… they are just being Gryffindors.” He smiled as brightly as his blond hair. “I will help you instead if you’re okay with it. Do you have your wand with you?”

“Err… I… don’t?” Harry answered with uncertainty in his voice. Was he supposed to keep his wand with him all the time? Was that something wizards do?

“I do…” came the timid voice of Neville behind him. “But I’m not very…”

“Great! It’s easy you will see. Hold your wand flat in your hand, like that!” The blond showed the wand position in his own hand. “Picture what you are looking for in your mind and then say, ‘Point me’ and the name of what you are looking for. For example, Point me Lee Jordan’s Tarantula!”

The older boy’s wand turned in his hand and the tip pointed the trunk underneath the feet of one dreadlocks boy eating a lollypop.

“Your turn!”
Neville reproduced the wand position. “P… Point me T-Trevor?” Nothing happened.

“You shouldn’t stutter it!” The dreadlock boy called out. “Say it firmly.”

“He is right, try again.” The blond boy cheered on.

Neville sighed loudly and took a deep breath before saying more loudly: “Point me Trevor!” This time the wand turned in his hand, pointing in the direction they came from.

“It works!!!!” Neville cried excitedly. “Harry! I did magic!!!” Harry could not do anything but smile back at him.

“Well, you’re going to Hogwarts, don’t you?” the dreadlocked boy mocked him from his seat.

“Don’t be mean, Jordan!” the blond boy scolded before turning back to them smiling. “It should be easier to find your toad this way. You might need to recast the spell after some time though.”

“Thank you, thank you so much!”

“You’re welcome! See you later during the welcoming feast and welcome to Hogwarts boys!” he said before going back to his seat.

“You’re such a Hufflepuff, Diggory! Five galleons you’ll be Prefect before 5th year!” Harry heard the amused voice of the dreadlocked boy before the door closed. He shook it off and focused back on Neville. “Let’s go?”

Neville nodded, his eyes still fixed on his wand. They roamed through the train when the tip abruptly changed direction as they passed a compartment door. Both boys exchanged an excited glance, and Harry knocked politely. “Excuse us… we think my friend’s toad is in your compartment, do you mind if we search for it?”

The compartment was filled with 5 girls who seemed to be around their age. Their entrance seemed to have stopped a bushy haired girl in a deep explanation but another girl with a long plait jumped on their interruption to cut her off. “Hi, Neville!”

“Oh, hi Susan! Do you happen to have seen Trevor?”

“Err… no. Sorry.”

“He should be here. Neville, do the spell again!” Harry cheered him up excited to see if it really worked.

“Okay,” Neville breathed deeply, “Point me Trevor!” The wand turned again to the corner of the compartment, behind a trunk.

“Sorry girls…” Harry said before lying down to the ground. They all had the decency to lift their feet. He stretched his arm and touched something slimy which he pulled back to him. “Found it!” He announced triumphantly exposing the toad.

“Trevor!! Thanks, Harry!” Neville exclaimed taking back his toad and lending a hand to Harry to help him back to his feet.

Harry accepted the offer after having wiped his slimy hand on his jean under the disgusted eyes of the girls.

The bushy-haired girl was the quicker to sober up. “Was that a real spell? I thought spell should be
said in Latin for them to work? I’ve worked on the Latin language all summer! Nobody in my family’s magic at all but my parents studied Latin in medical school, so they were able to help me a little bit. Pronunciation is tricky though! Latin being a dead language and all… I’ve still worked out some simple spells after practising a little, so I guess I’m doing okay. I’ve learnt all our set books off by heart, of course, I just hope it will be enough – I’m Hermione Granger, by the way, and you are?”

She said all this very fast. Harry looked at Neville who exchanged a glance with the girls confirming that ‘Hermione Granger’ had certainly acted this way during the whole journey so far.

“I’m Neville Longbottom, heir of the house Longbottom,” Neville answered running back to his shy ways.

“Harry Potter,” Harry said.

“Are you really?” asked Hermione doubtfully. “I know all about you, of course – I got a few extra books for background reading, and you’re in Modern Magical History and The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts and Greats Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century!”

“Am I?” said Harry, feeling dazed. He turned his face to Neville for confirmation.

“Hum. They also wrote children books about your story, but Gran’s always said they were more fantasy than anything else…”

“What they wrote on ‘historical’ books too according to my aunt, they had been largely romanticized.” ‘Susan’ added. “I’m Susan Bones, of House Bones. Nice to meet you, Heir Potter.”

“You can call me Harry,” Harry said back, feeling embarrassed by the honorific title. “I’m not even sure I’m the heir of any house.”

“Hannah Abbott”, the girl next to her introduced herself.

“Padma and Parvati Patil”, one of the two other girls, likely twins, finished. “And you are the Heir of House Potter,” the other confirmed. “Probably the one of some other older houses too. You might go to Gringotts and take a heredity test to be sure.”

“Oh… I didn’t know. They hadn’t said anything about it when I went there this summer…”

The four girls and Neville stared at him with concern until Hermione Granger broke it off. “I can’t believe you don’t know about the books! I mean… if it was me, I’d have found out everything there is to know about it!”

“I don’t agree.” Said one of the twins. “Would you really want to know what lunatic theories strangers wrote about you?”

“Would you really want to learn how your parents supposedly died or worse from people who weren’t even there or fighting by their sides?” Hannah added. Harry noticed that she grabbed Susan’s hand when she said so.

“Err… I… Err…” Hermione stuttered.

“It’s okay,” Harry intervened seeing how uncomfortable the muggleborn felt, “I didn’t know about the war or Volde-“The deafening gaps stopped him just in time, “Sorry, ‘You-Know-Who’ before this summer so… No offence taken Granger, don’t worry.”

The four girls exchanged a glance and Susan let out a long calming sigh. “Sorry, Granger… I know
that for muggleborns, the last war is just an abstract historical subject but it’s still very fresh in the memory of the wizarding world.”

“It was just ten years ago!” Hannah specified. “And most witch or wizard in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland had lost at least one of their family members in the war. Including most students at the school.”

“It’s not just about you, Harry.” Susan smiled sadly. Harry noticed that Hannah was still holding her hand tightly and that she quickly glanced at Neville too.

Hermione seemed to accept this explanation and apologise quickly to everyone. The others smiled at her and apologised too before switching the subject to the sorting ceremony.

“Okay… I think Ron must be wondering where I disappeared, so I think I will go back to my compartment.” Harry announced when he was certain of the mood he left them with. “Wanna come, Neville?”

“Sure!”

On their way back, they remained quite silent. Harry was glancing at Neville who was petting his toad absentmindedly. “Tell me, Neville… Have you… Have you lost someone during the war too?” He dared ask after some time.

Neville quickly glanced at him before going back to fix his feet. “They are not dead but… My parents had been hospitalized since then… My grandmother raised me.”

“Oh…”

“I know you had it worse. Susan too. She lost her mother and most of her relatives. Her father didn’t really manage to get back on his feet after this loss… She spends most of her time at her aunt’s or sometimes at my place since our families are quite close to each other. There are plenty of other examples at school, the war turned out very awful in the end…”

“I didn’t know…”

“It’s okay.” Neville tried to smile at him. “We are the next generation and we are going to Hogwarts! And I can do magic! Like real magic! Did you see?” He said back to his excited self.

Harry laughed as he entered their compartment. He eyed Ron, who had eaten up the most part of the candies he brought since he left.

“Welcome back!” Ron said with a chocolate full mouth. Harry tried to hide his disgust and gestured Neville to sit next to him. “I see you found that bloody toad after all! Unfortunately. If I were you, I’d tell my parents that I lost it, so they give me a new pet! I mean, my pet is an old rat I got from Percy, but he is so old… He has been in the family like forever! He’s not even magical and just sleeps all day. I hope he will die or something so my parents buy me an owl like Percy. Who are you by the way?”

“I’m Neville Longbottom. Heir of the House Longbottom,” Neville answered reverting back to his shy manners, he brightened up quickly, however. “And yes, we found Trevor. Thanks to Harry. I would have never dared ask to upper years alone…”

“Oh, cut it off with the pureblood crap! We don’t care about families and heirloom here! We aren’t
bloody Slytherins! And you should be grateful to Harry! I mean, he is the Boy-Who-Lived and he still helped you! He is awesome!” Ron said proudly making Harry feel uncomfortable again. “Do you know which house you would go in? My whole family has been Gryffindors, so I guess I’m settled. So much for you Harry! I mean you defeated a Dark Lord when you were a baby AND you’re a Potter! Of course, you’ll be in Gryffindor!”

“I’m not so sure about that…” Harry contested pensively, repressing a sigh. “I mean… I think I could be considered brave sometime, but I don’t like being reckless for no reason… And I kind of had to be resourceful too from time to time… I mean… My relatives don’t really like me much, so I had to get by somehow… Same for being smart, I’d spent the last two years studying and I actually passed the entrance exam to Sutton Grammar School with honours! I mean, I even got in the top ten and I got the scholarship as we planned and… Well, I can’t go now… obviously… since I’m going to Hogwarts but…”

The words were stuck in his throat when, unavoidably, he thought about Ace waiting for him at the bus station. The expression on his face should have turned sour and he flinched when a supporting hand brushed his arm. Neville immediately removed his hand when he saw how scratchy it made him feel. “Are you okay Harry?” he asked softly. “You sound like you’d rather go to this school than Hogwarts…”

“Stop being ridiculous Longbottom! Harry Potter has nothing to do in some stupid muggle school! Of course, he’d rather go Hogwarts aka the BEST WIZARDING SCHOOL in the wooooorld!”

Harry glared at him. He hated how wizard used the term “muggle” as if it was an insult. This boy knew nothing and still, he acted as if he knew him and what he was thinking. He was like Hagrid, telling him he had no choice because of who he was! But nobody ever asked him what he really wanted! He did not know what he really wanted anymore anyway!

Harry was about to speak his mind when the door of their compartment slid open. Three boys entered, and Harry lost his breath when his eyes crossed the ones of the middle one. He was pale with platinum blond hair and Harry thought he might have caught a sight of him with his family in Diagon Alley when he went with Hagrid but that was not what stroke him most about the boy… No, what was absolutely startling about this boy were the silver colour of his eyes. A colour Harry knew much too well even if he had never seen them in any other human being until now.

“Is it true?” The blond boy said hauntingly. “They’re saying all down the train that Harry Potter’s in this compartment. So, it’s you, isn’t it?”

Harry did not answer; how possibly could this boy have the same exact eyes as Ace’s? Not only the colour but the shape too…

He barely noticed the other two boys who were thickset and looked extremely mean nor did he notice Neville moving a little closer to him out of fear.

“It’s him.” He heard Ron say.

“Well, this is Crabbe, and this is Goyle. And my name’s Malfoy, Draco Malfoy, Heir of the most Ancient and Noble house of Malfoy.”

Ron gave a not so discrete slight cough, which might have been hiding a snigger. Draco Malfoy looked at him.

“Think my name’s funny, do you? No need to ask who you are. My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles and more children than they can afford.”
He then turned back to Neville and subtly inclined his head.

“Long time no see Heir Longbottom. I’m glad to see you eventually made it to Hogwarts, your grandmother must be relieved.” His silver eyes then focused back to Harry who still had not managed to quit staring. “Is there something on my face Heir Potter?”

Harry could tell by the way he subtly bit his cheek and looked aside by the window to check his reflection that he was making the boy uncomfortable. The boy seemed good at hiding his feelings though. He eventually managed to force himself to look away and was about to apologise when, once again, Ron spoke for him.

“It’s just probably the first time he sees two baboons raising a baby peacock that’s all! Tell me Malfoy, is that your perfume or just the baby power your mummy put on you this morning before your first day at school?”

“At least my mother knows my own name and don’t call me ‘Child number…’ what Six? Seven? How many of you are there anyway?”

Harry noticed the wands suddenly out of their pockets, the tension raising in the air, and became overly aware of Neville who was trying to hide behind him. “Could you two just stop?!” He yelled. “I’m sorry for staring Malfoy, you just remind me of someone I know, but she would never act like that, so sorry for my behaviour it was inappropriate. As for the title, you can drop the ‘Heir’ or just call me Harry.”

It was difficult to say if Ron even tried to be subtle when he puffed: “Ah! He said you look like a girl~”. Yet, he managed to dry off all residuals of patience Harry might still have.

“As for you Ronald! I didn’t say that. I say he reminded me of her, but she looks nothing like him! She is kind and smart and brave and awesome! And what so wrong about being a girl anyway? You pretend to be my friend, but you insult everyone I meet even before I could forge my own opinion about them! It’s annoying.”

For once, Ron had the decency to look ashamed and to lower his eyes while grumbling “Sorry”.

“Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, you can stay if you want but you have to promise you would stop insulting my friends too.” Harry continue trying to be courteous and not to react on prejudices.

Malfoy slightly turned his head to his two counterparts. “Go and wait for me in our compartment.” He ordered before taking the place Harry had created for him on the bench.

“They could have stayed, you know…” Harry said trying to hide his relief.

“They are not really great talkers…”

“Trolls…” Ron mumbled, only to receive a warning glare from Harry.

“What were you talking about before I came in?” Malfoy continued without giving any credit to the interruption.

“Sorting” Neville muttered so low Harry doubted Malfoy heard it.

“Where do you think you’re going to be?” The black-haired boy asked louder.

“I’ll be in Slytherin, all my family have been,” Malfoy answered proudly.
Ron sneered. “Who would have guessed it… from a Dark side lover family…”

“Ron…” Harry warned again in a low growl. He noticed the way Malfoy’s body stilled but he did not talk back and instead directed his next question to Harry.

“What house do you think you’ll be in?” he asked surprisingly calmly.

“Well… Like I was saying just before you came in, I’m not very sure. To this point, I kind of ‘had to’ be brave, resourceful and smart from time to time… But most of the time, I did all that for my friend, so I guess maybe I’d go to Hufflepuff. I think loyalty is the most important thing to me…” — ‘even though I betrayed her…’ he added in his mind, feeling sour again.

Harry had lower his eyes, so he missed the shared disgusted expression on Malfoy and Ron’s face.

“There is nothing wrong with Hufflepuff,” the shy voice of Neville came to his side. “I think I might go there too…”

“Don’t be ridiculous! There is no way HARRY POTTER could be a Puff! They’re just useless cowards!” Ron answered haughtily.

“M-my father went there, and-and he still became a great A-Auror.” Neville tried to talk back in an unsteady voice.

“Was he? And where is he now?”

Harry snapped out of his dark thoughts. How could Ron… no Weasley dared…

“You’re over your head, Weasley!” Malfoy shouted first. “Frank Longbottom was a war hero! Everybody knows that! What happened to him had nothing to do with him being a coward or a Hufflepuff!”

“Yeah… But it sure has everything to do with your family, isn’t it?” Ron scorned back.

Malfoy blanched, and Harry distinctly heard Neville holding his breath. He could not let that slide any longer. “Okay, that’s enough Ron! I’m sick of your behaviour. If you don’t leave this compartment, we will.” He got up and began to gather his belongings.

“Wait, Harry! You can’t possibly take Malfoy’s defence!!” Ron tried to stop him.

“Really? And why not?”

“His dad’s a Death Eater!”

“I don’t care about his dad! He was not the one insulting my friends over petty prejudices as far as I remembered! I can’t stand people like you who judge people by their cover and acted aggressively before they know! I’ve had plenty of that on my life already and I won’t go by it anymore!” He then turned to the other two boys. “Come on… Let’s go.”

Harry slammed the door closed as soon as they were out and move a little from the compartment. “Sorry about that… He… I don’t think he’s a bad person but… he’s really annoying.”

“You don’t have to apologise for him, Potter,” Malfoy said. “It’s not your fault he is an idiot.” He snarled but let a little of his natural arrogance go after a short pause. “I… I wasn’t expecting you to defend me… I mean… I would understand if my family’s position in the war…”

“Fuck the war!” Harry stopped him. “I mean, if I get it right, we were all babies when it ended, isn’t
it? So how can I hold you personally responsible for it? I mean… if there is one thing I learn during History class is that holding the loser country as solely responsible for everything – even the civilian people who didn’t take part in the conflict – and making they pay even long after their defeat could only build up for another war! …but well… as Susan Bones said, I’m quite new about all what happened during the last war, so I might be a little idealistic…”

“Yeah… Err… Maybe you should know that Weasley was right about my family… My aunt, her husband and brother-in-law were part of the team who… attacked the Longbottoms.” Malfoy explained anxiously stroking his hair back.

“Oh…” was the only thing that managed to come out of Harry’s mouth as he turned to Neville.

The chubby boy was staring at his feet but flicked at him an instant before gathering the courage to tell his thoughts. “I… Harry is right Heir Malfoy. We were one-year-olds at the time, and you just defended my father… saying he was a hero and all… I mean… my grandmother always says my parents were heroes but it’s the first time I hear someone else genuinely say it and…well… thanks.”

Draco nodded. “They got a life sentence in Azkaban for it anyway… I’ve never really known them or anything but my mother’s always told me that her sister has gone insane during the war and that she was really scary. That only real heroes like your parents ever had the courage to go after her to do what was right and that’s it was thanks to people like them that I had the opportunity to grow up with them.”

“It’s nice of her…” Neville muttered, his face was going red under the unexpected compliment on his parents’ part.

Harry smiled. “So, it’s settled?”

Neville nodded, and Malfoy’s muscles subtlety relaxed. “Is that a Natterjack Toad?” he asked to change the subject.

Neville nodded again and stroked Trevor’s back. “They are great in Herbology to prevent any contamination from insects and they keep the water clean without being intoxicated by the plants.” He explained.

“It could also be useful in Potion to test what you’ve done. They would hardly be killed by it even if you mess up.”

“I’ll probably mess a lot in Potion… My grandmother always says that I’m a disaster and that I would never go in her lab alone.”

“I could help! I’m quite good actually!” Draco offered.

“That would be nice…” Neville smiled shyly.

“Could you tell me if it got any wart in exchange? It’s really difficult to get fresh ones when you don’t have your own toad and my parents bought me an owl so…”

Harry smiled. It was great to see two people whom he felt like he might befriend getting along together. “I would be glad to participate in your private lesson too! I mean, Potion seems like a mix between cooking and chemistry, but I haven’t had the opportunity to do a lot of practical chemistry yet since it’s a middle school subject and all, but we were really looking forward to it!”

‘We’… once again, Harry pictured Ace waiting for him at the bus stop getting desperate in the rain… Ace alone in class, too reserve and hurt to talk to anyone… it was his fault…
“Harry are you alright?” Neville’s voice got him out of his mind and he looked up to two clearly worried faces.

“Yes! Sorry… What were you saying?”

“I was asking you what chemistry is,” Malfoy answered.

“Oh… It’s the science of how atoms interreact with each other and how different external elements impact their properties and all…” Harry stroked his hair; the two others clearly did not get what he meant but he did not know how to explain it better. “It’s like understanding the reaction when you put vinegar on baking soda and how you can act on it? Err… muggle subject…? Really… Sorry.”

Harry looked around and realized that it was getting dark now and that most of the other students were wearing their uniforms including his two new friends. “I think we’re about to arrive, I’ll get change. See you both at the station okay?”

Chapter End Notes

So... Finally back on track. What do you all think? Please let me know!
And if any of you wish to become my beta, you know where to find me.
Outside the train, first years were gathered apart from upper years to the lake by Hagrid. Harry answered politely to the half-giant but did his best to keep a safety distance between him and the gamekeeper. After reading his books all summer he ended up resenting the half-giant for his absence of introduction to most topics included in them… Hagrid left him with more questions than answers and no way to contact anyone to know more about the world he was supposed to come from. It was not okay.

Harry shared his boat with Neville, Malfoy and a boy named Blaise Zabini who knew Malfoy from before. Hermione Granger’s non-stop babbling about the castle and what she read about it was the only sound that really broke the anxious silence of their journey across the Black Lake, but even she, stopped talking when they all glimpsed the castle for the first time.

The wait before the sorting ceremony was unnerving. Malfoy was almost wriggling beside Harry while Neville seemed like he was going to be sick. Harry was feeling his own guts in his stomach and tried his best to ignore Ron Weasley’s stare. What if he went to a house where people don’t like him? Where they would expect something he was not? Would Neville and Malfoy still be his friends? Should have he made it clear before now that he wished to try and be friends even if they ended up in different houses? Was that even possible?

Harry was so nervous he almost did not look at the magical ceiling of the Great Hall when they entered. He could not bring himself to focus enough and comprehend what Granger was babbling about again.

There were so many people. Harry felt like all their eyes were on him. He wished Ace was there with him. If she were there, she would have done something so the attention was on her and no more on him. Then she would have look at him and smile brightly. He misses her… God, he misses her so much.

The whole Hall suddenly burst into applause and Harry jolted back to the present. He had barely noticed that there were a four-legged stool and an old hat in front of them. He did hear someone sang, however… he thought. He wasn’t paying attention again. He should pay more attention to what was going on.

“Abbott, Hannah”, the teacher – Professor McGonagall – called.

Harry watched the girl he met on the train stumbled out of line, put on the hat, which fell right down over her eyes and sat down. A moment’s pause –

Harry was startled again when the hat suddenly shouted: “HUFFLEPUFF!”

It was the same tone as the voice who had sung before. Did the hat sing the song? Did he really just miss a song sung by a hat because he was thinking about his best friend again?!!!

The sorting continued. The first years were distributed between the different houses one after another. Harry noticed that Neville was shivering next to him. He looked ghastly, so Harry discreetly came closer to him and took his hand in his. He smiled supportively when Neville looked at him. He acted as Ace would have acted for him because it was always easier to be strong for someone else
than to struggle alone. Neville calmed down a little bit and Harry felt his own nervousness soothing
down too.

When Neville was called, Harry tugged his hand a little harder before letting him go. Neville was so
nervous he fell over on his way to the stool. Someone in the Hall laughed at him but as soon as
Neville raised his head again and glimpse at Harry, the black-haired boy nodded at him showing that
he was not laughing and that he had nothing to laugh about. The chubby boy nodded back with
determination.

The hat took a long time to decide where to put Neville. Even longer than for Granger a few minutes
before. Maybe it was getting tired? So, it was going to be worse and worse and Harry already knew
he was by the end of the list.

“GRYFFINDOR!” the hat shouted suddenly, and Neville got up so quickly he almost forgot to put
the hat done before leaving. He only took a step away before jolting back though and the few laughs
were drowned by the loud cheering from the lions’ table.

Harry smiled at him when their eyes met again before focusing back on his own nervousness.

The sorting continued and soon Malfoy’s name was called. He had not even finished putting the hat
on his head that “SLYTHERIN!” was called upon him.

So, it was not a matter of tiredness of the hat like Harry previously thought, but it was down to the
person. He hoped his turn would come and go quickly but he already knew he could not go
unnoticed, not with the name he wore.

“Potter, Harry!” Professor McGonagall called and the whole room was immediately vibrating with
whispers.

Harry sighed to calm himself. He had known this would happen from the moment he saw how the
sorting had been proceeding. He wished he could have been just another anonymous name like his
friends.

He made his way to the stool trying to ignore the exciting murmurs following him. He was not what
they were expecting – smaller, thinner, with ridiculous broken glasses… He heard them all, but he
should not let it distract him. It would be even worse if he made a fool of himself by tripping or
something like that.

The hat fell before his eyes and he could no longer see the people craning to get a good look at him.
Once again, he hoped Ace was there with him. The obscurity was reassuring, and he managed to cut
himself from the stressing noises. He waited.

“Hmm”, said a small voice in his ear. “Sadly, I cannot choose the school you go to but only your
house. You may remember that if you are here it’s because the choice has already been made… even
if it was not by you. However, like some might say, we always have the choice, haven’t we?”

The guilt Harry felt hearing that torn his guts. Why was there a voice speaking inside his head? Why
was it so mean to him! He had no choice! Nobody left him a choice!

The voice resumed its analysis without commenting further on that part.

“No, back to us. Difficult. Very difficult. So much courage and a good mind that knows how to be
used in a very cunning way to help the one you love. There’s talent and… oh… you surely thrive to
prove yourself. Now, you’re an interesting one, Harry Potter! And great things will be expected of
you. Now, where should I put you?”
“Just do it quickly,” Harry thought feeling the nervousness coming back. He hated having someone into his mind. They have no right to do so! His mind was his! His mind was the only thing they could never take away from him.

“In a hurry, aren’t we? But I cannot take my decision hastily, Harry Potter. This would determine not only the next 7 years of your life but also the man you might become… would you live long enough to meet him... Now, you could go to any house but not all are made for you... Your loyalty and hard work could not be denied but Hufflepuffs leave as a community and an outcast like you would not appreciate so much proximity by so many… Then there is Ravenclaw… but even if you know how to use your brain, knowledge has hardly ever been your primary goal and it would quickly drive you away from your fellows. That leaves Slytherin or Gryffindor…”

“Neville or Draco,” Harry thought.

“Yes, you’ve already made connexions to these two Houses, both with great potentials, I must admit... You could be so great if you go on this way, you know. Collecting precious individuals. It’s all here in your head. Slytherin will help you on your way to greatness, no doubt about that… And yet you don’t want to stand out and, sadly, a way has already been drawn for you… If you want to stay in the dark a little longer there is only one way. You’re really an interesting person, Harry Potter. I hope to see you again one day… GRYFFINDOR!”

Harry heard the hat shout the last word to the whole Hall. When he took the hat off, loud cheers greeted him. He made his way to the table and sat next to Neville, in a hurry to get out of everyone eyes and attention. Neville smiled at him and he smiled back nervously. He was happy to be able to stay with a boy he had already met and appreciated so far.

There were only three people left to sort and McGonagall took what felt like forever to resume. When the Hall finally calmed down, Harry tried to glance at the Slytherin table to spot Malfoy. Since Gryffindors and Slytherins sat at opposite sides of the Hall it was nearly impossible but when the student turned to look at the next sorting, he managed to cross Malfoy’s eyes. The blond boy seemed disappointed and quickly looked away without the faintest smile. Harry felt guilty as if he had betrayed him and suddenly, the sad silver eyes looking away from him from the other side of the large room was no longer Malfoy’s.

The hat was right. He did betray her by being here, didn’t he?

The first week of class went by in a magical hurricane of discoveries and odd situations for Harry. He had a hard time trying to ignore the constant whispering from the moment he left his dormitory to the one the class door closed, and the teacher started speaking. People were everything but discrete about the way they were staring and sometimes gasping at him when he crossed them in the corridors or one of the hundred and forty-two staircases of Hogwarts.

It was easier during classes – at least after the intending teacher had gone by the register and paused or squeaked at his name.

Harry quickly understood that he was not that far behind since he read the class books ahead. He felt even more advanced than some magical-raised students like Ron. However, Harry did not attempt to show off like Hermione Granger and decided to keep a low profile during this first week. The practice was a little harder than theory anyway and he had not been able to practice much with his wand this summer since he was afraid of the way the Dursleys would react if they caught him.

Harry sat next to Neville in most of the classes. The round face boy was not stupid, but he was so
anxious he had a hard time keeping up with the pace of the courses. When a professor asked him a question, he was so nervous, he could barely put a full sentence together. Even when another student asked him something, the poor boy had a hard time answering without stuttering.

After the first few days of this, Harry tried to work on it with him in the common room. They reviewed the first few chapters of every class together. It was easier for Neville when there were only the two of them, but Harry knew his friend needed to get used to speaking to and in front of other people to overcome his shyness.

Herbology classes were Neville’s favourite. They shared it with Hufflepuff and Neville invited Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott at their table to work together. Neville knew everything and explained it to them enthusiastically. Professor Sprout even granted him twenty points for his handling of the plug plants and Harry smiled at him proudly when he became as red as Ron’s hair but still managed to say ‘thank you’ loud enough for the teacher to acknowledge it.

On Thursday night, they spent two hours in the common room reviewing the first 3 chapters of Magical Drafts and Potions by Arsenius Jigger. They had heard nasty rumours about the potion’s professor from the Hufflepuff girls. Apparently, at the end of the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff session, at least 3 students were crying, and none was looking forward to the next week. They also warned them about a knowledge test at the beginning of the session and then practical brewing on the Boil Cure potion – they were not to expect assistance from the teacher who will use this to assess the class level for the year.

Of course, Harry and Neville relayed the warning to the other Gryffindor first years who accepted it with mixed feeling. Hermione Granger just left for the library and they had not seen her since. The four other girls already knew from Parvati Patil twin sister and started gossiping about what Professor Snape did, allegedly or not, to students who failed the previous years. Dean Thomas shrugged when they told him, telling them that it was up to God before asking Seamus Finnigan to join him for an improvised soccer game.

Neville was trying to reproduce the best practices for the ideal workshop sitting with his quills and his books for the fourth time when Harry spotted Ron, alone. His Prefect big brother was leaving him after spending a few minutes talking worryingly to him. The youngest redhead seemed upset and lonely.

Harry knew that Ron did not quite manage to be included with the other two Gryffindor first year boys – Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan. Both met during their trip to Diagon Alley last summer and had become quick friends ever since. So, with Harry and Neville in one corner and Finnigan and Thomas in the other, Ron could be considered as isolated. Even if Harry knew that Ron could put the blame on himself because of his behaviour, he could not help himself but feel sorry for him. His situation reminded too much of his first grade at Primary School, before he met Ace, before he ever imagined he could have a friend.

“Neville?” He asked his friend waiting for him to acknowledge him to continue. “Do you mind if I offer Ron to join us?”

Neville looked in the direction of the redhead then back at his hands, avoiding Harry’s eyes. “… okay…” he said sadly.

“Neville, I won’t ask him if it makes you uncomfortable. It’s just… he is all alone and I know what it’s like and… I know he had been rude to you in the train but… I’m sure he is not a bad guy and he just doesn’t know how to moderate his words… We are going to spend seven years with him in the dorm anyway and… I mean he is the only one we didn’t tell about the test… and…”
“You want to ask him because you feel bad for him? Not because… I’m useless and you’re already bored with me?” Neville finished his sentence so quickly and lowly that Harry had barely got it. But he knew that feeling too. God… or rather ‘Merlin’, he had feared to lose Ace so many times when they first met!

“Of course, I’m not bored with you Neville! You help me so much this week! I mean, I would know nothing about wizards’ ways if it was not for you! Everyone would already hate me because I would call them by their first name or because I ask to see their wand or whatsoever.” He laughed to lighten the atmosphere.

“But I keep getting lost and forgetting the password and our timetable and…” Neville whined.

“Leave the map and the time management to me and focus on preventing me from doing something rude or stupid, okay?” Harry offered.

Neville finally smiled at him, “Okay.”

“I can ask Ron then?”

Harry got up when the chubby boy nodded. “Ron.” He called out approaching the redhead who immediately jolted his face in his direction. “Listen… we learned from the Hufflepuffs that there’ll be a knowledge test tomorrow during Potion… if you want to review or something…”

Ron scowled. “It’s useless to review. Snape hates Gryffindors, everyone knows that. Even if you got a good answer, he would find something to say and give the points to the Slytherins or take some from us… The guy is the king of the slimy gits of the school… my brothers all hate him.”

“Err… okay… anyway… now you know…” An awkward silence settled between them. “Do you… do you want to… play at… something?”

“We could play Gobstones if you want… Percy just gave me his set. I could teach you.” Ron offered.

“Could Neville join too?”

Ron looked hesitant for a second, probably figuring out that he could not exclude the other boy if he did not want to jeopardize this new opportunity to befriend Harry. “Okay.”

Potions lesson went worse than what they had already expected.

First, there had been the Slytherins. For the whole week, Harry had tried to make eye contact with Draco Malfoy, but the blond had – seemingly purposely – been avoiding his gaze. They hardly ever met between classes and Friday’s Double Potions was their only class together. However, even when he could hardly do so because they were both waiting for the same class to begin in the same corridor, Malfoy refused to acknowledge Harry’s presence.

Harry was torn between letting it slip – and not make a scene – and confronted him – at the risk of being humiliated in front of all the other First years from their respective Houses. Neville was waiting next to him and seemed to understand his dilemma. And so, the chubby Gryffindor did the bravest thing Harry had seen him so far and called out for Malfoy.

“Malfoy,” he said, “we… we didn’t have the chance to tell you so far but… Congratulations on Slytherin. You… your parents must be proud.”
Malfoy, Blaise Zabini and the pug-faced girl he was talking to, suddenly shut up and turned to face him. Harry easily decrypted the uncertainty in Malfoy’s eyes when he saw them, however, the blond boy responded with a snare. “Congratulations to you too, Longbottom, Potter. Seems like you eventually have it in you to be Lions instead of Puffs, your Weasley friend must be so proud!” His voice was cold and haughty, and his friends started sniggering behind him.

His answer came as a blow for Harry. He got that Malfoy was not happy with him being in Gryffindor of all houses but why would he take it out on Neville? They seemed to go along well enough in the train and for what he knew, their family were not in good terms even back then! And then, Harry saw it in his silver eyes… Malfoy was uncomfortable with what he just said. He was putting a show for the people around them. He did not mean it.

Harry was about to let it go quietly but, unfortunately, he had decided to befriend back a loud redhead the previous night. “What did you just say Malfoy?! Of course, we are proud to have Harry Potter! You are just jealous because he won’t be your ‘friend’ anymore! But be honest! Who would want to be friend with a slimy snake like you?! You, Slytherins, are just a band of evil gits who will end up in Azkaban sooner or later!”

The wands were suddenly drawn but Harry reacted first. “Stop! Ron, I did not ask you to defend us. And there’s no need to insult them! It’s stupid to say they are evil just because they are in Slytherin! The traits for Slytherin are ambition and resourcefulness, not evilness! I don’t care that most dark wizards came from that House. They are 11, just like us. There is no way they could be evil! If a child is considered evil at 11 – or at 5, he added in his head – it’s certainly not his or her fault but the fault of the environment he or she grew up in!”

Harry remembered clearly that summer night two years before. Ace had come to the Dursleys’ and opened his cupboard in the middle of the night and they had fallen back asleep in the garden, but he had been wakened up by the violence of Ace’s nightmare next to him. Whatever she said afterwards, he knew she had had a fit that night. It was late, and the only adults around had been his relatives, so he waited for it to pass and she had calmed down after a few minutes… But she had been so tired and so shaken…

“You remember more about your past than what you tell the social services, don’t you? Why do you hide it so much?” he had asked when she had settled down in his arms.

“Because it’s useless to rub salt into the wound… It’s done now.” She had answered weakly.

“They could catch the Evil Old Witch and make her pay for what she did to you…”

Ace had stayed silent for long seconds before putting herself straighter and looking at him in the eyes. “Har’… There’s something I never told you…” He had nodded to encourage her to continue. “Back then… The day I left… She… I mean, I….” She had taken a long breath and her silver eyes had gone liquid. “I was hurting so bad and… and she kept on c… I couldn’t take it anymore so I… I don’t remember clearly what I did but I… I fought back and suddenly she stopped. She stopped hurting, she stopped screaming, she stopped moving… she stopped breathing… and… Har’… I… I think I killed her that night and that’s why I ran away and… and…”

She had been crying by that point and Harry had taken her back into a tight hug while shushing her gently.

“If they know, they’ll send me to prison or to a madhouse because I’m a murderer and I don’t even regret it… I must be evil… only evil people don’t regret killing other people… only evil children can
“If you want to hate them, hate them for something they did willingly and on their own.” Harry finished, back to the present. “Being a Slytherin or the son of someone your dad hates is not a reason enough to treat them that way.” – neither is killing someone in self-defence when you were 5… he added in his mind.

“Enough jabbering around and get to your seat already!” Harry jolted when he heard the icy voice of an adult coming from his left. He was so taken in his memory that he had not noticed the class door had opened and the vampire-like professor had come to get them. The black eyes daggered him when he met them. “Five points from Gryffindor for delaying the beginning of the class Potter,” the Potion Master announced retreating inside the classroom, silently ordering them to follow “No more than two by station. Gryffindors to the front. We lost enough time already, I don’t want to hear a word.”

Harry hurried and sat next to Neville and tried to make himself forgotten. However, he soon realized that if Professor Snape disliked Gryffindors, he profoundly hated Harry in particular.

It started when Professor Snape paused at his name while taking the registered. “Ah… Harry Potter… Our new – celebrity.” Luckily, after the stunt he made just before class, only a few Slytherins sniggered at this.

Snape introduction speech was cold, frightening and borderline insulting. It set the tone of the course perfectly if someone had missed it before.

“Potter!” said Snape suddenly. “What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?”

Harry paused an instant. He knew that one, he read about it last summer… It was on a chapter by the end of the book… to go further… and there was a picture of a mice dozing out next to it…

“A sleeping potion, sir.”

Snape’s lips curled into a sneer. “The correct answer was the Draught of Living Death. Next time be more specific! Approximations could get you killed in this class, Potter, and even fame will not save you when it happens.” He paused, and Harry secretly wished he would find another victim for the next question. However, Harry’s wish hardly ever worked. “Let’s try again. Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?”

That one was easy. It was on the introduction of the book, he read about it yesterday with Neville.

“The drugstore… well, I think you call that the apothecary in the magical world. However, as a Potion Master, you probably have some in your office since poisoning can occur easily while brewing complex potions. But if you are in a hurry because someone had been poisoned and your office is inaccessible for some reasons, I would go to the infirmary I guess…”

“And if I want a fresh one? From the primary source?”

“Ah… in the stomach of a goat… but I don’t know how to get it without killing the goat though, so I’d rather let a professional do so.”

“Sounds like our Saviour knows how to read and possesses a minimum of common sense then.”
Snape scolded seemingly disappointed before finally turning his eyes away from Harry.

Harry let out a discreet sigh and smiled at the reassuring hand of Neville on his forearm.

“Longbottom!” Snape’s voice came back acidly making them both jump on their seats. “What is the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?”

Harry could see his friend becoming paler and paler, but he knew Neville had the answer to that question. Neville knew everything about *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*!

“I don’t hear. I must be deaf.” Snape snapped when Neville mumbled his answer.

Neville was shaking out of stress and Harry discreetly touch his leg with his foot to calm him down. Without leaving his eyes from Snape, he gestured his friend to breath. “it’s… the same plant, sir.” Neville repeated a little louder.

“Any other known name?”

“A-aconite. They cannot be grown domestically and can only be found in the wild, especially here in Scotland…Sir!” Neville explained in an unsteady voice and looking at his table before finishing with a high squeal when he almost forgot the title of the professor.

Snape’s only acknowledgement was to ask the next question to someone else until everyone had at least one correct answer or three bad ones – which was the case of most other Gryffindors excepted Hermione – of course – and half the Slytherins.

The rest of the lesson went by as Harry tried his best to prevent Neville from adding the wrong ingredient at the wrong time. His friend was so nervous he could not stop shaking and mixing up everything. Snape constant scrolling at every student that seemed to breathe wrong was definitely not helping. Harry could not hide his relief when the two hours were finally behind them and no one ended in the infirmary – despite Finnigan’s cauldron somehow melting 5 minutes before the end of the class.

After the end of the class, Harry cornered Ron on their way to lunch. “Ron… I can’t accept that you keep on insulting people for the only reason they’ve not been sorted in Gryffindor.”

“He insulted you first!” the redhead tried to defend himself. “…and he is a Slytherin…”

“No, he didn’t. Well… I might reckon that his tone was a little…” Harry made a face before shaking his head. “But the words in themselves were okay! I mean, yeah, I’m glad to be in Gryffindor and Neville too! And you can’t deny that you’re happy I’m here either after the stunt you made in the train about ‘The-Boy-Who-Lived can’t possibly be in any other House!’”

“Plus, he could have said far worse…” Neville interacted timidly into the conversation. “He could have said that… our parents must be so proud… if we had any…” he finished in a whisper and Harry eyed him. It was clearly something that haunted his friend. To be true, he had long mourned his own parents and was rarely thinking about them, but it seemed to be different for Neville.

“Anyway!” Ron dismissed. “He used what he said as an insult and you know it!”

“No, he… he was just trying to show off.” Harry corrected him, taking his attention back to the redhead. “I mean… he’s just like us, he met new friends and he was trying not to jeopardize their friendship already by doing something they might disapprove. He wasn’t sure how to react so he… screw up I guess. Just like you did.”
Ron looked at him as if he had grown a second head before sighing heavily.

“You’re too kind Harry… Soon you’ll realize that Slytherins would never befriend somebody out of their House without prior motives. It’s in their blood or in their mindset if you prefer. I mean… it’s all about ambition and ‘making friends that could be useful you know’…”

“You can’t define somebody just from their House! It’s not all black and white! I mean you’re afraid of spiders, where is the braveness in that?”

“How do you know that?!!”

“Because you told me, in the train, and I actually cared enough to listen because it’s what friends do. They listen to the other and try to understand or at the least to be careful not to make the same hurtful mistake again.” Harry sighed. “I mean, Ron… We’ll share class with them for the next 7 years, you can’t hate them already because some stupid prejudices tell you to! And just as your fear doesn’t make you less a Gryffindor, Malfoy being a Slytherin doesn’t mean he’s evil or that he’ll stab me in the back at the first opportunity.”

Ron kept staring at him until his stomach growled and apparently convinced him to let go because they should already be eating by now.

“Okay… I won’t hex him next time I see him but if he insults us ever again, I won’t let it slide!”

“That’s all I ask…” Harry sighed again. He would have never thought that having more than one friend could be so tiresome.

Chapter End Notes

Please, tell me what you think!
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Their first weekend at Hogwarts went off in a blow between visiting Hagrid – who insisted on meeting with Harry on a regular basis, getting acquainted with new friends via unknown magical games and doing their homework.

A notice had been pinned up in the Gryffindor common room to announce their first flying lesson on Thursday with Slytherin. Ron groaned when he learnt the news, but a glance of Harry stopped him before he could make any hateful comment.

Malfoy had been back to avoiding them since their last potion lesson, but Harry had noticed the curious stares of some other Slytherins in his path. His stunt about Slytherins not being evil had been around the school in a heartbeat and some senior Gryffindors had confronted him about it. When he explained his point of view they just sighed about youthful innocence and learning the truth soon enough by himself. Their comments made Neville nervous again, but Harry would not buy it. There was nothing to see, they were just kids and kids are neither evil nor saint, they are just kids! If Ace were there, she would definitely agree with him!

On Thursday morning, Neville’s face had turned green from the stress. Unlike Ron and other magical raised children, his grandmother had never let him on a broomstick – arguing about safety and killing rate – so he was now terrified at the mere idea of flying. Harry had spent most of his week trying to reassure him or rather trying to pretend he was not as anxious as him and that every counterargument Neville gave him back ‘according to his Gran’ made him want to go hid under his bed until Friday morning. Just as all the other muggle-raised or muggle-born students, Harry was utterly nervous as it was a new aspect of the wizarding world they had never experienced before.

Harry could not determine what was worst: Neville’s death scenarios, Hermione Granger’s babbling about theoretical facts she read in Quidditch through the Ages, or Ron’s bragging about his flying skills since he had trained his whole life with his older brothers old brooms and that “Quidditch was the only real sport in the world so what about muggles and soccer anyway?!”.

Luckily, the owl post was there to distract them all during breakfast and let Harry gather a few minutes of peace.

Harry watched the owls flying around the Great Hall to their destination and, like every other morning, he thought about the fact that he still had not had the chance to find a way to contact Ace… He had not had the time to even look for a way yet! It had been 10 days already… He hoped she was okay and that she met new friends and that she was not too worried about him… He wanted to slap himself at that thought. Of course, she would be worried! He hardly managed to put himself in her shoes and consider how he would have reacted if she had not shown up at Sutton’s without prior notice! Hopefully, his stampless letter would have made it through and she received it when she went back home last weekend… Otherwise…

Harry’s eyes were mindlessly following the majestic eagle owl that ended up landing down before Malfoy like every other day. He was so deep in his thoughts that he barely noticed the worried silver eyes on him. However, as soon as he forced himself back into the present and crossed the Slytherin gaze, the blond boy stiffly looked away. It made Harry’s heart twinge, but he decided to focus on the barn owl that had just landed in front of Neville instead of thinking about it further.
Neville excitedly explained what his grandmother's present was and Harry could not help but smile since his friend was finally getting some colours back and managed to eat something thanks to this grateful distraction.

At three-thirty that afternoon, all Gryffindor and Slytherin first-years gathered on the training ground. Twenty broomsticks were lying on the ground. Harry heard the Slytherins commenting about how old they were and about how their very own broomsticks back home were so much better.

Harry was back to trying to reassure Neville when he noticed that Malfoy was looking at them. When he looked back, for the first time in ten days, Malfoy kept his face straight, uncertainty shining in his silver eyes. Harry knew that look from Ace… Malfoy was worried about him but did not know how to talk around it. The blond boy seemed to finally come to closure and made a step toward them but Madam Hooch – their flying teacher – came in before he could take another.

The lesson was a disorganized mess and suddenly, Neville broomstick went up ten meters before anyone could stop him and the chubby boy inevitably dropped and landed on the ground in a characteristic crack Harry knew too well. Madam Hooch went straight to the boy and stated the casualties “Broken wrist.”. However, instead of asking for a student to go with Neville to the infirmary – as any responsible teacher would do – the flying teacher decided to get him there herself, strictly forbidding a group of 19 excited 11-year-olds to use the broomsticks they still all hold in their hands.

“Did you see his face, the great lump?” a Slytherin girl burst into laughter as soon as Madam Hook was out of earshot. Other Slytherins joined in. “So much for Gryffindor bravery!”

“Shut up, Bulstrode,” snapped Parvati Patil.

“Ooh, sticking up for Longbottom?” said Pansy Parkinson, one of Malfoy’s close friends. “Never thought you’d like fat little crybabies, Parvati.”

“I don’t like him!” the Indian girl sneered before adding in a lower tone for the Gryffindors. “What is he doing in our House anyway? He should be in Hufflepuff…”

Harry was about to defend his friend, but Ron cut him. “What are you doing Malfoy! Give that back!” He shot in his loud voice and all eyes turned to the blond boy who was just getting up, Neville’s Rememberall in hand.

“What? I was just…” Malfoy tried to explain but suddenly, Ron drew his hand at him and a few sparkles sprout out, touching Malfoy’s hand resulting in him dropping the glittering glass ball. “Ouch!” he grunted. Yet, before the Rememberall touched the ground, a blackbird came diving and grabbed it in his claws.

“What’s the…” Malfoy exclaimed before abruptly stopped when Harry grabbed his hand to look at it and check if he was not injured.

“Are you okay?!”

“Yeah… what was that?” the blond asked him in a low voice.

“It’s Neville’s,” Harry explained in the same tone. “A present from his Gran because he did great in potion last week.”

“I’ll get it back!” Malfoy announced slipping his hand out of Harry’s and grabbing his broomstick.
“What?! Malfoy, wait!” Harry shouted after him, but Malfoy was already ten meters away in the sky, tagging the bird. Harry could see it clearly… Malfoy’s falling, from this high, light brown hair soaked with blood, and glassy grey eyes that would never shine at him ever again.

“No!” Hermione Granger’s voice came after him. “Madam Hooch told us not to move – you’ll get us all into trouble!”

Harry ignored her. Blood was pounding in his ears as he leaned forward and the broom speeded up. The commands came to him naturally, he suddenly felt as if it was the place he had always been meant to be and he quickly caught up with Malfoy. “Go down Malfoy, you’re injured you gonna kill yourself!” He yelled in the wind.

“It’s important for Longbottom! You go down, it’s your first time in a broom! Wait! It’s your first time in a broom Harry! There’s no safety ward on those models! You’ll fall and break your neck! Slow down!” The panic was rising in Malfoy’s voice as he looked at him. A sudden blow made them twang and Malfoy winced when he was forced to tighten his grip with his injured hand. In front of them, the blackbird had been surprised by the wind as well and had let his prize off.

“I’m taking care of it,” Harry said. “Go down first!” and he speeded up in a dive after the ball without waiting for Malfoy’s consent. He raced the ball as fast as he could, wind whistled in his ears, mingled with the screams of people watching, he stretched out his hand – less than one meter from the ground – he caught it – just in time to pull his broom straight, and he toppled gently on the grass with the Rememberall clutched safely in his fist.

Malfoy landed next to him a few seconds later. “Are you okay?!!” he asked clinging his shoulders, tears were filling his widened silver eyes. “Have you bloody lost your bloody mind?!!! I thought you were going to…”

“HARRY POTTER!”

Both froze and turned to a very angry Professor McGonagall.

“Never – in all my time at Hogwarts –” Professor McGonagall was almost speechless with shock. “– how dare you –”

“It’s not his fault Professor!” Malfoy placed himself between Harry and the witch. “I went after the blackbird, but I sprained my wrist and he went after me to stop me!”

“Well go to the infirmary then, Mr Malfoy.” She said stiffly without giving him more than a rising eyebrow. “Potter, follow me, now!”

Harry’s legs felt like jelly all of sudden. Passing by Malfoy, he slipped the Rememberall in his uninjured hand. “Could you please give it back to Nev’, please? Tell him I’ll owl.”

“Har…”

“POTTER! I don’t have all day!” McGonagall cut.

Harry saw the worried look of the Slytherin and tried to smile to reassure him but it did no good. There was nothing they could do. Madam Hooch had been very clear before she left them. They would be expelled before they could say Quidditch…
Harry followed his head of House into the castle. He was going to be expelled, he knew it. It had been 10 magical days and now he would go back to his normal life… Maybe Sutton’s would still accept him even if he had missed the entrance ceremony and the first week of class… What would the Dursleys say when he turned up on the doorstep? Who cares? He was going to see Ace again!

When McGonagall stopped in front of a classroom and asked for wood. Harry froze. Well… The wizarding world was certainly a few decades behind regarding some things of the society but were they still okay with corporal punishment? Not that Harry was not already used to it but… Well, those people did send a letter to “The cupboard under the stairs” without a second thought so maybe it made sense.

Harry spend his dinner that night telling the story about how he became the youngest seeker in a century, again and again… Until he decided he had enough of it and left the Gryffindor table with the intention to pass by the Hospital Wing to check on Neville and Malfoy. He certainly did not expect to be stormed at as soon as he got through the door.

“Potter! Are you alright?! They didn’t expel you, did they? I firecalled my father! He’s in the board of governors! He can interfere and…”

Harry did his best to control his flinch when the blond boy grabbed his arms and frantically search into his eyes any sign of hurting in a way that reminded him well to much of his missing best friend. Malfoy blanched a little more when he noticed the sorrow that inevitably took over his face while thinking about Ace.

Harry forced a smile in his face and slowly touched Malfoy’s hands for him to release his grip. “Slow down Malfoy, I haven’t been expelled. I didn’t even get detention.” He reassured before the blond got the wrong idea.

Instantly, a loud sigh of relief came from the bed behind the Slytherin. Harry tilted his head and smiled at Neville. “How are you feeling? Both of you.” He added looking back at Malfoy.

“I’m discharged but I stayed to eat dinner with Longbottom. He needs to stay the night.”

Harry eyed Neville, checking if he was okay with the other boy speaking for him but the Gryffindor only smiled shyly at him. He seemed oblivious and just happy to have friends around, so the black-haired boy shrugged and went to sit on the bed next to his, gesturing Malfoy to join them.

“Malfoy explained to me what has happened. Thank you for my Rememberall but you shouldn’t have taken such a risk! It wasn’t worth it! You could have killed yourselves! Both of you.” Neville scolded but Harry could see in his eyes that he was not really angry.

“Potter told me it was a gift from your Grandmother!” Malfoy snapped back before looking down at his feet. “I know how hard it is to reach our guardians’ expectation sometime and… well, I thought you’d have been sad if you lost it…”

“I’d have been sadder if something had happened to you because of it…” Neville smiled, and Harry noticed Malfoy’s nervousness as slight pink coloured his fair skin. The Gryffindor looked at his fellow lion. He had not expected Neville to be so comfortable around Malfoy. Well, they sure just spent the last few hours together in the Hospital Wings but, compared to Neville’s relationship with Ron, who shared their dormitory for the past 10 days… It was like chalk and cheese!

“Well… I only jumped in to stop Malfoy. I’d have been sad if he got hurt too.” Harry said evenly,
taking a squint of the blond boy blushing a little more. “Now that we talk about it, I reckon you called me ‘Harry’ up there… How did we go back to ‘Potter’?”

“Err… I… Sorry… It was very rude of me… Please accept my apology, Heir Potter.” Malfoy mumbled.

“Well, I didn’t really mind. I told you on the train that you can call me Harry if you want.” He mused.

“You can call me Neville too” the chubby boy added with a smile.

Malfoy raised his head and looked at them with both hope and uncertainty in his silver eyes. “Did you really mean what you said? About not judging people by their parents?” He asked lowly.

Harry nodded before sighing, not so sure about how much he was willing to share about his homelife. “All my life, my relatives had repeated me that my parents were good-for-nothings that left me with them because they were irresponsible drunkards and that was why I need to do all the chores and that they h… They treated me the way they did.” He started slowly. “My cousin spread the word in school and before the end of the first week of primary school, everyone, even people that I’ve never met, had labelled me as an attention-seeking delinquent that would only bring troubles.”

Harry sighed. It was harder than he thought… “The only person that has ever treated me for who I am was Ace, my best friend. She didn’t care about the rumours. She gave us a chance to know each other before judging me by my past and… Since I got here, I decided to try and be a little more like her.” He explained with a sad smile before looking straight into Malfoy’s eyes. “So far, you defended Neville and you defended me. You could have called out on Ron to McGonagall, but you didn’t. You put yourself at risk just to prevent Neville to feel sad and you cheer him up when you could have just gone to the Great Hall to eat with your other friends.” He summarized. “You seem like a great guy Malfoy, and I want to be friend with you.”

Neville was nodding approvingly to the last part of his speech and the blond boy checked on him before answering: “Then, Harry, Neville, I’d be honoured if you call me Draco from now on.” He solemnly declared before the three of them burst into laughter.

Life continued at Hogwarts. Lessons, homework, and adjusting to a new world were taking over Harry’s time. Harry and Neville met Draco twice or thrice a week to do their homework together or, basically, to listen Draco and Neville geeked out about magical plants – how to grow them for one and their effects in potions for the other. Harry and Draco also talked a lot about Quidditch – once Draco had been over ‘the blatant, yet not surprising, Gryffindor favouritism’ of Harry being the youngest seeker in a century. Unlike Ron who was all over Quidditch Official Team and naming players Harry had never heard about, Draco was more interesting in tactics and historical matches that lead to changes in the rules and so on.

Their meetings with Draco were the only time when Ron did not tag along with Harry and Neville. First, because they called it ‘revising sessions’ and Ron found it absolutely useless – even if he was in the last quarter of their year group ranking, and second, because Ron really had a problem with Draco. He refrained from commenting most of the time now that Harry had stated that the Slytherin was his friend too – and that if he had to choose, the choice was already made – but he still could not stay near the blond boy without trying to hex him, and Harry would not have it, so he just decided not to go with them when they were to meet with Draco.

Apart from that, Harry’s biggest challenge was to find a way to contact Ace and to let her answer
him back. His closest friends being all purebloods, they could not really help him find a solution. So far, the muggleborns he had asked all told him that, to contact friends, they send the letter by owl to their parents who redirected it to the real recipient. As for the answer, their friend wrote back to their parents who redirected the letter to them by owl.

There was no way Harry send his letter to Ace through the Dursleys! He would never trust them with it! They would certainly destroy it or worse read it! He could not afford that, and he was not comfortable enough to ask one of the muggleborns to act as a proxy. Plus, he knew Ace… She would definitely try and contact the owner of the sender address if she was worried… And she was stubborn. So, Harry could only trust someone who was ready to have a 10-year-old sneaking into their house in order to find a captive black-nested boy in their cupboard under the stairs…

There were also owls which could deliver the letter to a muggle post-box, but they could not bring the letter back to Hogwarts without the letter being given directly to them… So, it would be a really long letter explaining why Ace must give the letter to the bird on her window and that it was not strange at all. Neville and Draco did not recommend this method, saying that it may be considered as a breach of the Statute of Secrecy – especially if his friend was as stubborn as he told them she was.

Harry felt like it was a dead-end. He had a bad feeling about the situation. He missed his best friend, but he could only imagine what she must feel like, knowing nothing about what happened to him. Every week that passed without a solution was making him feel sourer and sourer. He hoped she got his first stamp-less letter at least. He hoped she was okay…

Without anyone noticing, it was Halloween already, they were learning the Levitation Charm with Professor Flitwick, and Harry could not concentrate at all. It had been two months since he was there. He had not seen Ace in almost 4 months… He stared at Granger who was trying to teach Ron – poor her. Granger knew everything, and it was true that he did not really ask her yet. So, at the end of the class, he managed to corner her.

“Err… Granger… May I ask you something?”

“Sure Harry! But make it quick, I want to start working on the Astronomy essay before the feast!”

Harry did not comment on the fact that the essay was due in two weeks. “Well… you see… I was wondering if you knew if there was a way for muggles to write us? By ‘us’ I mean, us at Hogwarts.”

“Well, Hogwarts sends an owl to my parents every week if they have something to tell me. They also have an address for emergency owling if they have to.”

“I know about students’ guardians but what about muggles that don’t know about magic or Hogwarts at all, like your primary school friends and all?”

Granger thought about it a few seconds. “I guess I would ask them to address the letter to my parents for them to redirect it to me…” she seemed uncertain.

“What if you don’t want to bother your parents or the letter is about something or from someone you don’t want them to know about?” Harry tried again.

“I… I don’t know… My parents would probably be happy to help and… and I don’t have anything to hide from them so…”

Same answer as Dean then, Harry thought bitterly.
“Drop it, Harry!” Ron’s voice came behind him. “She probably doesn’t have any friend to send her letter anyway! I mean, even muggles wouldn’t stand a bossy know-it-all like her!”

Harry sighed heavily and turned to snap back at the other boy, but the damage was already done. Someone knocked into Harry as they hurried past him. He caught a glimpse of Granger’s teary face and anger took over him.

“What was that about?! It’s not enough to mock Neville and go after Draco, you HAVE TO go after everyone I talk to?!! When will you learn to mind your own damn business, Weasley?!!”

“Harry, I…”

“No! No. I don’t want your meaningless apology! I’m not even the one you should be apologizing to! I’m sick of your behaviour already! Leave me alone!”

With that, Harry took off and ran after the bushy girl. He did not know where she went but he heard a bunch of third year Ravenclaws talking about a girl crying in the 2nd-floor west-wing bathroom and he took the bet.

“Granger?” He called after having knocked on the door and waiting for one minute without any answer. “I’m coming in.” He announced opening the door.

There was nobody in the girl bathroom, only one stall door was closed, and sniffing sounds were coming out of it.

“Granger? Is that you? It’s me, Harry.” Harry called again, getting closer.

A loud sniffing answered him first. “Leave me alone! It’s the girl bathroom, you have nothing to do here!”

“My best friend is a girl, I think I spent more time in the girls’ bathroom than in the boys’ in primary school.” He chuckled. “I won’t come in, but do you mind if I stay a little bit?” He continued more seriously.

When Granger did not complain, he settled down on the floor next to her stall.

“Ron is a git…” he stated out loud after a few minutes. “I know it’s easy for me to say but you shouldn’t listen to him.”

“He’s right, though. Everybody hates me.” Granger sobbed behind the door after a few seconds of silence when Harry wondered if she heard him.

“Nobody ‘hates’ you…” Harry sighed. “I mean… yeah… sometimes your attitude is a bit… well, I get that you’re really excited to learn. You’ve just come to know about this new magical world and you want to know everything about it. I totally get it! I’m muggle-raised and I’ve just learned about the wizarding world this summer too, remember? And, just like you, I’ve read all our school books before the school year even started.”

A loud snort answered him. “You’ve never said anything about it. I thought I was the only one…” came Hermione’s voice.

“Well… I’m more the ‘blending-in’ type, and to be honest, learning suddenly that I’m famous and everybody knows me is already a lot of attention to take, so… yeah, I guess I kept a low profile regarding my academic achievements… But I’m sure most of the other muggleborns are just the same as we are!” He sighed again, did most of the other muggleborns had the same kind of
childhood as he did? “You know… I didn’t have so many friends before either. I mean, I only have one friend growing up, really. For all the other kids, I was just the strange kid with no parents who strange things happened to.”

“Did you have a lot of accidental magic?” Granger asked, and Harry noticed that her sobs had calmed down a little.

“Yeah… I suppose. Turning a teacher’s wig blue, growing my hair back after an awful cut, teleporting onto the kitchen rooftop, making a glass disappear on the zoo and setting a cobra free…” he listed smiling slightly. He also had some older memories of flying toys and repairing a broken bowl before Aunt Petunia caught him… And healing… probably a lot of healing too… when sleep just claimed him and pain disappeared overnight.

“And you are Harry Potter!” Granger cut his line of thought and brought him back to the present. She slowly opened her door and looked at him. Her eyes were red and puffy. She looked done, seemingly ashamed which did not happen often. “Almost nothing happened to me…” She continued with a low voice. “When Professor McGonagall came to my house last summer I was really surprised. The only things that have ever happened to me were small things like when some upper years pushed me in the lake and the books from the library I had on my bag were not wet at all… Or when the car won’t start, and I was about to be late for an exam and suddenly it just started even if the mechanic man had said that the engine was dead… So, when I learned about this school I was ecstatic… and then…”

“Then you realized that even with magic, kids are just kids, they still treat you as a nerd, and they are not as grateful as you are to have the chance to study something as unique here.” Harry completed with a soft smile.

“Yes… that…” she stumbled looking up expectantly.

Harry reassuringly smiled at her and patted the space next to him for her to sit. Then, he pensively looked at the ceiling.

“You know, it’s not because they are not as… engaged as you are in their studies that they are not willing to learn… I mean, most of them have known magic and listened to stories about Hogwarts their whole life, so of course, they are not as excited about everything as you. But they have also waited their whole life to be here whereas we’ve only waited for one or two months after knowing we were getting in.” He explained. “You’re excited because you can do whatever you want! You’re doing it for you, not for your parents or I don’t know what great uncle that did the same school twenty years ago.” He chuckled and shook his head slowly. “It’s not the same for them. Their families have expectations. Take Neville for example! He had very limited bursts of accidental magic growing up and his family thought he might be a squib. Now he is at Hogwarts, but he really struggles with everything because he is afraid to disappoint his family by doing something wrong or not being able to perform as well as his father and all… And you, showing off about everything, you are not really helping. Because in two months you put to shame their maybe 10 years of homeschooling. Because you answer every question before they get a chance to manage their own answer and listen to the teacher explanation if they don’t get it on their own.”

He saw Granger open her mouth to protest but he stopped her before she formed an excuse. “I know that you don’t mean it and that you just want to do your best too. You’ve just studied a lot because you want to catch up with them and to prove you have your place in this school.” Harry laughed when he saw her astonished face. “I told you, I was just like you. Once I came back from Diagon Alley, I spent my August reading my books and asking myself if this would be enough to fit in. However, there are so many things that I don’t know because they can’t be found in books… and it’s
the same for you… I mean, you remembered on the train, don’t you? The way the other girls reacted when you talked about the war like it was something abstract. It’s like if we just transferred abroad to a new culture and all you do is just… well almost telling them that they are stupid because they don’t think the same way you do, without even trying to understand their way of thinking in return!”

“It’s not true! I don’t think they are stupid! I mean… Not all of them…”

Harry chuckled. “Yeah, I think Ron is stupid too… He’s really narrowminded but I guess that’s the way he had been raised. I mean, having so many brothers that shadowing him. He probably thinks that everyone’s only purpose in life is to make his miserable…”

“He told you that?” She asked disbelieved.

“No, I get it by myself. I’m quite good at analysing people, actually. It doesn’t make him less of a git though”

“I wouldn’t know what it’s like… having so many siblings. It’s always been only my parents and me…” She looked sad again. “I miss them…”

She started sobbing and Harry set a comforting hand on her arm and suddenly he had a crying bushy head pressed against his shoulder. He tried his very best not to flee from that unwanted touch.

“I’ve never been away from them for that long. I know that it would have been the same even in a normal… I mean muggle boarding school but… I’ve never thought it’d be so hard.”

“I totally get how you feel…”

“Do you miss your relatives too?”

“Err… no… not at all. We don’t have the greatest relationship. I miss my best friend, though. We were supposed to go to Sutton’s Grammar together… We even got our scholarship and all…”

“Wow! That’s impressive. It’s one of the best Grammar in the UK, isn’t it?!”

“Yeah… But I haven’t seen her since the beginning of July, so I haven’t had the chance to tell her I wouldn’t make it in the end because I need to go to Hogwarts instead. She was so happy about Sutton’s… I mean we both were. It was all thanks to her, though. She made me work for it. She’s so smart, you know. A little bit like you. She knows everything and when she doesn’t know, she tends to make up convoluted answers that totally make sense in the end. She would never answer spontaneously in class though… She always reserved her crazy answers only for me… or when she wants to piss the teacher… but it hardly ever happens…”

– because we both grew up learning that pissing out adults was hardly ever a good idea, was left unsaid. His smile faded. “I can’t even tell her about Hogwarts because of the Statute of Secrecy. I don’t know how she is doing… if she’s alright… if she managed to settle in without me… if she misses me as much as I miss her…”

“The question you asked me before… It’s to contact her, isn’t it?” came Granger’s genuine analysis.

Harry could only nod before hiding his face on his knees. He had tried his best not to cry for the past two months – maybe three. He felt so bad about the whole situation. It was too much for his 11-year-old self.

He silenced his sobs like he always did at the Dursleys. The tremors on his body were the only noticeable signs of him crying. He felt a pressure on his shoulder and deepened himself a little more
into his arms to escape the unwanted touch.

“Harry… I…”

Granger was trying to talk to him, but he could not bring himself to focus enough to listen to her. He noticed however that her tone changed suddenly so he forced himself to calm down. Then he smelt it…

He raised his head just in time to see the toilet door burst open by the last ginger he wanted to see at that moment.

“A TROLL! THERE’S A TROLL COMING THIS WAY!! MOVE!!!!” Ron screamed at them.

Chapter End Notes

What do you think????
Harry softly patted Hedwig’s feathering and looked down at the address on the envelope one last time before giving it to the owl. He added a few sickles on the little purse on her legs.

“To Muggler Smuggler in Horizon Alley”, he said softly before letting her out of the owlery.

Hermione was the one who heard about this service from an older year Ravenclaw who used to mail order muggle magazines that her parents were judging ‘inappropriate for a young lady in the making’… The principle was simple. You just wrote your letter with the muggle address and you send it to them by owl with 10 sickles for a muggle stamp and additional fees. Once they received the order, they added a generic muggle returning address at the back of the envelope before sending it. If any answer came back from the muggle side, they forwarded it back to the initial magical sender by owl.

Their motto was ‘Discretion, anonymity and efficiency’ and Harry was just glad not to have to explain one of his friends’ parents why he could not just ask his own relatives to take care of his correspondences. Thus, he gave it a try.

His friend group had found a new dynamic since Halloween Eve. Fighting a mountain troll definitely helped bring people together and he happened to spend more time with Ron and Hermione now.

Neville did not really comment on it, but Harry noticed the chubby boy tended to withdraw from the conversation when the two other Gryffindor first years started yet another fight about nothing. For his part, he found their antics strangely entertaining.

Between classes and increasing number of Quidditch practices as the first Quidditch match against Slytherin was getting closer, it was becoming harder and harder for Harry to save time with only Neville though.

Draco had an even harder time with Ron and now Hermione than Neville. And with the match coming, he told Harry he had no choice but to stop seeing him for a few weeks in order not to upset his housemates.

Even after the match – which Gryffindor won, Harry only managed to see Draco once a week, at the library, to work on their potion and herbology assignments together with Neville. The fact that Ron and Hermione were certain that Snape had tried to kill Harry during the Quidditch match was not helping any in their willingness – especially Ron’s – to accept that Draco was his friend too.

After two or three weeks, Harry managed to keep Hermione at bay of their studying sessions too. He had noticed how Draco would just shut down and not say a word when she was here. Therefore, he told her that since she had already done all her homework at least two weeks in advance, it would be too easy for them to just ask her and they’d rather find the solution by themselves. She accepted the excuse – probably because he looked desperate when he asked, and she was less oblivious than Ron – and she said that she could spend this time on private research.

In the end, Harry was feeling a bit contradictory.

He would have liked to keep a little more distance between himself and Ron and Hermione so his
two other friends were not so distressed by the situation but he must also acknowledge that it was relaxing to talk about the muggle world with Hermione and kind of exciting when the three of them happened to find themselves in an incredible adventure involving three-headed dogs, Gringotts’s robbery and someone called Nicolas Flamel…

The whole plot seemed slightly forced. Why would someone hide something that precious in a school full of children? Why would Hagrid let out hints about it so willingly if he was part of the defence strategy? How could a simple first-year charm open the door protecting said defence strategy?

Nevertheless, the adventurous spirit Harry got out of it was intoxicating. It kept away his thoughts about his best friend and the lack of response from her part including after he tried to contact her by muggle means several times…

Coming December, Harry’s anxiousness was getting too big to ignore anymore. He wrote his Aunt – using Muggler Smuggler and not ‘a bloody owl’ – and asked her if he could go back to Privet Drive for Christmas. He did not care about the awful holiday he would pass, he just wanted to check on Ace personally. Sadly, his aunt had not got any nicer during the three months he had not seen her and concisely wrote him back less than 4 days later:

‘The contract said we won’t have to see your freakiness until at least mid-June. We will, by no mean, accept to reduce this peaceful time of normalcy by a minute. You cost us far too much already. Stay away, don’t come back and don’t try to contact us ever again.’

The only good side about this answer was that Harry was now certain that Muggler Smuggler was working and that his letters were getting through and back…

Err… It was not that a good side now that he thought about it.

It meant that Ace got his letters and decided not to answer… No no no… she probably did not get his letters because her foster dad was getting them first and she did not know about them… This was the only potential reason. There was no way she could be deliberately ignoring him for so long… Unless she was mad at him because he betrayed her… or unless she just did not care about him anymore because she made new friends and did not need him any longer…

“Harry?” Neville’s soft voice barely made it to his ears.

Harry forced himself back to the present. The noise of the Great Hall and Ron and Hermione’s usual morning fight about table manners surrounded him. He tried to smile reassuringly while sending a questioning look to his other Gryffindor friend. However, his attempt froze in a smirk when he met the worry in Neville’s eyes.

“It’s okay” He sighed and tried to convince himself. “Just my relatives saying that they are not expecting me for Christmas. Nothing new, don’t worry.” He dismissed folding the letter back into its envelope.

“D…do you want to go… out and talk about it?” he offered in a low tone not for the others to notice them.

Harry shook his head. “It’s okay, don’t worry.” He repeated again before going back to his breakfast. He was not hungry anymore though. He felt like one more bit and he would throw up. She would not have forgotten about him, would she?
Harry spent the next day in auto-mode. The same thought kept on coming back to his mind every five seconds. He did not manage to focus on anything else.

“Do you mind if I partner with Draco today?” Neville asked just before their Friday double-Potion class.

Harry shook his head and went to settle down next to Hermione, immediately followed by Ron. Snape swiftly separated them, and Harry ended up with Theodore Nott from Slytherin. Nott was not a big talker and Harry was in no mood for small talk, so they just did what was asked of them without exchanging a single word.

Two days later, just after an early and quiet breakfast like most Sunday, Neville reached for him and brought him to an unused classroom, away from Hermione – and Ron who was still sleeping. Harry was about to ask Neville what this was about when he noted the blond boy waiting for them in the room.

“Hi, Draco,” he said softly trying his best not to look him in the eyes.

Harry had soon realized that whenever he missed Ace too much, seeing her eyes in someone else’s face was not helping and making him even more depressed. He hoped Draco would not notice. He did not want to explain right now.

“Hi, Harry.” An awkward silence settled down between them and Draco made eye contact with Neville before continuing. “Neville told me about your relatives… being unable to host you for the holidays and… I asked my parents and… Would you like to spend Yule at my house instead? My mother always organizes a ball on the 22nd but, except that, we’ll be pretty free, and we could go out flying in my training yard.”

“I would have offered too, but Gran likes to travel and see old friends during that time of the year to prevent us from spending two weeks at St Mungo’s so… it would not have been as fun.” Neville added.

Harry looked at his two friends. They seemed genuinely worried for him. They worked together to find a solution to his troubles. They acted just like Ace would have for him. They wanted to spend time with him… like real time with him! Just because they’ve noticed that he felt down lately and…

For the first time of that week, a real smile lightened his face.

“That… That would be brilliant Draco!” he said brightly but sobered up quickly. “But are you… are you sure your parents would be okay though? I mean Christmas is meant to be spent with family and I’m not…”

“I’ve already asked them, there’s no problem Harry! Plus, your father was a pureblood, so we are certainly related somehow. You could ask my mum about it, I’m sure she’ll know how exactly!” The blond reassured him energetically.

“I’ll ask Gran if I could come for Yule too” Neville announced. “I mean, your mother usually invites her for the Gala anyway.”

Harry stuck his shiny emerald eyes at him. That would be glorious. It would mean so much and…

Unable to express his emotion with words, Harry did something he never did with anyone except Ace. He took a step forward and hugged his two friends.
It felt strange. Not as comfortable as Ace arms but it was okay, he could handle it. “Thank you.” He mumbled before quickly let them go. Neville and Draco did not move and stared at him gobsmacked.

“Sorry…” Harry said. “It was strange…I just… Do wizards not hug each other or…”?

“No! I mean they do, but…” Neville stopped him but struggled with the words. “We are just surprised because we thought… well, I thought that you… I mean you don’t seem really comfortable when someone touches you so… I mean I just guess that…”

“I don’t,” Harry confirmed. “I mean… I’m not… I usually don’t really like when people just touch me, and I don’t expect it and… Sorry… I didn’t even ask you if you were okay with being hugged even though I hate it myself… Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, we’re okay! We don’t mind. Like I said, just surprised, that’s all!” Neville explained moving his hands in front of him as to dissipate the awkwardness between them.

Harry nodded and looked worriedly to the Slytherin who still had not move. “You too, Draco?”

“Huh?” Draco answered uncharacteristically. He was clearly not listening to them and being addressed directly jolted him back to the present.

“It didn’t bother you that I just hugged you out of nowhere?” Harry repeated anxiously. He would have hated to make his friends uncomfortable. Especially after they just offered him such a great opportunity to spend the first real Christmas of his life with them.

“Oh no, I like it,” Draco said quietly back to looking afar. “Can I hug you too?” He then asked fixing his silver eyes on Harry’s.

It was Harry’s turn to be shocked by his friend. “Huh… no… I mean… Sorry, I just… It felt right at the moment but… Sorry, I really don’t like people touching me and…”

“You can hug me if you want Draco.” Neville rescued his Gryffindor fellow.

The blond boy turned to the chubby one and hugged him. “Hum…” he mused pensively. “It’s not the same…” He commented moving out of Neville’s arms. “You’re a better hugger Harry!” He declared firmly.

“Hey!” Neville shouted and slapped Draco’s arm playfully.

The three of them laughed it out and Harry managed to keep his gloomy feeling away for the next few days.

Of course – as we have already stated several times in this story – nothing really ever goes Harry’s way in this story. It was mid-December and snow had already taken Hogwarts over. Professor McGonagall came to Harry during breakfast.

“Mister Potter, it had been brought to my knowledge that you didn’t enlist to remain at Hogwarts for the holidays. Do you intend to go back to your relatives’ house for Christmas?”

“Good morning, Professor. I won’t go back to my relatives’, but a friend invited me over, so I will be staying at his house instead.” Harry explained sending a worried look to Neville at his side.

McGonagall looked at the other Gryffindor first year as to evaluate him. “Do your Grandmother receive a formal agreement from Mr Potter’s guardians, Mr Longbottom?”
“Err… He’s not staying at my…” Neville started before squeaking out of nervousness.

“May I know whose classmate’s you intend to stay at?” McGonagall asked Harry without commenting on Neville’s inability to make a full sentence.

“M-Malfoy’s,” Harry answered trying to avoid her inquisitive gaze. He knew that the Transfiguration Professor was not really fond of Slytherins as most of the current and former Gryffindors tended to be.

“Well, you might remember your f-friend’s parents that as your Head of House I need a written agreement from your guardians before letting you out of Hogwarts.” The stern woman informed him stiffly. “Please, make sure to owl or hand it to me before the end of the week. You might consider staying with the Weasleys here at Hogwarts otherwise. Good day, Mister Potter.”

Harry’s gaze followed his Head of House’s back. Of course, it would have been too good. It’s still the same world where nothing ever goes according to plan for him.

“Harry?” came Neville’s voice by his side. “I… I will go fetch Draco. Let’s… I’ll come back for you. Don’t move!”

Why did he have ever done to Fate? Well… This time it could be logical. He really was only 11 and no school would have let him leave without prior agreement from his ‘guardians’, but… At what point in his life did the Dursleys really have been ‘guardians’?! Well… Prison guards maybe… That made sense… If only Ace was there… She had always been the best at going around them. Thanks to her, he had had birthday parties, sleepovers, fun, got to taste the cakes he baked and sit at the dinner table… He was useless without her.

“Harry?”

Harry looked up and was suddenly facing Neville and Draco. “Come on, let’s go!” Draco said grabbing his sleeves to force him up. The Gryffindor followed his two friends without really thinking about it when his brain finally noticed the direction they were headed to.

His legs suddenly stopped moving. “Where are we going?!” He asked agitatedly.

“Well, the owlery of course!”

“Draco is going to ask his dad to go see your relatives for the permission form,” Neville explained.

Draco’s dad? A wizard! And judging by how Draco acted sometimes, a really real wizard! Very very unDursleyish!

Harry violently moved his arm to break Draco’s grip. “No! He can’t!”

They told him not to contact them ever again. His aunt really really seemed not impressed by his effort on using muggles means. And it had not been enough! If a real wizard appeared at their doorstep… They would be so mad… Uncle Vernon would certainly become all red like that time with Hagrid and… Merlin! What if he took it off on Ace?!!

“Wh… Are you… are you afraid he does something to them because they are muggles and he was accused of being a Death Eater?” Draco asked, hurt piercing through his unsteady voice.

But Harry was not listening anymore. That was it… What if Ace went to the Dursleys because he was not at Sutton’s in September and they were still mad at him for what Hagrid did to Dudley and Vernon blamed it on her because Harry was not there to take the blow?!!
“No… no… He can’t!!” Harry shoot frantically.

What if Dudley told them she was his only friend and it would be a great repayment since Ace refused once again to be his fiancée?! What if he did something to her and she accepted in order to find Harry?!! What if that was the reason why she was not responding?!! What if she could not reply?! What if they hurt her so bad that she died, and they hide the body, and nobody knows and it’s all his fault and…

“Potter! Potter?? Do you hear me?? Aguamenti!”

Harry blinked. He was drenched in cold water. The blond upper year from the train was looking at him. Neville was sitting on the ground next to him. Draco was still standing, looking upset a few meters away from them. As soon as he noticed that Harry’s eyes were focused again, he pinched his lips and left hurriedly.

“Harry? Are you okay?” Neville asked, preventing Harry from calling out for Draco.

“I…” Was he feeling okay? No… definitely not… he was cold, and his heart was beating as if he was going to die and… Ace, she…

“Hey, Potter! Focus on me!” The upper-year – yellow scarf… Hufflepuff – called out before his thoughts could trap him again. The boy put his hand on Harry’s chest and the younger boy noticed that he had stopped breathing. He forced the air out of his lungs, following the example of the Hufflepuff without really thinking about it. “I’ll carry you to the Hospital Wing, okay?”

Before Harry could answer, he found himself piggybacked by the older year. Harry listened to him talking with Neville and trying to reassure him. He was trying to force himself not to think about Ace… trapped in the cupboard under the stairs… She was not him… People would worry about her and find her. They would never let her there alone! She was not him. She was okay… She probably was okay… She must be…

A pressure on his arm brought him back to Hogwarts with Neville’s worried eyes fixed on him. “Harry, stay with us.” He pleaded softly. “We’re almost there.”

Indeed, they arrived at the Hospital Wing a few seconds later. As soon as they passed the door, the matron was upon them.

“What is it Diggory? I swear if you bring me yet another stray cat I’ll ask the Headmaster to open a specialized veterinary wing!” She started before noticing the two Gryffindor first-years with the Hufflepuff. “Put him here!” she ordered pointing a bed. “What happened?” she asked while sending a series of diagnostic spells at the shivering Boy-Who-Lived.

“They were outside the owlery arguing with a Slytherin and, I don’t know what he did but…” The Hufflepuff started to explain after realizing that neither first year was inclined to do it themselves.

“It was Draco! He’s our friend, we weren’t arguing!” Neville cut him as soon as he understood the implication of his words. “And he did nothing! We were about to send Mr Malfoy an owl so he can ask Harry’s relatives if they were okay with Harry staying at their house for the holidays and… Harry panicked and… and…”

“He had a panic attack.” The mediwitch concluded without waiting for him before summoning a small vial of potion. “Take this mister Potter. It’s a Calming Draught, you will feel better after taking it. Would one of you be keen to explain to me how he ended up soaked in cold water?”

Harry did as ordered. He was not really listening to what was happening around him. He just wanted
to go home and check on his best friend. As soon as the strange tasting fluid entered his system, this thought seemed to go away and be replaced by a sort of numbness that remembered him the times he had a really high fever and was unable to think straight. He was also really tired all of sudden and drift into a dreamless sleep in no time.

Mrs Pomfrey stopped lecturing Diggory about the idiocy of casting an Aguamenti charm on an 11-year-old in the middle of December in bloody Scotland, and, above all, not thinking about drying and warming charms afterwards. “That was not supposed to knock him off… merely make him a little sleepy for the next couple of hours… Do you know if he has trouble sleeping lately?” She asked Neville.

“Err… He… I know he has nightmares sometimes, but I didn’t notice if he had more lately than at the beginning of the year… I… I’m sorry.”

“He has had nightmares since September and none of you has thought to bring it out to me, your head of house or at least a Prefect?!!” The matron yelled, and Neville fought the urge to go and hide behind the Hufflepuff third year.

“I… He doesn’t like to talk about it and… He always says he is okay…” he explained but it sounded like petty excuses to his own ears and he hated that his voice was turning into a whine.

Harry was out of the Hospital Wings before dinner and reunited with his friends at the Gryffindor table. He heard whispers in his way to the table and around him – as if everyone knew he had been missing for being in the Hospital Wing… But it might just be the “Boy-Who-Lived” mania back for some reason…

He dismissed Hermione worried inquiries and Ron incessant questioning. Neither Neville nor Draco seemed to be in the Great Hall. Harry noticed that most of Slytherin first years were sending dark glances at him every now and then.

“So… when will you admit I was right?!” Ron finally asked, some Treacle Tart finding its way back to his plate on the process.

“What?” Harry focused back on their conversation.

“Don’t worry, some upper years are already setting up your revenge on Malfoy anyway.” The redhead finished with a satisfied grin.

“What?! Why??”

“Stop being ridiculous Ronald!” Hermione interjected. “Upper years would not go after a 1st year, even if he’s a Slytherin, just because he fought with his friends! I mean, I’m sure you’re not one going out about vengeance and honour and things like this, right Harry?”

Harry’s eyes were switching between Ron and Hermione. He had a really bad feeling about this. “What are you two talking about?” he asked sensing cold sweet slipping down the back of his neck.

“No need to pretend, Harry! Everybody knows that you were in the Hospital Wing all day because Malfoy hexed you into the Black Lake!”

“It’s December, you almost died from hypothermia…” Hermione breathed with an apologetic look in her eyes.
“Then Diggory, Hufflepuff’s new seeker, saved you because… well because he is a Hufflepuff and didn’t realize letting you die would have been his only chance to beat you for the next Quidditch Match!” Ron continued but Harry was not listening, still processing the first part of the rumour.

“What?!? But… Draco has nothing to do with me being in the Hospital Wing! He’s my friend! I just… HE DIDN’T HEX ME AND HE’S DONE NOTHING WRONG!” Harry ended up shouting for the whole Hall to hear. He felt like they were all already listening to them anyway.

He got up and ran from the Great Hall. He needed to find his friends. He hoped nothing happen to Draco!

He was running in the corridors when two pairs of hands stop him. “Harry! Wait!” Fred and George Weasley were standing before him, a little breathless as if they had run after him.

Harry eyed the two older Gryffindors. What did they want? Why did they stop him? Were they trying to prevent him from saving his friend?! “If you are part of the team who went after Draco, I…”

“No! We’re not!”, Fred said – thanks to Quidditch, Harry had learned the subtle difference that allowed him to differentiate them. ‘A mistake between both could cost them the game after all’, Wood had explained thoughtfully.

“Cedric told us what happened,” George explained.

“We know where they are, we can help you.” They finished in synch. “Follow us!”

Harry did, and the twins drove him through passages he had never taken until that day. They ended up in front of a girl bathroom.

“We are on the second floor,” Fred announced.


“Let’s go.”

They entered the bathroom and sobs immediately came to their ears.

“Come on Draco, let’s go to the Hospital Wing. Mrs Pomfrey will help you.” Neville pleading voice was coming from behind the giant central sink.

“No… I… He’s still there… I don’t… I don’t want anyone to see me like that…” Draco sobbing voice was weird as if there was an echo.

“Neville? Draco?” Harry called as he approached them.

They were both sitting on the floor. Neville was hiding Draco’s face. He turned as he heard him. His eyes were red as if he had cried recently but it was nothing compared to Draco’s state. He had twice his own face on his head. Four eyes, two noses, two mouths. It seemed so unnatural that it was painful to watch.

“Who did that to you?!!!” Harry urged, falling to his knees next to them, trembling hands hesitating to touch his friend’s double-face.

New tears filled the four silver eyes and Draco hid his face on his arms as his sobs became louder.

“Some Ravenclaw 6th year,” Neville answered softly. He was stroking Draco’s back and shoulder
and Harry quickly noticed from their position that he had probably done so for some time already.

“Why do you care?” Draco’s muffled voice mumbled. “You hate me and you’re afraid of my dad…”

“What? Draco, no! I…”

“Found it!” One of the twins’ voice came triumphally behind him.

The three first years blenched as they didn’t notice – or had forgotten – about them.

The twins were sitting on the floor too, several open books were dispersed around them. There was the ghost of a Ravenclaw student above their heads, but they seemed to ignore her. Fred showed George the page he was reading – a two-faced man was pictured in it. The ghost hummed approvingly.

“We got the counter-curse!” George announced them.

“Malfoy, if you please?” Fred asked well-meaningly.

“I won’t let Weasleys curse me!!!” Draco screamed as he saw their wands before hiding again.

“We won’t curse you!”

“We just want to help you.”


“Because you’re Harry’s friend.” They both answered in synch.

“And because you’re currently too ugly and too noisy to stay in my bathroom! I don’t accept gloomy boys under 4th year!” the ghost added but Fred quickly jinxed her quiet.

“I promise they won’t hurt you,” Harry murmured while stroking his friend’s hair. The platinum blonde was certainly different from the light brown he was more used to, but he guessed it was not that strange… until the unnatural double-pair of silver eyes raised up to meet his. He froze but when Draco spoke, it was not to call him off.

“You promise?” he repeated, and Harry could only nod.

“I trust them, they helped me find the two of you.”

“Kay…” Draco agreed in the weakest voice Harry ever heard him before finally facing the twins.

Harry left his hand from the hair of the Slytherin, but the blond boy grabbed it back into his own hands before it went too far away from him. He did the same with Neville’s and Harry noticed he was shaking.

The Weasleys positioned themselves in front of them and shared a glance before nodding a tempo with their heads.

“Vultus reficio!” both twins casted at the same time.

The violet spells left their wands and merged before hitting Draco’s face. There was a big flash and the Slytherin grunted, letting his friends’ hands go to cover his face again.

“Draco?” called Harry.
“You’re okay?” asked Neville at the same time.

After a few endless seconds, Draco finally lifted his head and… His face was one again. He got up to check it on the sink mirror. He checked both his side faces and his straight face again. His eyes fell on the tap a few seconds as if he was lost in his thoughts.

“T-thank you…” He mumbled.

“You’re welcomed, our dear little Slytherin!” George said, gathering the books and putting them back in Fred’s bag which seemed far too small to contain them all.

The ghost was still silently pestering above their heads.

“As you’re Harry’s friend, it’s free of repayment for this time!” Fred declared and then gave a small paper card to Draco.

“Should you ever be in need of our service some other time, you now know how to find us…” George explained.

“Or rather, we’ll know how to find you…” Fred clarified.

“For now…”

“We must leave you…”

“Have a good evening our dear little first years and don’t go to bed too late!” They finished in synch as they always do, and they left the bathroom followed by the angry girl ghost.

The three first years were now alone in the bathroom. An awkward silence settled between them.

“Did they attack you because of this stupid rumour?” Harry finally asked to confirm his doubts.

Draco was still playing with the silver tap and looked at him through the mirror. Harry shivered. Now that the situation had settled down, he could clearly see the betrayal in the silver eyes.

“You heard it?” Neville asked to cut off the tension building up between his two friends. “It was all over the school before lunch began…”

“Why didn’t you correct them?”

A new heavy silence caught them. “Well… you see…” Neville started.

“If I said that you had a panic attack at the idea of my Death Eater father going to your muggle relatives it would not have really helped my case!” Draco sneered. “So much for your ‘family and prejudiced don’t matter’ speech…” He finished feeling disgusted. He then turned to face them.

“What we don’t understand is why did you accept to come to my house for Christmas if you fear my father that much? I thought you were my friend… What are you expecting of me from pretending to like me?”

“What?!” Harry startled. “Wait Draco, I’m not pretending to be your friend! I’m your friend! And I want to go to your house! I’m not afraid of your father!”

“Stop pretending! You have a bloody panic attack!” Draco screamed.

“Not because of your father!”
“Then why?!!”

“Because…” The words were stuck in his throat. Could he tell them? He did not know how the wizarding world was seeing education and physical punishment yet. Neville did say that one of his Uncle throw him out a window just to prove he had magic. Maybe they would make fun of him…

“Harry? You don’t have to tell us if you don’t want to…” Neville started but Draco did not agree.

“Yes, he has to! I mean, you always look so sad and lost! Neville told me you got nightmares too. What’s really wrong Har’?”

Har’… this diminutive nickname… Why did Draco always unconsciously remind him so much of Ace?

Harry sighed. He knew how they felt. He remembered how seeing Ace unhappy without any explanation had always stressed him out.

Harry looked at them both. Draco had sat back next to them. His face was still puffy from what he had just gone through. Neville was looking at him a little more acceptingly and less expectantly, but he still has red eyes. He knew he had cried over Draco… surely because of him.

They were his friends… They offered him a way out even if it fell through.

“It was not your father I was afraid of…” Harry explained in a deep breath. “It was… it was my uncle. You see, my relatives really really hate magic and everything they don’t consider ‘normal’ and… They told me not to try and contact them ever again. They said they didn’t want to hear about me before June and that it would be far too soon already…” He breathed out. “When Hagrid came and got me to Diagon Alley this summer, he did something to their son – my cousin, he is our age – and they were so scared and then so mad at me. I’m afraid that if your father goes there, it’ll be worse.”

“Harry, my father knows how to defend himself against muggles…” Draco started but Harry shook his head.

“I was not afraid for your father… My relatives, they’ll never agree to anything that could make me happy. If you father argues with them, I know how it’ll end… I… Well, I know how it would end if I were there with them… But I’m not and… I just… Since I’m not there, I was afraid that they could go after something that could still hurt me even from afar… I started thinking they could go after Ace and then that maybe they already did and that’s why I haven’t heard from her since this summer… I… I’m sorry Draco. It was not against you or your father. I just… once I started having these thoughts, I couldn’t find my way out of them and I…” Harry shook his head again. The Calming Draught was still active in his system and that was the only reason he was not back to having a panic attack right now. The tears had started running down his cheeks and he could not handle his friends’ gaze any longer.

“Ace… it’s your muggle best friend, right?” Neville asked softly.

Harry lowered his head as he nodded, and soon, two sets of arms embraced him as to shelter him from the world. For once, he felt comfortable, protected by their arms and comforted by their presence.

“One day, you will have to introduce your muggle friend to us because you sure care the hell about her and she certainly not makes it easy for us,” Draco mumbled against his left ear.

Harry nodded again and leaned a little more against his chest.
It will be okay, he had friends.
“You’re sure you’re going to be okay?” Neville asked for the hundredth time.

“Yes, Neville. The Weasleys are staying too anyway.”

“I’ll try and come back a few days early.” Draco reminded him, also for the hundredth time.

“You know we are seeing each other in two weeks, right? What will it be when summer comes?” Harry tried to joke but the eyes of his two friends darkened immediately at the reminder.

They had acted like that since Harry had admitted he was afraid of his relatives to them. Most of the time, they managed not to think about it and act normally but from time to time they would just turn overly anxious and overprotective. They decided to take turns in monitoring Harry to make sure he did not have another panic attack. As soon as Harry seemed to lose himself in his thoughts Neville or Draco would try to find a new subject of conversation to fix his mind back to Hogwarts and the present.

“Anyway, Hermione gave Ron and I a mission. We’re supposed to find out who Nicolas Flamel is and what business he has with what is hidden on the 3rd Floor.” He told them to ease the mood.

“Nicolas Flamel?” Neville repeated.

“The Alchemist?” Draco continued.

“You know who he is?!” Harry exclaimed.

“Well, yeah”

“He created the Philosopher Stone…” Neville continued.

“The Philosopher Stone? Like the one which turns anything to gold and can revive the dead?” Harry guessed.

“See, even you know about it!” Draco sneered.

“What?!! It’s really that??!! I thought it was just a muggle legend!”

“Muggles know about it??!!” Neville and Draco yelled at the same time.

The three of them shared a disbelief look and burst into laughs.

“Well, that clue was so easy we didn’t even see it!” Harry snickered.

“Yeah, I think it even mentioned in some Chocolate Frog cards…” Neville considered.

Harry shook his head. He wondered how many ‘muggle legends’ were real magical culture facts?

“Are you going to tell them?” Draco asked.

“Who?”
“Weasley and Granger!”

“Oh… I’ll let them search for it a little more. If Ron spends his holidays in the library, he’ll have less
time to rant around Quidditch and why it’s so great that I’m the Boy-Who-Lived!”

“You’re sure you’re not a Slytherin?” Draco mocked.

“I could have been. But the Hat said that Neville needs me more than you…” Harry mused.

“I’ll kill this Hat… I need you too!!!!” The Slytherin wined.

“And you have me!” The black-haired boy assured with a laugh.

“I need a hug!” Draco asked, opening his arms large.

“Hug Neville!” Harry smiled mischievously.

Draco pouted but did as instructed. Neville chuckled in his arms. It had become a traditional end of
discussion process between them. Sometimes, Harry was okay with hugging them but most of the
time it was not coming to him so naturally, so they always asked first. On the other hand, Draco had
become quite demanding of physical marks of affection, so the task often ended down to Neville.

“You need to go, you’ll miss the train.” Harry reminded them.

“We’ll write,” Neville promised.

“You’ll write!” Draco ordered Harry nodded with a smile. “Every day!!” the blond added
determinedly.

“Err…”

“Last departure for Hogsmeade!” Professor McGonagall called out.

“Take care, Harry!” Neville launched before pulling Draco with him to where the other students
were already gathered.

“Take care…” Harry repeated a little less heartfully now that his friends were gone.

He sighed and took the direction to the Art Room. He still had some Christmas presents to finish and
it was a good enough distraction. He had decided to draw portraits of all his friends. Hogwarts Art
Classroom was well furnished, so he had a lot more options to choose from than he had in Primary
School.

The Art teacher, Professor Canvas, told him that he could join the Art Club if he wanted but as he
was already the Seeker for Gryffindor and Wood was the hell too focused on their training, Harry
could not go to most of the club meetings. Professor Canvas also told him that he taught magical
painting to any student interested from 3rd year and above.

Harry would love to be able to make his portraits alive, but the teacher explained that it was a
complex process that could not be mastered if one’s magical core was not mature and stable enough.
Harry agreed with him when Canvas still took the time to work with him on a single flower picture
to make it move with the wind. It took Harry four hours! And the result was not really convincing.
So, for now, Harry was just pleased to accept the advice of the teacher on his ‘very muggle’
drawing.
At dinner that day, the Great Hall felt really really empty. There were only a dozen students left in the castle and almost half of them were Weasleys. The tables had been rearranged so there was only two – one for the students and one for the remaining staff – left. The Hall seemed smaller too, but the twins quickly explained to Harry that it was because it always magically adapts to the number of students in the castle.

The beginning of the holidays went by quickly. Harry received letters from Draco literally every single day and from Neville every other day. He took the habit of responding to them in the morning while Ron was still searching the library in quest of information on Nicolas Flamel.

On one afternoon, Harry spotted Snape limping to the dungeon. Snape as the three other heads of House was one of the only teachers that stayed in Hogwarts for the Holidays. Ron told Harry that was because Snape did not have any family or friend. Harry knew from Draco that it was not true, and that Snape was quite close to the Malfoys, it was Snape that initiated Draco to Potion when he was 7.

Harry thought that a teacher that took time to teach a complex subject to a 7-year-old must not be all that bad despite all the rumours and theories that Ron and other older Gryffindors made about him. It was true that Snape was a nightmare to their House but they all had to admit that Gryffindor tends to act stupidly, and he could create dangerous situations in class, especially when boiling and toxic ingredients were lying around! Seamus did manage to make his caldron melt or exploded at least 3 times since the beginning of the year!

“May I help you, Potter!”

Harry jumped at hearing his name pronounced with such disgust. Snape had stopped in front of his office and was now looking at him with infinite suspicion. Yeah… that was the part where Harry never found arguments against Ron’s theories. Snape did seem to genuinely hate Harry. Most of the time, he would harass Harry with specific questions during class but if Harry managed to get the answers right, he would sneer and ignore him for the rest of the class. Draco could not explain to Harry where this animosity was coming from and Harry forbade him to ask Snape directly, afraid it would make it worse. Instead, Harry decided to spend hours with the Slytherin and Neville to prepare every Potion class and make sure he knew the lesson by heart before their weekly Friday morning double-Potion!

“No… I mean yes!” Harry answered joining the professor as if he did not know how much the man disliked him. “I was wondering… Would you recommend any book to learn how to best prepare ingredients for potions? You see, Draco… I mean Malfoy, has been teaching Neville and I and… I think it’s a waste of Draco’s time that he has to explain to us how to cut or crush this or that ingredient when we could learn those parts on our own and concentrate our time together in actual potion-ing…”

Harry did not dare to raise his eyes to look at Snape’s facial expression. He knew this kind of adult and knew how they could consider such an action as an act of rebellion.

“Ingredients’ preparation IS actual potioning Mister Potter.” Snape snarled. “But I dare say I'm quite surprised by your demand. You don’t seem like the type to go find answers in books or to waste time preparing for lessons beforehand.”

Harry pinched his lips. Of course, he prepared his lessons! How did Snape think he knew the answers to his questions otherwise?!

“I was raised in the muggle world, Professor. I feel like I have much to catch up and Potion does seem interesting, so I do what I can to understand what I’m doing during your class…”
Harry saw Snape’s hand tremble a little bit when he answered, and he could not stop himself from peeking up. His emerald eyes crossed the deep black ones of his teacher and suddenly, he thought about his summer reviewing his school books without any other reference books to look after the terms he did not know and then about Neville and him questioning each other before classes, next of Draco coming around and showing them how to crush their beetle to produce more juice and the three of them laughing before Harry asked Draco something about a Potion they had yet to brew in class. Eventually, he saw the shy smile of Neville during class when they got the good answer and Snape moves on to another student and Draco smirking at them from behind the teacher’s back.

Harry looked down again, he felt cold sweat forming in his neck and a throbbing headache starting in his forehead. What was that?! It felt strange, very strange. He unconsciously took one step back to put some distance between him and Snape.

An uncomfortable silence settled in the corridor.

“You may look for An Essay on Modern Potion and Improvement of the Art by H.B. Prince. It should be on the library, ask Madam Pince for it,” Snape finally snorted. “I doubt you’ll be able to understand a quarter of it, but you might find what you are looking for between the lines.”

“T-Thank you, Professor.” Harry stuttered.

“Now, get going, Potter! Lions have no place in the dungeons.” Snape ordered.

Harry was too keen to comply and almost ran away from the dungeon. This discussion definitely had been strange! Snape seemed less hateful suddenly, he even looked a little bit proud… But what made him change his mind? He had never believed Harry so far… Maybe it was just a test. He will need to really study that book and prove the man that he was worth it!

Hopefully, Christmas Eve was there, and Harry had other things to think about. He had owled all his presents that morning and really hope that his friends would like them. He played wizard chess with Ron and listened to Fred and George’s stories. Even Percy joined them at some point, correcting his brothers when the “romanticized” part of the story was becoming a little too obvious. It was a fine evening overall and they soon went to bed.

Harry woke up early next morning and the first thing he saw was a small pile of packages at the foot of his bed.

“Happy Christmas,” said Ron sleepily as Harry scrambled out of bed.

“You too,” Harry answered. “Will you look at this? I’ve got presents! Like several presents!!”

“What did you expect, turnips?” Ron grumbled pulling on his dressing-gown and turning to his own pile, which was a lot bigger than Harry’s.

Harry picked up the top parcel which was from Hagrid and contained a roughly cut wooden flute. The Gryffindor noted in his head that he would have to thank him because he had not expected a present for the half-giant.

The second package was from Draco, it contained a broom caring kit and a book on Best Seeker of All Ages. Harry had to control himself not to open the book and read it all now instead of finishing to open his other gifts. He was not used to having so many of them! Usually, it was just Ace’s and… Well, Ace had always been more inclined to practical gift than really pleasurable ones…

Harry was about to open the third package, but Ron stopped him. “I think I know who that one’s from,” he said pointing to a very lumpy parcel. “My mum. I told her we were best friends and – oh,
no,” he groaned, “she’s made you a Weasley jumper.”

Harry did not correct Ron about the ‘best friend’ part. Maybe it was true from the redhead’s perspective and he was not about to start a painful argument on Christmas day! He set down the package he had in hands and took the one Ron had pointed. It was a thick, hand-knitted sweater in emerald green and a large box of home-made fudge.

“Every year she makes us a jumper,” said Ron, unwrapping his own, “and mine’s always maroon.” He complained.

“That’s really nice of her,” said Harry, trying a fudge and going back to unwrapping his next present.

It was a large box of Chocolate Frogs from Hermione. The twins – “with the complicity of Cedric Hufflepuff Diggory” the card said – also bought him sweets called Ever Laughing Beans. Harry felt bad since, like for Hagrid, he had not thought of sending them a present. And now that he thought of it, Diggory had helped him twice already! He really had to thank him properly.

There were two packages left. Harry took the more solid one first. The card was from Neville, “I asked Gran to help me in gathering this. Turns out our mums were friends! Hope you will like it.” Harry scratched the wrapping and found a photo album. On the first page was a picture of two couples and two new-borns, Neville’s writing was commenting it from the side: “Taken at St Mungo's on Friday, August 1st, 1980 – Did you know we were born one day apart? I let you guess who are my parents and who are yours!” Harry chuckled. It was easy as one of the men had the same untamed black hair that Petunia had cursed him about during his whole childhood. The woman next to him had dark red hair and her tired green eyes were shining from happiness to the camera. She waved her hand at Harry and her husband kissed her head lovingly. Harry flicked the pages for more pictures.

“Err… did you draw that yourself?” came Ron’s annoying voice.

Harry lifted his head and saw that Ron was showing him the portrait of him he drew. He had contextualized it with chessmen in the front and a Quidditch pitch on the back. The raven-haired boy nodded uncomfortably. Was his friend not please by his present? Okay… he had forced himself to do one for Ron too because he did not want the redhead to feel left out if his other friends were to bring the topic in front of him but…

“It’s not even moving…” Ron commented.

Harry looked away and grabbed his last package. He did not want to fight. It was okay if Ron did not like his present… What if none of his friends liked his presents??! Maybe it was considered a shoddy present for wizards… Draco and Neville’s presents were so great in comparison… He should have bought them sweets like Hermione and the twins did…

Something fluid and silvery grey went slithering to the floor when he finished unwrapping carelessly his last package. Ron gasped, forgetting his hurtful comment already.

“I’ve heard of those,” he said in a hushed voice, dropping Harry’s drawing. “If that’s what I think it is – they’re really rare and really valuable.”

“What is it?”

Harry picked the shining, silvery cloth off the floor. It was strange to the touch, like water woven into material.

“It’s an Invisibility Cloak,” Ron said, a look of awe on his face. “I’m sure it is – try it on!”
Harry threw the Cloak around his shoulders and Ron gave a yell.

“It is! Look down!”

Indeed, Harry’s feet were nowhere to be seen but Harry’s eyes quickly went back to his pile of now unwrapped presents. He had opened all of them, there was nothing else… It meant that Ace didn’t send anything… He was secretly hoping that his friend was mad and waiting for a big moment to reveal she was forgiving him. She tended to act like that sometimes…

“There’s a note!” said Ron suddenly. “A note fell out of it!”

Harry pulled off the Cloak and seized the letter. Written in narrow, loopy writing he had never seen before the note informed him that the Cloak was his father’s and to “Use it well.”

There was no signature. Harry stared at the note. Ron was admiring the Cloak.

“I’d give anything for one of these,” he said. “Anything! What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” said Harry. He felt very strange. As if he forgot to do something. Who had sent the Cloak? Had it really once belonged to his father? Maybe it was in the photos Neville had gathered…

Before he could say or think anything else, the dormitory door was flung open and Fred and George bounded in. Harry stuffed the Cloak quickly out of sight. He didn’t feel like sharing it with anyone. It was his!

“Merry Christmas and Happy Yule!!”

“Hey, look – Harry’s got a Weasley jumper too!”

The twins were already wearing blue jumpers similar to Harry’s and Ron’s. There were blue with large yellow F and G on it.

“Welcome to the family Harry!” They both said with a grin.

“Try it on!!” Fred pressed.

“Why aren’t you wearing yours, Ron?” George demanded. “Come on, get it on, they’re lovely and warm!”

“I hate maroon,” Ron moaned but his older brothers would have none of it and forced the jumper on his head. They stepped back to admire their work and their eyes landed on Harry’s drawing for Ron.

“Wow! Who offered you that??”

Ron looked at him before sighing. “Harry…”

The twins’ eyes turned to him and Harry felt like revealing his Cloak and disappeared from their view.

“That’s really great Harry. ‘Didn’t know you can draw so well,” George said, and he sounded genuine.

“I’ve never seen you so great Ron! Are you sure it’s a picture of you?” Fred added.

“So confident and proud, look more like a young Bill!”
“Bill has never been young, George…” His twin brother corrected him and they both laughed.

Harry felt relieved by their laughs. So, his present was okay? It was just Ron who did not like it?

“What’s all this noise?”

Percy stuck his head through the door, looking disapproving. He carried a red lumpy jumper over his arm and it was enough to launch the twins in a new battle to force one of their brothers to wear the present their mother made them.

Just as they were leaving for Christmas Dinner, Harry received owls from Neville and Draco both thanking him for the drawings and stating that they were awesome. It definitely made him feel better and he enjoyed the biggest feast he had ever had! The meals he had to prepare for that day at the Dursleys’ over the year were nothing compared to what Hogwarts had to offer. The twins had settled themselves on each of his sides and their laughs were so communicative even Percy followed them on their jokes.

That night – after a furious snowball fight in the grounds, turkey sandwiches in front of the fireplace in Gryffindor common room and a chess tournament with the Weasleys that Ron won – Harry finally retreated to his dormitory.

Ron fell asleep almost as soon as he got to bed. Harry used that quiet time to look over Neville’s photo album again. There were so many pictures of his parents… they seemed so much younger than Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon… Some pictures were oddly cut to let only one or both of his parents in it. Harry wondered who their friends was and why they could not stay in the pictures that were given to him. Maybe they were shy. Or maybe they just didn’t want him to know them…

Harry’s finger stayed a few second next to a picture of his father in his Quidditch uniform – shoving the House Cup above his head – and his mind dived to the cloak. He leant over the side of his bed and pulled it out from under it.

His father… This had been his father’s. He let the material flow over his hands, smoother than silk, light as air. He read the note again, ‘Use it well’.

He had to try it, now.

He slipped out of bed and wrapped the Cloak around himself.

*Use it well.*

Suddenly, Harry felt wide-awake. Excitement flooded through his veins as he stood there in the dark and silence. He could go anywhere in this, anywhere, and Filch would never know. He had to go explore! Now!

As he was about to cover his face, Harry heard Scabbers squeak. He turned his head and saw the rat making his way to him on Ron’s bed cover. Did the rat want Harry to wake up his master to go with him? But it was his father’s Cloak – he felt that this time he wanted to use it alone.

“Go to bed Scabbers”, he scowled in a whisper before putting the Cloak on his head.

Harry crept out of the dormitory and as he climbed through the portrait hole, he knew he had to go to the Restricted Section in the library. He’d be able to read as long as it took him to find out who Flamel was. That was a strange thought… He already knew who Flamel was after all. However, his feet and his heart were just too keen to fulfil his illogical goal.
It was only once in the Restricted Section – that was strangely not locked – and with a book screaming bloody murder in his hands that Harry finally managed to snap out of his strange compulsion. However, he was already hearing Filch coming his way. He had to flee!

He ran as fast as he could. His naked feet made almost no noise on the cold stone floor. He turned and backed away, turned again and took a few steps until he entered a room that seemed to be a disused classroom.

There was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, in the centre of the room. Harry got near it as his panic faded and suddenly clasped his hands on his mouth while his legs were giving up under him.

There, on the mirror, smiling silver eyes laughed at him. Ace got on the floor next to his reflection and tightly hugged him. Harry raised a trembling hand to his shoulder but there was nothing there, only the cold wool of his sweater, while his reflection entwined his fingers with Ace’s.

Harry felt tears burning his eyes. Ace looked up in the mirror and Harry followed her eyes. Draco smirked through the glass and Neville waved shyly at him beside the blond.

Harry felt stupid sitting on the floor while his friends were standing so he forced his way up again. Ace’s reflection did the same but kept his reflection’s hand in hers. On their back, Draco and Neville got nearer and new shapes appeared. The couple from the pictures, a little older but still cuddling lovingly sent him bright smiles.

“Mum?” he whispered. “Dad?”

Harry reached out a hand and pressed it against the mirror. Ace jiggled happily next to his reflection and kissed his cheek before running away. She was received by two other pairs of hands of new shapes that Harry could not quite discern but guessed were her real parents… Real loving parents.

Harry looked at his own parents again. They were waving at him. His friends were laughing. Draco jumped on his reflection’s back and Harry’s image laughed with him, feeling so comfortable. Ace and Neville joined them while the adults just looked over them with happy smiles. It was so unrealistic… But here he was, hugging his friends like mad, they were all laughing, and they seemed so happy. Ace was teasing Draco about his hair and Neville stole Harry’s glasses before making faces at him. Harry chuckled. The reflection of his three friends turned their face at him and smiled brightly again.

“How?”

Harry barely noticed the new voices that were calling him until a hand – real this time – was put on his shoulder and he jolted away. Breathing very fast, he looked up to find Fred and George’s worrying expressions in front of him.

“You okay?” George asked. “We’ve called you for quite a long time…”

“We didn’t intend to frighten you.” Fred guaranteed.

Harry looked at them. How long had he stood there? He didn’t know but his icy feet were now killing him. His cheeks were wet, he swiftly dried his face with the sleeve of his sweater. “W-what are you doing here?” he asked the twins in a hoarse voice.

“Well…”

“Scabbers kind of woke us up…”
“You weren’t in your bed…”

“Haven’t been all night and it’s already 5 am.”

“And we… well… are you okay?”

Harry stared at them with suspicion. How did they find him? He peeked at the mirror. Did they know about this place beforehand? He wanted to stay with his friends a little longer.

Fred and George followed his eyes and looked at the mirror.

“Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.” Fred read.

“I show not your face but your heart’s desire.” George translated.

They approached the mirror together and stopped abruptly before looking over their shoulders then back to their reflection.

“It’s my friends… and my parents.” Harry explained.

The twins looked at him, their smiles were gone even from their eyes which gave them a strange look. Harry was not used to seeing them looking like that. It was as if they just saw a ghost… well, like muggles who had just seen a ghost. They shook their head.

“We are probably not seeing the same thing, Harry,” Fred said.

“See, this mirror would show you what your heart desires the most. And each person heart is different.” George finished sadly, grabbing his brother hand behind their back.

Oh… Harry thought. Of course, his parents were gone, and Ace had stopped talking to him… and Neville and Draco were away, having fun together without him.

“What… what are you seeing?” Harry asked the twins to stop his stream of thoughts.

He was not very focused. He felt down. He wanted to look in the mirror again. His reflection seemed so happy, so loved. He had nothing of it in the real world. The reflective world seemed so much better. Even Ace seemed happier there. She had parents there. Draco and Neville loved her too. They didn’t fight like Ron and Hermione did all the time…

“Harry? How long did you stay in front of the Mirror?” George asked crouching in front of him.

“Don’t know…” Harry muttered looking away.

The redheaded teenager raised a hand to smooth him but stopped before actually touching him. Harry had already slightly flinched anyway. He was pathetic.

“Listen, Harry, we are going back to the Common Room. You shouldn’t come here again, okay?” Fred said, crouching next to his brother.

“Why?”

The twins shared a look. They seemed so more serious and mature than they usually were.

“See, the mirror is seeing through your heart and show you what you want to see.”

“However, what you want to see is not always something you can have or something that is good for
you.”

“Some dreams would always stay what they are. Trying to pursue them when they are just impossible would just make you feel miserable.”

“And no one wants you to feel miserable, Harry.”

“Your blondie Slytherin even wanted to pay us to make sure you don’t feel miserable during the holidays!” Fred joked.

Harry chuckled. It was definitely something Draco might do. Draco cared. Draco and Neville were there in the real world for him. Ace too! Even if they were not with him right now, they cared.

“In the wizarding world, there is a saying…”

“Stay away from the things that show you what you don’t want to see…”

“And run away from the things that show you what you do want to see.”

“Soul reading artefacts are never good news.” They finished in synch.

Harry nodded. It made sense. However, as they made their way back to Gryffindor tower. Harry’s mind kept on drifting to the mirror. What if it was his only opportunity to see Ace ever again? What if the mirror showed her first because, just like his parents, she was… gone?

“Hey, Harry? We were wondering…” Fred’s voice cut through the numbness of his mind.

“You won’t ditch the Quidditch Team to the Art Club, right?” George continued.

Harry looked at them and they smiled at him before Fred took the fakest desperate look Harry had ever seen.

“Not now that we finally have a decent seeker!” he whined as they passed the Fat Lady.

“Don’t show your drawings to Wood, he would burn them, so you can stay focus on the Cup!!”

Harry laughed with them before understanding what they were doing and thanked them.

“If you really want to thank us, we have this project…”

“It’s really just an idea at this stage but…”

“We might need a designer for some packaging sometimes…”

“Do you think you can help us create a trademark and illustrations for our products?”

“Err… yeah… sure but what kind of products?” Harry asked uncertainly.

“That’s a secret at this stage!”

“But we’ll need you very soon!”

“Be ready.” They finished together with mischievous grins.

Harry laughed again before yawning loudly.

“Now up to bed, little Harry!”
“Baby blondie Slytherin might hex us if he comes back early and sees you look like an inferi…”

“Bed! Bed! Bed!”

And with that, Harry was suddenly back to his dorm, on his bed with a warming charm on his sheets. Exhaustion finally took him over and he drifted to a dreamless sleep.

Severus Snape was not a very social person. Nobody would be surprised about that fact. So, when he was at a very public setting like Malfoys’ Annual Yule Ball, he tended to quickly disappear in the family library as soon as possible – meaning after having greeted the hosts and spend a minimum socially acceptable time in the reception hall.

This year was no different from the others. Most people only wanted to know how their offspring was doing at school, completely overshadowing the fact that Severus was also a Potion Master who happened to write for some of the most prestigious Potion Research Papers in the world, thank you very much! Severus knew he needed to keep his position at Hogwarts at all cost because it was the only thing preventing Dumbledore from sending him to Azkaban but still! This year seemed even more dreadful than the last… and it had everything to do with Harry Bloody Potter.

The boy was not what Severus had been expected. He startled him since his first Potion class with his little rant against House prejudice. Severus had heard his house talking about it for a few weeks and the Potter boy did it again a few weeks before while taking the defence of young Draco Malfoy in front of the entire Great Hall. Severus had been surprised but not stupid. Potter’s political position could just be a way to bring new light to him and it did. Now the Slytherins were interested and they are the hardest House to win over… It was clever for a First Year, but it might just be one of Dumbledore’s little plots…

The second surprising thing about Potter was his academics and his dedication to the Art. For that part, Severus wondered if Potter had not taken more after Lily than his infamous father… Potter. At first, Severus had thought it had just been a fluke, but Potter was now in the top 5 of that year First years… He had gotten the answer to that mystery two days before. Draco was helping Potter to prepare for his classes. Severus wondered why the first-year Slytherin was acting so out of character and what Potter might have offered as a compensation. However, for the lion cub’s defence, the boy did seem genuinely dedicated to his lesson. Severus had to beat himself not to think too much about Lily when those shiny emeralds looked at him in such expectancy.

Maybe the boy was not that bad… or maybe he was up to something and was just trying to win over his sympathy.

“… it’s not fair! Your present is so much better than mine…”

The whiny voice of the heir of the Malfoy House came from the library and Severus smirked. Young Draco always pretended to be so grown-up at school. He tried his best to be up to his father’s expectation in both attitude and academics. Yet, at home, he remained the spoiled little boy he had watched grow up with both consternation and amusement.

“Don’t be stupid, Draco! He’ll like your present too.” Another young voice answered giggling lightly. “But you’re right, mine is better! I might be the only one to receive a hug!”
Severus was surprised not to recognize the voice but not as much as noticing the tone used to answered Draco Bloody Malfoy. He knew Draco’s follow Slytherin friends and none of them was close enough to attempt such a degree of intimate teasing with the young heir.

“I wish I was in Gryffindor with you guys… We could spend so much time together…” Draco sighed loudly.

“Yeah, but you’d have to share a room with Ronald… And he snores.”

Severus smirked again, imagining the face of disgust of his honorary nephew.

“…well, I wish you were in Slytherin then?”

“I thought I would be eaten alive at least ten times a day if I were in Slytherin!” The other boy chuckled.

“You would. But Harry and I would protect you! Don’t worry Nev’!… Hey! Don’t blush at that!!!!”

Both boys busted into laughs and Severus finally decided to make himself known but coughing unimpressively. The unexpected duo jumped out and quickly smartened their gala robes before bowing their head to their Potion teacher. Longbottom’s switch in behaviour was the most impressive. He went from a smiling lively mocking friend to a frightened 5-year-old who could only look at his feet and get three-word-sentences out.

“Happy Yule Uncle Sev’!” Draco said brightly.

Severus had to admit, he had not seen the young Malfoy so happy since his 6th birthday maybe… before his father started with all the pureblood mannerism and faces to hold in public to be exact.

“H…Happy Yule… Professor Snape…” Longbottom managed to get out. He was back to the character Severus was more used to in class.

“Happy Yule to you too, Heir Malfoy, Heir Longbottom. Draco, what are you doing here instead of enjoying the dancefloor with your friends? I reckon Miss Parkinson must be quite lonely…”

“It’s okay. She was dancing with Blaise when I left! And I’m with a friend.” He confirmed proudly.

Severus eyed him critically. Was Potter rubbing off on him? He then remembered the snippets of memories he gathered from Potter a few days before. Maybe their friendship was just as genuine as his and Lily’s used to be.

The Potion Master coughed slightly. “So, he came to my knowledge that I owe you some demonstrations of gratitude for you taking up to the difficult task of saving my class of two more walking disasters, Draco.”

The blond boy giggled. “They are not really walking disaster when they managed to focus enough! And Neville is very great with plant and ingredients! Right, Nev’?”

The Longbottom heir looked like he was trying to hide behind his friend instead of accepting the compliment. Severus snorted.

“Well, I may have recommended a book to the Potter Heir, he may share it with you both after holidays if you three really want to get into it… I must warn you though, it’s not first-year material.” He said while gesturing them to the door.
“Really???? Thank Uncle Sev’!!!”

Draco was so thrilled he jumped to unexpectedly hug the stern Potion Master. Severus was so shocked he did not even think to move. Draco had not hugged him this way in years! It took him a few seconds to get over it.

“Enough Draco, I’m still your teacher.” He reminded him.

“We’re not at school!” Draco complained but put his Slytherin mask on as soon as he noticed Severus’ severe stare at him. “I’m sorry, Professor.” He said politely.

“It’s forgotten. Now, off you go. Both of you.”

The boys nodded and gathered the books that were dispersed on the ground before getting out. Just as Severus was about to let out a long sigh of victory for being alone, his honorary nephew’s voice called out on him again from the door.

“Uncle Sev’, can I ask you something?”

“You just did,” Severus sighed, “but go on.”

“Well… You see… if a student was like terrified of going home because…”

“Draco, no!” came Longbottom’s hush voice as the chubby boy clutched the Slytherin’s wrist.

“… Because he – or she – thinks that his – or her – family hates him – or her – and hates magic in general… Should the teachers be concerned?”

Severus eyed the two First-years. What was that about again? It was so easy to see where Draco was willing to be going…

“Well… The teachers certainly will be concerned if such a case was to come to their knowledge and they might investigate to see if the student is in need of a more suitable housing arrangement.”

Severus saw the light switch on the blond boy’s eyes, but it was gone as soon as he heard his voice turning cold as ice for the next part of his answer.

“However, I can assure you that Potter is treating as a prince by his guardians and has been looked after his whole life to be sure he was not in need of anything. I know from a reliable source that he’s as spoiled as you can be. I would recommend you both to be careful about what you are keen enough to believe. Potters have an attention-seeking tendency running in their veins and the last of the line seems to be just like his father before him.”

“But…” Draco started but Longbottom’s firm grip stopped him immediately.

The two boys seemed to have a silence conversation before settling back to answer him. Severus was suddenly taken aback from the way the chubby Gryffindor was staring angrily at him.

“We are sorry for having been bothering you, Professor. Good evening and happy Yule again.” Longbottom said in a cold voice before storming off while dragging his friend and leaving an astonished Potion Master behind them.

Chapter End Notes
Hello!
I hope you enjoy this story! Please tell me what you think so far!!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The end of the holidays had turned into literal nightmares for Harry.

Every night since Boxing Day, he dreamed about his parents disappearing in a flash of green light while a high voice crackled with laughter. Some nights, his friends joined his parents’ dead bodies. He kept on seeing Ace launching herself in front of him while Draco and Neville fell dead behind him. He saw them over and over again. He could do nothing to save them and he always woke up feeling useless.

During the day, he thought about the way his reflexion seemed so confident and comfortable with his friends and family. It was so far away from the awkwardness he always felt when Neville or Draco came too close too quickly or when he was not the one to initiate the physical contact. He was so afraid they ended up understanding how much a freak he was… Just as Uncle Vernon had always repeated.

Harry felt the pressure becoming more and more insufferable the closer the holidays. He had stopped answering his friends every day. He only wrote back after two or three days, writing letters with no meanings. He could no longer look at his photo album. He had turned to Best Seekers of all Ages but then he had noticed all the annotations Draco had put in the margins of the book. He must have spent time on it…

Thinking of his friend, Harry contemplated the ease with which he had let them come so close. Almost feeling as if he could not go on without them anymore. If they died because of him, he could not survive it.

It was wrong.

Some days, Harry just felt apathetic. Nothing mattered anymore, and he ended up losing his appetite.

If not Ron, the twins and Percy took notice. They tried to help and distract him during meals. The twins would crack jokes at him or conspire with him about their secret joke shop project. Percy would come at him during breakfast, asking about his studies or if he needed any help with his homework. They were great. The three of them. Not as great as Ace but they were great enough, and Harry did finish more than half of his meals every day.

Draco came back three days before the end of the holidays. However, so was Theodore Nott – another Slytherin first year, and Harry used it as an excuse to avoid his friend. He was not ready yet… neither was he the day before the end of holidays when Neville came back with the clear majority of the other students. Hermione was back too, and she wanted to know all about their research/mystery project so there again, Harry had the perfect diversion plan.

That night, Harry was pretending not to notice Neville’s worried gaze on him in the Great Hall. He had purposely sat so his friend could not sit near him since other students were already there and Ron and Hermione had taken the nearest seats. He was so focused on pretending to be interested in whatever Hermione and Ron were saying that he failed on realizing that he had barely touched his plate. Since he tried so hard not to look in Neville’s way, he also failed to see the couple of looks sharing he had with the Slytherin table.
At the end of dinner, Harry felt a common slight touch on his sleeve, but he could not stop himself from flinching out. Neville’s hand froze in the empty space he had created. Culpability cringed into Harry’s heart. He knew he had just hurt his friend. That was why he needed to stop being so close to them, so they are not so hurt by his freakiness.

“Harry, are you alright?” Draco’s voice came beside him.

Harry looked at him but was not able to answer. He did not know what to say. The whole student body was now leaving the Great Hall around them and it made him feel like choking. They were too many people around him. He did not feel safe. There was so much noise it was ringing in his ears. He was suffocating.

Harry only stepped out of his stupor when he heard a door closed and the sudden silence. He took notice of the hand around his arm only when said hand released him. He looked around and saw that he was now in an unused classroom with only Draco and Neville. His relief was suddenly cut short at this realization.

He was not ready.

Draco and Neville shared a look.

“Harry, are you okay?” Neville asked cautiously.

“Y-yeah… a little bit tired that’s all… I wanted to go to bed early tonight, actually.”

“It’s been three days in a row then,” Draco commented coldly. “And Nev’ told me that you weren’t at lunch and that you barely ate tonight.”

“Are you feeling unwell? Did you go to see Madam Pomfrey?” the Gryffindor boy cut him off in a more accepting voice.

“No, it’s okay. Just tired really. Don’t worry.”

The two other boys shared a new look. Harry knew they were not buying it.

“Harry… did… did we do something that…” Neville started carefully.

“No!” Harry immediately cut him. “No, no… Don’t worry. It’s not you, it’s just…”

“You didn’t like our presents, did you? I shouldn’t have spoiled the book, should I? It’s just that Neville’s gift felt so personal, so I thought…” Draco tried to explain.

“I’m sorry to have contacted your parents’ friends without your permission, I could give you their contact information if you want, they said it was okay if you…” Neville apologized at the same time.

“It has nothing to do with you or your presents!” Harry stopped them feeling like he was suffocating again.

“So there really is something!” Draco picked up immediately.

Harry tensed up but only looked away.

“Draco…” he heard Neville whispered to the blond boy to stop him. But Slytherin did not take the hint.

“It’s because of Weasley, isn’t it? He said something about us during the holidays and now you’ve
decided you’ll only hang out with him and Granger. What did he give you for Yule anyway? Knowing how poor his family is, I can’t think of anything as remotely awesome as our gifts!”

Harry saw red at this comment. How dare he?!!!

“Ron’s done nothing! And if you must know, his mother made me a hand-knitted sweater and fudge and the twins got me sweets! They’ve been great! Really great! So, I won’t accept that you insult them any longer! And may I recall you that I don’t have money either and that’s why my present sucks so much! I didn’t know it was a competition! Sorry about that.”

“Har…”

“Now, if you would excuse me, I’m tired and I want to sleep so good night!”

Harry did not let his friends explain or apologize and stormed out of the room.

When Neville entered the dorm room a few minutes after him, he had already drawn the curtains around his bed and pretended to be asleep.

The next morning, Harry woke up early, too early to go down to the Great Hall for breakfast or to have anyone else up, really. Taking up his glasses, he noticed a note on his nightstand: “We both really loved your Christmas presents and there is nothing wrong about them. We were sincere in our thank-you letters, and we hope you’ll forgive us for pestering you so much tonight. We’re just worried because you don’t seem fine. You can talk to us whenever you want, we won’t ask about it again. Good night. Neville and Draco.”

Harry sighed heavily. Maybe he had been a little too harsh the day before. He did not want to fight with his friends, it was just that he did not know what to tell them. How can he possibly explain that he felt like they had become too close too quickly? It was so stupid he cannot say it out loud, but he hated the fact that they were at odds.

He got up and looked at Neville’s bed. The boy was still deeply asleep.

Harry took his quill and some parchments from his trunk and went to the common room. It took him almost an hour to find his words but by the time the first early-risers went to join him, he was off to the owlery.

He went to breakfast early and hurried to the library when he saw his friend entering the Great Hall half an hour later. He was too embarrassed to stay there during mail delivery. Hedwig knew her job, she had two stops to make. He did not want to be there when Neville and Draco read his letters.

He had tried to keep it simple. He did not really explain but at least he apologized, asking them for a little more time. He was not angry, he just did not want to speak right now. He just needed a little more silence to be with himself. He would be okay. They would be okay too.

Draco and Neville joined him at the library fifteen minutes before class. Draco apologized too, and Neville told him that they will not push the matter anymore. The Slytherin added a little ‘For now…’ but he got pinched in the ribs by Neville as soon as the words left his lips. Harry chuckled at that. Then, they asked Harry about the book Snape had recommended during the holidays and they just moved on.

Harry thought it was enough for him to be okay and to leave everything behind him. And it quite did for 5 days! But, then, the Potion Class came. His days were okay, but his nights were still shortened by nightmares, so he was not merely ready enough for the greasy Professor’s antic.
“Am I boring, Mr Potter?” Snape asked dryly after spotting Harry trying to contain a yawn. “You should note that laziness has never been an indication of realistic domestic abuse. Your friends might be genuinely concerned about you, but it would cost you far much than petty lies about your relatives to convince an informed professional. Twenty points from Gryffindor.”

Harry blinked. The other students were deadly silent. How… Why… What?!!!

He glanced at Neville and noticed how his friend was making faces at Draco and then the Slytherin winced back and the chubby boy froze before turning his face in his direction. The guilt was so easily readable in his eyes.

Harry felt cold anger boiling in his veins. He decided to focus on his book for the rest of the lesson. None of his friends managed to draw his attention to them. He was not ready to confront them… How could they betray him like that?! Why on Earth would they go and talk to Snape of all people??! When did they… Malfoy’s Yule Gala… of course… How much did they tell? Did they often talk about him to other people behind his back???

The bell finally rang the end of this dreadful class. Harry gathered his stuff and left without a word or a glance to anyone else.

“Harry! Harry, wait!!” Neville called behind him.

He did not listen. He did not want to listen. He regretted having been honest with them. How could they?!!!

“Har’ wait!!” Draco ordered grabbing his arm.

Harry jolted away immediately and hurt his back when he crashed on the stone wall next to him. “Don’t touch me and don’t call me that!” he shouted back to hide the pain he was feeling.

“I’m sorry…” the blond boy muttered.

Neville appeared out of breath next to him. He had run to catch up with them. He looked at them without understanding why the atmosphere was even colder than inside the Potion classroom.

“Why did you tell him?”

“I…” Draco started but Neville cut him off.

“We were just trying to help. Professor Snape seemed to be okay with you in Yule. He told us about the book and about the fact he was proud of Draco for helping us prepare his classes…”

“He hates me!!” Harry yelled. “How could you think it was a good idea??! I trusted you! I didn’t tell you for you to run around spreading the word!”

“… He’s like an uncle for me…” the Slytherin explained. “My father and he had been friends for ages… He… he could have help…”

“Well, he doesn’t !!”

They were still in a corridor. Several students from all years stopped to look at them with curiosity, clearly hungry for a little gossip about the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry hated it. He hated being the centre of attention like this!

Neville must have noticed too. His shoulders hunched within and he seemed smaller as if he was
trying to hide behind the Slytherin boy.

“My father could…” Draco tried again.

“Can’t you just stop with your stupid father?! I don’t have a father and I’m doing just fine without the help of any grownup so far!!!!” Harry shrieked before storming out to the castle ground.

It was cold and snowy outside, but he did not care. He did not want to go to the Great Hall and confronted all the others. He did not want to hear the latest gossip about him. He just wanted to be left alone.

Harry was angry at his friends. They have no right to just go and tell a teacher about his home-life. They did not know, and they did not understand! Ace understood. Ace never sold him off. She respected him and respected what he told her in confidence! But Draco… he has a loving mother and a protective father! How could he get it?! Of course, Snape did not take them seriously. Nobody ever believed him anyway! Now Snape is convinced he was a liar just as all his teachers ever did in primary school. He would talk to his other professors and even those who did not teach him yet. And the, they would all judge him and doubt the sincerity of his abilities too…

He hated it. He hated them. They had spoiled every bit of effort he had made since September!

At some point, Harry heard steps in the snow behind him. He did not turn back, he was convinced it was Neville or Draco or both and he did not want to see them right now, especially Draco.

“You’ve missed lunch… I… I thought you might be hungry, so I made you a sandwich…” Neville’s unsteady voice came behind him.

Harry ignored him. From the long shadow next to him, he knew that he came alone. It was just a small victory.

“Draco don’t talk about his father to remind us we don’t have one…” The chubby boy clarified softly. “He didn’t know it could hurt us… It wasn’t intending to…”

“I don’t care,” Harry grumbled.

“He’s upset…’” Neville specified.

“Good for him. I’m upset too… I don’t want to see his face.”

Neville stayed silent a few seconds – probably guessing on his next move.

“I was there too… You’re not as mad at me,”

“I know you’re not the one who talked to Snape…” the raven-haired boy answered bitterly.

Neville did not answer which was as much as a confession. He sighed heavily. “Come on Harry, it’s freezing out there. He just wanted to help, and he wants to apologize.”

“You can stay but I’m not forgiving him. He had no right to talk.”

“He’s your friend.”

“He has other friends.”

“… and I don’t?” Neville strangled out. “That’s why I can stay, isn’t it? Because I’ve no other friend and you pity me??”
Harry finally looked up. Neville’s hazel eyes were already filling with tears. The words stayed blocked in his throat and Neville took it as a confirmation and ran off to the castle, shoving Hermione and Ron in his path.

“What’s the matter with him?” Ron asked uncaringly when they joined him.

Harry did not answer. Ron did not need to know. Hermione got the clue and pushed him slightly.

“We were about to go to Hagrid’s,” she said. “Do you want to come? We still haven’t found out about Flamel… Oh! Do you want a Chocolate Frog? It could hardly count as a healthy meal but still better than nothing I guess.”

Harry nodded uncommittedly and accepted the sweet.

“Oh… the Twins told me to tell you that you have a special training session with the Quidditch team tonight. Wood has something to tell you apparently. Can I have the card?” Harry gave it to him. “Ew… Dumbledore again… ‘Greatest wizard of modern age…’ blah blah blah… Bloody Merlin’s beard! I’ve found him!!! I’ve found Flamel!” he exclaimed suddenly.

And with that, their mystery mission restarted once again.

Hermione had read about Flamel and the Philosopher Stone in her ‘light reading’ book she borrowed from the library weeks ago. Harry did not tell them he had known about Flamel since before the Christmas Holidays. That night, Wood announced the team that Snape would be the Quidditch referee for their next match against Hufflepuff and forged them a new dictatorial practice program.

Harry did not have any free time anymore. He saw Neville with Draco in the corridor a few times. They ignored him – well, Neville seemed like he wanted to talk but Draco dragged him away – but Harry was not ready to apologize either anyway. It was better this way. They will be safer this way…

Ace never answered his letters. A few weeks into January, Harry got a letter from Muggler Smuggler indicating that his Christmas present for her – which should have been delivered as a registered package – came back with a no delivery notice.

Harry drowned himself in his studies after that. It was harder to get ready for Potion class without Neville and Draco but he could not give Snape the satisfaction of seeing him fail! On the other hand, he was trying to convince himself to believe Hermione when she said that his friend had certainly a lot of work to do if she was at Sutton’s Grammar and she had no time to write him back because Muggle secondary school classes must be soooo interesting! And she missed Maths… somehow.

The Quidditch match against Hufflepuff came and went. Dumbledore was there. Harry caught the Snitch in less than five minutes. When he came back from the pitch, he learned that it was still enough time for Ron to have a fight with Draco and Neville in the stands, but he tried his best not to commit himself on either part. He didn’t have time nor energy for that.

Hermione started drawing up revision timetables and colour-coding all her notes. Exams were 10 weeks away and teachers were on the same pages as her. Homework was piling up just before the Easter Holidays when Harry received a new letter via Muggler Smuggler.

He was surprised when the owl land before him that morning. He had not tried to contact Ace after the Christmas present fiasco. He carefully loosened the letter from the owl leg, but his anxiety flattered down when he noticed that the address was not written with Ace’s handwriting.

‘Hello Harry,
I don’t know if you remember me, I’m Kate Smith, June’s sister… well, foster home’s sister. I found your letters in my Dad’s letterbox when I sold the house… I don’t know if June contacted you since your last letter – since it was in December – but as you’ve sent so many letters, I allowed myself to open one of them… sorry about that. Anyway, she doesn’t live here anymore… Not since the beginning of September, really….

It’s not my story to tell and I don’t know how much you know already but… Things got bad (really really worse than bad… really), and I blame myself a lot for not noticing. It was my Dad after all and… well, I can’t say that I’m glad that he’s in prison but I’m glad that June got out of there.

I’m sorry I can’t forward your letters to her directly – I’m not allowed to contact her after what happened with my Dad and I don’t really know where she is now. I told the social services that you tried to contact her, though! I gave them the response address and I think they will tell her wherever she is. You meant a great deal for her after all. She even named my son after you! His name is Hadrian, but you probably already know, he was born at the beginning of August.

I hope she’ll write you back. She was really afraid when you disappeared this summer, I think it’s why she decided to talk about what was happening at the house… Your relatives were not really happy when she accused them of killing you… Were things really as horrible as she described it for you? If so, please note that my door is always open for you. I put my address on the back of the envelope, you can come and stay at any time. I know you don’t really know me, but I want to help you if you need it – take it as a repayment for having been unable to help June all these years…

Anyway, I wish you good luck for your future and if you happen to get in touch with June, please tell her that I’m sorry, that I don’t blame her, and that I still love her as a sister.

Best wishes.

Kate Smith (well, it’ll be Kate Johns soon, though… I’m getting married!).

Harry stayed immobile for long minutes. Reading and re-reading the letter. Ace talked? She told them about her foster dad, she tried to find him, she accused the Dursleys and now she was gone?!! Gone?!!! Since September… Since the very beginning while he was enjoying this new magical world and making new friends she… She talked?!!

“Harry? We are going to the library as planned, see you there?” Hermione asked next to him.

He moved his hand to confirm/dismiss her. Ace hated talking about that! She hated talking about her, about her home-life, about her foster dad, about her past, about everything! She named her sister’s kid after him… she cared… She had not talked all these years because she was afraid to leave him behind and then he left, and she was… gone. It was his fault, isn’t it?

“H-Harry?”

A chubby hand brushed his and lowered the letter. Harry pinched his lips. He noticed how his own hands were now shaking next to Neville’s and he let him take the letter from him.

They had not talked since January. He had been ignoring him, hurting yet another friend, Draco too… What if they disappeared too if they tried to help him? It had already started, hadn’t it? Snape had probably told Draco’s dad that he was a pathological liar, he might have got mad because he thought he had deceived his son or because Draco was weak enough to be deceived by him, and then he might have hurt Draco. Merlin, Harry even told him he was sick of him talking about his dad all the time… Ace’s foster dad went to prison because of what he did to her? How far did he go? She’d never told him… What if something happened with Draco’s dad and Draco didn’t talk about it
to Neville because of what Harry had said???

“I-I’m sorry, Neville… I can’t.” he stuttered.

He got up and left the Great Hall. Neville did not follow him as he used to. Harry suddenly felt so so alone. He knew he had to drive them away but why was it so hard?? He did not stay with them that long, merely a few months and… Why was it as hard as when he had had to leave Ace behind?! She was gone now…

“Harry! Harry!!”

Ron and Hermione were running to him.

“We saw Hagrid in the library!!” Ron said excitedly.

“He was looking at dragons’ training books. Something is definitely up!” Hermione added.

“Let’s go to his hut!!”

And with that, Harry let himself be swallowed by this new adventure. Hagrid did get a dragon egg, got it in exchange of information on his three-headed puppy… How can a secret keeper be so bad at his job? Harry did not know. He did not know why Dumbledore was trusting him either. They arranged the escape of the baby dragon with Ron’s older brother, Charlie. Pansy Parkinson spotted them in Hagrid’s hut with ‘Norbert’. Ron got beaten by the dragon. They got caught wandering back to their common room after successfully seeping out the dragon. They lost a bunch of points and everyone hated them – and especially Harry – for it. They also got detention with Hagrid in the Forbidden Forest. Hagrid’s dog ran away, leaving Harry behind when they encountered something drinking a dead unicorn’s blood. He was saved by a centaur.

At this point, Harry was sick of their ‘entertaining small adventure’. It felt too real, too dangerous for a bunch of 11-or-12-year-olds. Why were they the one to go after Voldemort? Weren’t there more capable adults to do so? And then, his Invisibility Cloak found its way back to Gryffindor first-year dormitory – even if Harry knew he left it at the top of the Astronomy tower the night they saved Norberta. There was a note pinned to it: Just in case.. Suddenly, Harry knew he was the only one, with Ron and Hermione, who could protect the stone in the absence of Dumbledore!

Harry’s stabbing headache started that night in the wood and kept on getting worse as the end of the year became closer. He had no news from Ace nor the social services. The final exams were finally there. His headache and nightmares had become so bad that Harry just quitted sleeping. He knew that Neville had noticed. He told him it was just a bad case of exam nerves. Neville did not comment further.

On the day of their last exam, Ron and Hermione guessed how strange it was that Hagrid got a dragon egg out of nowhere and decided to go see Dumbledore. That was how they learned from Professor McGonagall that Dumbledore had left the school due to a ‘Ministry’s emergency’. So, they did the only (un)logical thing to do… they decided to go after the stone and protect it themselves!

As they were about to leave the Gryffindor Common Room, someone was there to stop them though.

“What are you doing?” Neville asked.

“Go to bed Neville,” Ron grunted.

“No. You can’t go out, you’ll be caught again. We’ll lose points. Gryffindor will be in even more
trouble!”

“You don’t understand,” said Harry, “this is important.”

Harry’s voice seemed distant to his own ears. Neville noticed too.

“What is it, Harry? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Hermione cut. “It’s getting late, why don’t you go to bed, Neville?”

Neville stared at Harry. “Harry… please tell me…”

“Neville,” Ron exploded, “get away from that hole and don’t be an idiot – “

“Don’t you call me an idiot, Weasley!” Neville shouted, and Harry could hear month of bitterness behind his words.

“Ron, Hermione, go ahead. I’ll catch you up.” The black-haired boy sighed.

“But, Harry…”

“Please,” he insisted.

They stepped forward and Neville let them go through the hole. Once they were alone together, Neville looked up to Harry’s face.

“What is it Harry?” he asked softly, fighting with himself not to touch his friend.

“I… I don’t know… Snape is after the Philosopher’s Stone, he wants to use it to resurrect Voldemort and he’ll go after it tonight and… I know it’s stupid, but I feel like I have to go after him…”

“…it’s… Harry, I know Professor Snape hates you, but he would never… Harry, you can’t possibly think that three first years can compete with a teacher!”

“I know! I know it’s stupid, but Dumbledore is gone, and I know… I just know he’ll go after it tonight.”

“…Okay… let me go with you then!”

“What? No!” Harry exclaimed. “No, Neville it’s too dangerous! You could get hurt! You could be killed!”

“So could you, Harry! Draco will never forgive me if I let you get hurt while he’s gone!”

Harry frowned at that argument. “Why? Where is he?”

“His Grandfather’s funeral… same as Dumbledore… I promised him I’d look after you, Harry… You seemed so off lately and…”

Harry felt bad about not knowing about that. He did not even know if Draco was close to his grandfather… But at least he was out of the Castle, so he was safe. Neville would be safe in the Gryffindor Common Room too, Snape could not get there.

“I need to go Neville… Ron and Hermione are waiting for me…”

“Why can they go with you and not me?”
“Because… Because I don’t care! Or at least… I don’t know, I feel like they’re gonna be okay whatsoever but not… not you…”

“I’m not weak Harry! I can fight too!”

“I know! I know Neville but… I can’t lose you… or Draco… I just can’t. I wouldn’t survive it. I’ve already lost Ace, I can’t lose you too. I’m sorry Neville. _Petrificus Totalus_!”

Harry woke up in the Hospital Wing three days later – according to Dumbledore who was there when he opened his eyes. Harry wondered how long he had been there, watching over him… It was weird… He wondered if that was how Ace felt when she woke up in the middle of the night to her foster dad watching her in her room…

Harry explained the Quirrell incident – because, in the end, it was not Snape who was trying to help Voldemort – to the Headmaster who did not seem the slightest surprised.

They chatted for a while, Dumbledore danced around most of his questions. It made Harry uncomfortable as if he was being played with… he hated that, but this feeling did not seem to settle in his heart for long. Something was pushing him to like the old man even if his guts were telling him otherwise. Dumbledore did admit to being the one who gave him back his father’s Invisibility Cloak, but he did not explain why he had had it in the first place.

He then left, and Ron and Hermione came around saying that everybody in the school already knew about Quirrell, Voldemort and the stone but they wanted to know the real story. Ron also told him that he missed the Quidditch match against Ravenclaw and that they lost the Cup… as if that was important right now. After ten minutes, Madam Pomfrey ordered him to rest and chased his friends away.

Neville did not come. He had forgotten to ask Hermione how he was and how long he had stayed under the Full Body-Bind curse until someone found him and released him. Harry hoped he was okay… He had been asleep for 3 days… it meant that it was now June 7th… He had missed Draco’s birthday too…

Harry had a nightmare that night. Ace gave him the stone through the mirror again but this time, Voldemort noticed her and grabbed her. He pulled her out of the mirror and strangled her. Harry was watching but he could do nothing to save her as she was trashing frantically against the burning hand around her neck. As time went by, she became weaker and eventually, her hands fell lifelessly to her side. Voldemort crackled with laughter in his high voice and flung the corpse to the side, next to Neville’s frozen body.

Draco burst into the room, just in time to be hit by a green light.

“They died because of you. Just like your mother!” Voldemort mocked.

“Noooo!” Harry yelled jolting out of his nightmare and scared the hell out of the blond boy sitting next to his bed.

“Merlin Harry! Are you mad?!!”

“D-Draco?” Harry guessed before putting his glasses on and sitting up. “Wh… What are you doing here?”

The Slytherin boy looked back at him silently before shaking his head. “Weasley told the whole
school that you were awake… The twins helped me in… it cost me five galleons…” he grumbled. “I
needed to talk to you.”

He was so serious that Harry felt the need to seat straighter.

“How do you do?” Draco asked sternly.

“… fine… I guess… just a little tired. I got nightmares but it’s gonna be okay…” Harry answered
sincerely.

“Good,” Draco commented before grabbing a magazine on the nightstand and hit Harry’s head with
it.

“Hey!!! What?!? Why?!?” Harry squealed away but shut up when he saw the look in Draco’s liquid
silver eyes.

“Don’t you dare do something like that to Neville ever again!” he shouted. “What’s wrong with
you?! Why are you so mean to him?! He hasn’t slept in three days because of you! He’s convinced
that you were going to die because of him! Because he wasn’t strong enough to stop you!!”

“Wh-what?!? It’s not his fault! He has nothing to…”

“You think I don’t know?!!! Of course, it’s not his fault! It’s yours! You’re an idiotic Gryffindor
who can’t accept help and has the tendency to bet his life in fights that are not his without even
thinking of the friends he would leave behind if he dies!” Draco screamed. “You’ve scared him to
death! You’ve scared both of us to death!!! Why did you have to protect the stone yourself?!! Why
did you fight us off and keep us away like that?!!”

The blond boy was now crying, and Harry felt helpless before him. All these months he had avoided
them because he knew they would see through his mask right away and he was not strong enough to
reject them directly again. Was it really okay for him to give in? Why Draco’s tears were contagious
like that?!! Did he really have the right to ask for their forgiveness?

“I was just afraid to lose you…” he sobbed weakly. “I hate when people touch me but not you
two… not all the time… sometimes it’s okay but… You were so comfortable with each other and
I’m not and… your presents were so great and… and I’m a freak and now your father thinks that I’m
a liar who tried to manipulate you and… you have so much to lose and I have nothing to give you
and… I’ve already lost Ace, I didn’t want to lose you too… I’m sorry Draco… I’m sorry…”

“You’re not a freak Harry, you’re our friend! We want nothing from you, we just wanted to help
you! We are afraid to lose you too! We hate seeing you so sad all the time! We just wanted to
help…”

“I know…”

They were both sobbing pitifully by now.

“Harry?” Draco sniffed uncharacteristically. “Can I hug you?”

The raven-haired boy nodded softly before letting out a long cry in his friend’s arms. He had been so
afraid, so alone against his monsters both literally and figuratively. Draco hugged him tightly until he
calmed down and they both fell asleep in his hospital bed.

Chapter End Notes
And here comes the end of Harry's first year... We're still pretty much canon so far but things might diverge more from now on!
Please tell me what you think and if you have any wish for future developments! I would love to have more reviews... but I'm not ready to disclose the future pairings yet...
I mean, so many things could happen and my characters need to grow up a little more before being romantically involved!!!!
How do you find the length of the chapters? Too short? Too long? Okay?

Anyways, thank you for those of you who did review this story already and for all the others who read and kudo and bookmark and subscribe!
Year 2 coming soon! (in like chapter 13 or 14... Harry (doesn't) deserves his summer holidays after all! XD)
During the journey back from Hogwarts, Harry spent most of his time trying to convince Neville and Draco that he was going to be okay at his relatives’ house and that they had nothing to worry about.

Harry was kind of restless about going back to Privet Drive, so he could gather some pieces of information about what happened to Ace and how to contact her.

Ron and Hermione had left for another compartment because Harry got mad at Ron when he had rubbed Gryffindor’s victory in Draco’s face, again. Harry did not understand why Dumbledore had given them so many points for going against the rules. It was unfair for the three other Houses and especially Slytherin.

But Ron was gone now, and Neville was looking at him as if he was going to cast them away again. Harry tried to smile at him. Of course, he was not expecting to be able to write quite as often as his friends wanted him to, but he promised to try. Moreover, he had planned on lying to the Dursleys about the fact that he was not allowed to do magic out the school. So, really, it was going to be okay.

Or so he thought.

As soon as he went out of Uncle Vernon’s car, his trunk, wand and broom had been locked away in the cupboard under the stairs. Hedwig might have been too, but Harry menaced to call the RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) if he did so. This comment owed him to be violently hurled in his room, Hedwig’s cage bouncing in the broken bed behind him. Vernon slammed the door mumbling about how it was to be expected from that freak school not to teach him respect.

Sadly, both Vernon and Petunia plentily knew he was not allowed to do magic outside of school and they told Dudley that he had nothing to be afraid. However, Dudley still seemed unsettled by what Hagrid had done to him last summer, so he tended to avoid Harry anyway. It was bad for Harry though because he knew that his cousin was his only available source of information on Ace…

During one rainy day in July, he managed to corner him in the bathroom. Vernon was at work and Petunia was out having tea at one of the neighbours’.

“What do you want?” Dudley asked him suspiciously when he saw him blocking the bathroom door.

“Tell me what happened to June.”

“Why would I?”

“If you don’t I can force you.” Harry menaced in a low voice.

“Y…You can’t. Mum said you’re not allowed to use that.” Dudley seemed unsure. It was really unusual to see him act that way.

“It doesn’t mean I can’t.” Harry threatened more loudly before starting to mumble nonsense. “Hocus pocus tral…”

“STOP!!!” Dudley squeaked. “I’ll tell.”
“I’m listening.”

“I don’t know much, I was at Smelting’s when it happened.” Dudley reminded quickly eying Harry’s hands. “Pierce said that the police came and took her father during the second week of school. I don’t really know what happened, but they said he had done something to her. I heard Mum talking to Pierce’s, she said that…” He looked down and lower his voice. “…that June must have seduced Mr Smith and that you can never trust girls who are all about looks and far too cute for their own good. She said your mother was the same and that why she died.” He smirked at that but quickly resumed his story when he saw the look on Harry’s face. “Then… I don’t know how it happens or why but… June accused Mum and Dad to have killed you and the police came here. Mum was devastated, but, of course, the police officers understood it was all lies!” A new smirk appeared on his lips and he looked up with some renew bravado. “Everybody knows you’re a liar! So, of course, nobody believed what you said to June.”

“What happened next.” Harry cut him in a cold voice. The thunders sounded loudly through the window behind him and Dudley chickened out again.

“Well…. I told you I don’t know! I mean… Apparently, June tried to break into the house one night, and Dad caught her and called the police. Pierce told me he had seen June when the police came to our house and she seemed totally wrecked and crazy. Mum said you must have done something freaky to her, and that’s why they sent you to the freak school, because you always tell lies and that June must have trusted you for real. Because of you, Pierce asked me about your freak school!” Dudley complained but at Harry’s frown he went on. “Mum told the policemen that she would pray for June but that she was certainly in need of psychological assistance. They took her and nobody from Primary School has seen her ever since…. Well, according to Pierce.”

Harry stared at his cousin bewailed. It was not something Dudley could have invented. His cousin had never had the best imagination… But Harry could not accept this story like that! It could not be true!!

They heard the entrance door opening and Dudley’s behaviour switched immediately.

“MUMMMM!!!! HE’S MENACING ME!!!!!!!!!” He screamed loudly.

Instantly, Aunt Petunia was upstairs and snatched Harry’s arm to free her son. Harry’s back harshly met the wall and a frame fell next to him. He had just enough time to think how lucky he was not to have received it on his head when Petunia’s palm set his left cheek on fire.

“How dare you threatening my son, you freak??!” she yelled at him.

She dragged him to his room and for the second time this summer, Harry was violently hurled to the floor. The lock clicked loudly in the room.

“No meals! And Vernon will hear about that!” his aunt shouted from the other side of the wooden door.

Harry stayed on the floor for long minutes. He did not want to think about what his uncle was going to do to him when he came back from work. He had more important things to think about. Ace had talked about his relatives to the police or the social services and they did not believe her. His Aunt might even have even convinced them that Ace was crazy… All his worst nightmares from his childhood had become true… Nobody believed his friend because of her relationship with him. He knew it could happen but… He had told her that could happen and she still… She must hate him so much… Why was the world so unfair???
Petunia was true to her words and as soon as Vernon came back from work, Harry heard them shouting from the first floor. His uncle stormed into his room a few minutes later. Harry had taken off his glasses, not wanting them to be broken again. They lay safely on the wardrobe next to Hedwig’s cage while Harry was getting the worse beating he had for years.

Harry was still half-unconscious the next day when Uncle Vernon blocked the window from the inside with cleats – he was not stupid enough to fit bars on the outside for every neighbour to see. Additional locks had been put on his door when he woke up two days later.

From that day, Harry was only allowed out of his room to do chores during the day under the strict surveillance of his Aunt. As soon as his Uncle was back from work, he would lock him back to his room with no bathroom break until the next morning. Harry would also be locked in his room if Petunia needed to leave the house. He was forbidden, under any circumstance, to talk to Dudley. Finally, if he managed to not displease his relatives too much during the day, he could expect a little more than two slices of bread and one small bottle of water per day.

His imprisonment took one step further on the day of his twelfth birthday. Like every other day, Vernon stormed into his room at 6:30 and ordered him to make breakfast after his 5-min bathroom break. They ate at 8:30, Dudley asked for bacon refill thrice, nobody mentioned his birthday.

Then, Uncle Vernon cleared his throat importantly and said, “Now, as we all know, today is a very important day.”

Harry looked up from the sink where he was washing the dishes, hardly daring to believe it. Knowing them, it could be for the worse though.

“This could well be the day I make the biggest deal of my career,” said Uncle Vernon.

Harry went back to washing the dishes, letting his breath go silently, he was still off the radar. Of course, his uncle was only speaking about his dinner party that night. Before 1:00 pm, Harry needed to clean the windows, washed the car, mowed the lawn, trimmed the flowerbeds, pruned a watered the roses and repainted the garden bench.

The sun blazed overhead, burning the back of his neck but Harry enjoyed his time outside. He secretly examined the garden for one of Ace’s surprise present – even if he knew his friend was gone, he could not stop himself from hoping. He also searched the sky for a lost owl. He had had no news from his Hogwarts friends since the beginning of summer. Of course, he had not been able to write anything either, but he had kind of hoped that his friends would not have forgotten about him so quickly…

Nevertheless, he knew he had missed Neville’s birthday the day before and Draco’s at the beginning of June since he was unconscious in the Hospital Wing at the time – and they had not quite made up yet then – so maybe he did not deserve anything from them. Ron and Hermione did not write either… nor the twins… Maybe it was just because their owl did not find the way to his relatives’ very Muggle house… The houses were all the same here, it was certainly confusing for a bird… It must be that… They did not forget him… They did exist… Hogwarts did exist otherwise he would not have lost Ace, to begin with.

After his outside chores, Harry had to help Petunia in the kitchen. She decided to have him made roast pork and a pudding: a huge mound of whipped cream with sugared violets.

At 7:45 pm, his aunt came back from changing her clothes – she now wore a salmon-pink cocktail dress – and snapped at him, pointing to two slices of bread and a lump of cheese on the kitchen table, “Take that to your room! The Masons will be here soon! And don’t forget what your Uncle said!”
“Yes… I’ll be in my room, making no noise and pretending I’m not there.” Harry repeated his sentence without hiding his annoyance.

“Yes, you will! We’ll lock your door anyway. Upstairs! Hurry!”

Harry complied, and the door locks clicked behind him as soon as he entered his room. He took a bite of his sandwich, turned to collapse on his bed and almost choked. Why was there a creature sitting on his bed?!!

The creature was named Dobby and introduced himself as a house-elf. Harry knew about house-elves from Draco and Neville, but he had never actually met one. The thing was, he had not expected it to be so noisy! At each attempt by Harry to calm the house-elf and coerced him to be quieter, Dobby shrieked and tried to punish himself by banging his head against the wall or with the lamp nearby. After a few minutes of that behaviour, Harry decided to stop to try and spoke more harshly to the elf.

“What are you doing here?”

“Ah, sir,” Dobby gasped, tears in the eyes. “Harry Potter is valiant and bold! He has braved so many dangers already! But Dobby has to come to protect Harry Potter, to warn him, even if he does have to shut his ears in the oven door later… Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts!”

There was a silence broken only by the clinks of knives and forks from downstairs and the distant rumble of Uncle Vernon’s voice.

“W-What?” Harry stammered. “But I’ve got to go back! I really have to. You don’t know what it’s like here. I don’t have anything left and I don’t belong here! I belong in the magical world – at Hogwarts!”

Where he was not starved and beaten up every other day… even if some psycho tried to kill him occasionally. Where he still had friends that did not hate him… yet.

“No, no, no,” squeaked Dobby, “Harry Potter must stay where he is safe. He is too great, too good, to lose. If Harry Potter goes back to Hogwarts, he will be in mortal danger.”

“Why?” said Harry, keeping for himself that he was not safe at the Dursleys’ either.

“There is a plot, Harry Potter. A plot to make most terrible things happen at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year,” whispered Dobby, suddenly trembling all over. “Dobby has known it for months, sir. Harry Potter must not put himself in peril. He is too important, sir!”

“What terrible things?” Harry asked, what can be worse than a two-headed professor possessed by Voldemort? “Who’s plotting them?”

Dobby made a funny choking noise and then banged his head madly against the wall. It took five more minutes for Harry to calm him again. Then he launched his final argument to reassure the elf. “Hogwarts is safe, I mean, Dumbledore is there – you know who Dumbledore is, don’t you?”

Dobby bowed his head.

“Albus Dumbledore is the greatest Headmaster Hogwarts had ever had. Dobby knows it, sir. Dobby learns it well. Albus Dumbledore is a very powerful wizard. But sir, there are powers Albus Dumbledore doesn’t… powers no decent wizard can control… it’s too dangerous, sir. The plot is too perilous.”
And before Harry could stop him, Dobby bounded off the bed, seized Harry’s desk lamp again and
started beating himself around the head with ear-splitting yelps.

A sudden silence fell downstairs. Two seconds later Harry, heart thudding madly, heard Uncle
Vernon coming into the hall, calling, “Dudley must have left his television on again, the little tyke!”

Harry did not lose any more time and stuffed Dobby in the wardrobe, shutting the door and flinging
himself onto the bed just as the lock clicked at his door.

“What – the – devil – are – you – doing?” said Uncle Vernon through gritted teeth, his face horribly
close to Harry’s and his monstrous hands grabbing the collar of his oversized t-shirt. The proximity
to his throat was enough to give him a choking sensation. “One more sound, and I will make sure
you could not disturb us again… ever.” Vernon threatened before letting out panting on the ground.

The man stomped flat-footed from the room and the locks clicked again behind him. Shaking Harry
let Dobby out of the wardrobe.

“See what it’s like here?” he said rubbing his throat. “See why I’ve got to go back to Hogwarts? It’s
the only place where I’ve got friends who care…” I think, he added for himself.

“Friends who don’t even write to Harry Potter?” said Dobby slyly. “Even for his birthday.”

And suddenly Harry understood and saw red. “How do you know? Have you anything to do with
that?!” Did Neville and Draco try to write to him a lot since the beginning of Summer, and he had
not answered, and they had thought he was back to ignoring them like during the last semester?
Were they mad at him because of it? What if he lost them like he had lost Ace?

Dobby was now blackmailing him into giving up Hogwarts. He did not want to. He wanted his
friends’ letters. He wanted to make sure they were okay and apologized because this time it was not
deliberate! What if they did not believe him? What if Draco shut him off because he had hurt Neville
again??? Nobody ever believed him…

Harry’s face blanched abruptly when he saw Dobby magically unlocked his door. What was he…
Oh no!!!

Mouth dry, stomach lurching, Harry sprang downstairs after the fleeing elf. He tried his best not to
make any sound, but Dobby was already in the kitchen with the violet pudding flying around.

“No,” croaked Harry. “Please… they’ll kill me…”

“Harry Potter must say he’s not going back to school –”

“Dobby… please…”

“Say it, sir…”

If Harry did not go back to Hogwarts, Ace’s situation would repeat all over again. He will lose
Neville and Draco, he will abandon them like he had abandoned Ace and it will be all his fault.
Dobby said that there will be mortal dangers at Hogwarts this year, who will protect his friends if he
is not there? Dobby could not understand that. Dobby was just an elf but…

“Okay… okay… I won’t go… I just want to be able to contact my friends again…”

Dobby gave him a tragic and disappointed look.
“Harry Potter is a liar, sir. Harry Potter’s friends will make him go back to Hogwarts. Dobby cannot let that happen, sir. Dobby must do it, sir, for Harry Potter’s own good. Harry Potter’s own good is more important than the greater good.”

The pudding fell to the floor with a heart-stopping crash.

The following events trailed each other quickly.

First thing first, Uncle Vernon managed to gloss the whole thing over to the Masons until a huge barn owl swooped through the dining room window and dropped a letter on Mrs Mason’s head. It was a warning from the Department of Improper Use of Magic of the Ministry of Magic. Mrs Manson screamed like a banshee and ran from the house, shouting about lunatics. Of course, Uncle Vernon lost his deal with Mr Manson and everything fell to Harry.

Vernon hurled Harry back in his room and took off the belt. Harry only had time to cover his face with his arms. The whipping session felt like hours and Harry passed out from the pain at some point. When he woke up, the sun was setting again. At least one day had passed. There was no food in his room, just plastic bucket with a note on it “No bathroom break for freaks.”

For the next three days, Harry stayed locked in his room. He had a fever and faint again when he tried to change his t-shirt which was sticking to his wounds with dry blood. His only time outside his room was to empty out his bucket to the bathroom on the second morning. He had only one slice of bread and one glass of water a day and was feeling weaker and weaker as the days went by.

Harry had nightmares too. He dreamed about Neville crying alone in Gryffindor Dormitory and of Draco being expelled because he tried to force the Fat Lady to let him in the Gryffindor Tower. One night he dreamed that Ace was in his room too, but her once silver eyes were no more than unfocused grey fog. Draco was whipped by his father for being expelled and Neville threw himself from the Astronomy Tower… ‘He did not rebound this time’ were the words graved by his Great-Uncle Algie on his tombstone…

Harry knew his nightmares were unrealistic and that it was just the fever speaking but they made him colder and colder every time he woke up.

He startled awake one night, unable to determine why and clasped his hands on his mouth to mute a scream when he saw two pairs of brown eyes goggling at him through the window: freckle-faced, red-headed, two identical faces… Fred and George Weasley were outside his window! It was the first time the twins appeared in one of his nightmares…

Harry forced himself up, but his window was still blocked from the inside. His mouth fell open as the full impact of what he was seeing hit him. Fred and George were leaning out the front window of an old turquoise car, which was parked in mid-air. He saw that Ron was sleeping in the back seat. This dream was strange.

The twins smiling faces were darkened with worries when they noticed that he could not open his windows.

“All right, Harry?” he read on George’s mouth.

Harry shook his head slightly and grabbed a paper on his desk. “Can’t go back to Hogwarts, they locked me up. Can you tell Neville and Draco that I’m sorry?” He wrote stiffly before pressing the paper against the window.
The twins frowned deeper and shared a look before nodding determinedly. They sat back on their respective seat and the car left the window. Harry sighed. He hoped it was not just a dream, so, at least, his friends would know the truth and not blame themselves when he would not show up in September…

Harry was about to go back to sleep when he heard the click of the locks in his door. He froze. Uncle Vernon never came to his room without announcing himself with angry rumbles in the corridor. Was that a new turn in his torture? He was determined to play dead – or at least asleep – if it could prevent him from finding out tonight.

“Harry?” a hushed voice came.

“Harry are you here?” a second, one tone louder repeated.

Harry turned on his bed and gasped when he saw Fred and George’s faces through the gap between the frame and the door.

“What are you doing here! Leave now! If he saw you he will kill you!!!” Harry muttered frantically getting up.

“Where are here to rescue you!” Fred announced him getting in. “You’re coming to the Burrow with us.”

“That’s the name of our house,” George explained. “Where is all your stuff?”

Harry blinked a few times. Was he allowed to go with them? Did they really mean it?

Fred was now frowning over his bucket and Harry did not want to explain that. “H-Hedwig is here… the rest is locked away on the cupboard under the stairs…” he said.

“I’m getting them!” Fred announced, eager to get out of the room after glancing the blood stains on Harry’s bed.

George looked at him silently while he went beside him before entering the room to help Harry gather the few belongings he had there. He took Hedwig’s cage in one hand and looked at the younger boy critically.

“You’re okay, Harry?” he asked softly.

Harry nodded lightly. “I’ll be better when we’ll be out of here.” He tried to smile but he did not have enough energy left to be convincing.

George silently agreed with him. “Do you have everything?” He asked looking around and noticing the same troubling signs as his brother.

“Let’s go…” Harry breathed as an answer.

They proceed to go downstairs, unfortunately, George stepped on the bottom stair which creaked loudly in the silent house. Harry’s breath stuck in his throat when he heard his uncle usually grunt upstairs.

“Hurry!” he pressed George.

Fred was already fitting his trunk and broom in the car’s trunk.

“Petunia!” roared Uncle Vernon behind them. “He’s getting away! HE’S GETTING AWAY!”
However, at the last second, Harry remembered something and hurried back into the house.

“Harry!” George screamed after him.

Harry ran to the console where the telephone was and ransacked the drawer. He finally found the old piece of paper. He grabbed it and ran for the car. Vernon was already downstairs and almost caught him when he went to the door.

Fred had started the engine. George was outside the car, waiting for him. He urged him to the back seat. Harry crashed into Ron. The twin slammed the front door shut while a really red and angry Vernon stumbled through the front yard.

“Put your foot down, Fred!” Ron yelled – waking up to a living nightmare trying to open his door.

The engine rumbled loudly, and the car suddenly shot forward. They were back in the sky before getting to the end of the lane.

Harry could not believe it – he was free. He wound down the window, the night air whipping his hair. He closed his eyes, enjoying the fresh air after those last 5 days of imprisonment. Then, he looked back at the shrinking rooftops of Privet Drive. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia and a sleepy Dudley were standing in the middle of the street, looking at him with disbelief in their eyes. Harry shuddered when he imagined how angry Vernon had looked. It was okay, he did not have to go back there, he was safe… Ace no longer lived there, Vernon could not go after her. Wherever she was, she was safe. He looked at the small business card in his hand – Mrs Elisabeth Travers – Social Services: Children, young people and families department. Foster placement – London unit.. Wherever she was, he would find her.

Hedwig hooted in her cage on Ron’s laps. “Let her out,” Harry told him. “She can fly behind us. She hasn’t had a chance to stretch her wings for ages.”

“Err… Okay… but it’s locked.” Ron said. George turned to them from the front seat and handed a hairpin to Ron. “Wh-what do you want me to do with that?”

George sighed loudly and contorted himself to access Hedwig’s cage. “Ron, you’re our little brother! You can’t possibly be one of those wizards who think it’s a waste of time to know this sort of simple Muggle tricks!” Fred commented from the driver seat.

There was a small click and the door of Hedwig cage swung open. George grinned at Harry. “We feel they’re skills worth learning, even if they are a bit slow.”

“That’s how you got into the house?” Harry asked him with a tired smile.

George nodded. He looked intensively at Harry as if he was about to ask something but decided not to and got back to his seat.

“So, what’s the story, Harry?” said Ron impatiently. “What’s been happening? Why didn’t you answer my letters? I’ve asked you to stay about twelve times, and then Dad came home and said you’d got an official warning for using magic in front of Muggles…”

“It wasn’t me – and how did he know?”

“He works for the Ministry,” said Ron.

Yeah, Harry already knew that. But did that mean that everyone in the ministry was alerted when an underage wizard used magic outside of school? Was there nothing like confidential information and
privacy in the magical world?

“You know we’re not supposed to do spells outside school –” Ron continued his scolding. “Seriously, doing magic in front of those Muggles you live with –”

“I told you, I didn’t!” Harry lost his temper turning to his friend. This move stretched the wounds on his back and he winced. He saw the twins looking at him through the inside-mirror and scolded back to enjoying the night view. He did not want to talk about it, but they saved him, maybe they deserved an explanation.

He sighed and proceeded to tell them about Dobby, the warning he had given him and the fiasco of the violet pudding. He kept quiet on Uncle Vernon’s vengeance part. There was a long-shocked silence when he had finished even without that.

“Only old and rich houses like Malfoy’s have house-elf. Maybe it’s was him who sent it!” Ron launched evenly after a few minutes. “He was still mad at you because you’re not his friend anymore and he doesn’t want you back in Hogwarts because we made Slytherin lose the Cup.”

“Draco is still my friend!” Harry shouted back angrily. Or at least he hoped he was still his friend. But he did not have his letters back, so he did not know if the Slytherin had written or if he was angry or worried… He hoped they were okay. Maybe he could write a letter to him and Neville now. What if they didn’t believe him though…

The twins were strangely quiet, but George spoke first: “He wrote us – Malfoy I mean. He was worried because you weren’t answering his letters and his father was unable to locate where you lived.”

“…asked us if we knew anything,” Fred confirmed stiffly.

George glanced at his twin, sensing something was off, but the driver just shook his head discreetly – meaning “Later.”

Harry eyed them discreetly, just hoping they would not ask more questions for now. Ron started talking about his dad’s job and he listened absent-mindedly. It was easier than to think about his life.

After a few hours, Ron had fallen back asleep and Harry was drifting on and off sleep when George announced. “We’ll be there in ten minutes… just as well, it’s getting light…”

Fred brought the car lower and Harry saw a dark patchwork of fields and clumps of trees. Lower and lower went the flying car. The edge of a brilliant red sun was now gleaming through the trees.

“Touchdown!” said Fred as, with a slight bump, they hit the ground.

Harry only had time to admire the Weasleys’ house for a few seconds before Mrs Weasley appeared in the yard, marching angrily in their way.

He stayed in the shadow of the three red-headed while they got a ‘well-deserved’ dressing-down. He was tired and only hope he could get a few hours of sleep in a safe place before getting sent back to the Dursleys’, where his uncle was certainly already planning his murder.

“I’m very pleased to see you, Harry, dear,” Mrs Weasley said – sounding a little forceful to Harry’s ears. “Of course, Ron’s best friend is always welcomed at my home. Come in and have some breakfast.”
Harry followed her a little reluctantly. At least, she had not beaten any of her sons for their mischief, which was a good point. But what about when she will tell Mr Weasley…? It was always worse when Aunt Petunia tells Uncle Vernon.

Inside the house, the woman kept on snapping at her sons while she was preparing breakfast. The house was nothing like Harry had ever seen.

“It was cloudy, Mum!” tried to mitigate Fred.

“You keep your mouth closed while you’re eating.” Mrs Weasley snapped back.

“They were starving him, Mum!” George said.

And Harry froze. How do they know that? He did not tell them that. Could they tell by looking at him? Ace could always tell but… Luckily, Mrs Weasley did not even look up when her son spoke.

“Nonsense. Dumbledore has always been looking after him and I’m sure Harry’s life is perfectly fine at his Uncle and Aunt’s if it’s not for being a little lonely so far from all this wizarding attention. Right, dear?” She smiled softly at Harry and started cutting him bread and buttering it for him.

Harry nodded and thanked her, ignoring the twins’ eyes on him.

After that Mrs Weasley resumed her complaining about her sons, all of them except Percy was too inclined to disappoint her for her own good. Ginny – Ron’s little sister – appeared at one point but disappeared as soon as she saw Harry.

Harry forced some food into his body. He did not really feel the hunger anymore and knew he should not eat too much or he would be sick, but at least he tried. He almost fainted when Mrs Weasley forbade the twins and Ron to go to sleep. Luckily, it seemed he was the exception and she told him that he could sleep all he wanted. Harry nodded silently but still felt like he was supposed to be politer than that and said, “It’s okay. I’ll help Ron, I’ve never seen a de-gnoming– “

It was enough to have Mrs Weasleys all cooing around him. The twins shared a look but did not comment. It was strange to have them so quiet and Harry wondered how Mrs Weasley could not notice that…

“You should write a letter to Malfoy,” George said while his mother was fussing about someone named Gilderoy Lockhart. “Tell him you’re okay now.”

“What? Why should Harry write to this despicable personage?” Mrs Weasley squeaked. “He had put your father to hell at work again!”

“Draco Malfoy,” Harry specified. “He’s my friend. I had an issue with my mail since the beginning of summer. I need to explain to everyone why I didn’t receive their letters.”

“Well, you’d rather write your letters than doing dull work with those idiots then!” she said with a smile. “However, Harry, I must warn you about the Malfoys, they cannot be trusted. If this Malfoy did anything to you, I want you to know that you could talk to me about it. We’re not as well-off as that wicked family but we have enough relations to protect you from their kind.”

Harry focused back on his toast and did not say a word. Now, he knew where Ron’s prejudices were coming from. He knew he should write to Draco… and Neville… and probably Hermione… He did not really know who had written to him during the holidays. The problem was, he did not know what to write.
“Where the two of you think you are going?” Mrs Weasley’s screeching voice came again above his head, making him shivered against his will.

“Toilets!” The twins answered in synch before running off.

Harry watched them go. They sure acted strangely since the previous night.

“Let’s go,” Ron sighed next to him before his mother’s irritation with his brothers fell back on him.

Harry nodded silently and followed him outside. The morning sun was invigorating, and he managed to find some energy back. The garden was large and lacked some attending – there were plenty of weeds and the grass needed cutting. The Dursleys would not have liked it. There were gnarled trees all around the walls, plants Harry had never seen spilling from every flowerbed and a big green pond full of frogs.

Ron asked him questions about muggles and gnomes and why they thought they should look like Father Christmas. Then he showed him a real gnome, raised him above his head and started swinging it in great circles like a lasso before throwing it twenty feet into the air and over the hedge.

The twins joined them quickly and the three of them kept on throwing out gnomes until lunch.

Harry could not bring himself to join them. He thought that the process could be associated with animal cruelty, but he did not really know the laws on the matter in the wizarding world and Ron assured him that “It doesn’t hurt them” and that “They love it and will be back anyway”. Harry was still not inclined to join them and to inflict that on a living being.

He sat on the ground at some point and thought about the letters he needed to write. He thought about Draco and no word came to his mind. Draco had been so mad when he had hurt Neville back at Hogwarts and he certainly did it again by not answering their letters. Everything he could think of sounded like petty excuses. It was even worse than Ace’s letter the previous year… the letter she had never got…

At lunch, Harry forced himself to stay awake, but it was hard. He nodded absentmindedly at Percy’s rant about not letting things go if he was not responsible for the magical outburst in his home. “A warning like that could ruin your file later when you’ll look for a job!” he said. He then offered to write an appealing letter for him, stating it was his role as a Prefect to defend his fellow Gryffindors against injustice and arbitrary judgement. For once, Fred and George did not mock him about his obvious Head-Boy aspirations.

“Are you coming?” Percy asked him as soon as the table had been cleaned.

The other boys needed to clean the attic as further punishment for their behaviour. Harry followed Percy in his room and fell asleep as soon as the older boy told him that he could sit on the bed.

Percy did not wake him from his nap until supper was ready. He asked Harry to read the letter he had written to confirm he had the facts right and then they went downstairs where Mr Weasley was just back from work and too excited about Harry being here to really scold his three younger sons. Harry had rested enough to go through the supper and Mr Weasley endless questioning about muggle life and technology without yawning.

Ron and the twins were so tired by the end of the meal that they went straight to bed. Harry followed them and stayed awake for a few hours in Ron’s room. Thankfully, his fever had gone down during the day and his back was healed enough not to stain the sheet.

He closed his eyes tightly. He was safe. He was going to be okay. He repeated it in his head, again
and again, until falling back asleep.

Chapter End Notes

As always, your reviews are welcomed!!! What do you think?
Thank you for reading.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Life at The Burrow was as different as possible from life at Privet Drive. However, Harry was not really sure he would be able to get used to the non-stop noise and agitation in the house.

Ron was speaking too much, as usual. Ginny was either staring at him or avoiding him. Percy spent most of his time in his room. Small explosions often came from Fred and George’s bedroom, but nobody ever commented on it. When the twins noticed that Ron’s babblings were becoming a little too much for Harry, they tended to need him for an experiment or for Quidditch practice. Each time Harry tried to thank them for their rescues, they dismissed him, pretending that they did not understand what he was talking about.

Three days after his arrival at the Burrow, Harry received two letters. The first one was his Hogwarts letter and the second an official convocation to the ministry for his appeal hearing. He was demanded at the Ministry on the next Monday to defend his case in front of the Board of Governors of Hogwarts and representatives from the Improper Use of Magic Office, and from the Department of Magical Education of the Ministry of Magic. He was also requested to bring his wand.

Mr Weasley offered to drop him on his way to work. He had the afternoon off anyway, so he would be able to bring him back at the Burrow as soon as the hearing ended. Harry accepted and thanked him politely.

Ron received a letter from Hermione the same day, asking him if he could do their school shopping together on the next Wednesday. They all decided that it sounded like a plan and went on with their day – namely meeting up with Cedric Diggory who lived nearby and set up a small Quidditch tournament.

Monday came soon enough, and Harry was beyond nervous. He had never been to an official hearing before and was not sure what was expected of him. Mr Weasley told him they would “floo-travel” to the Leaky Cauldron then walk to the nearest Ministry visitors’ entrance. He explained to Harry that the Burrow’s floo was connected directly to the Ministry since he worked there but it would be inappropriate to use it to bring in a guest.

Harry quickly decided that flooing was not his favourite mean of transportation. The Ministry of Magic visitors’ entrance was on the muggle part of London, contrary to what Harry had thought. He followed Mr Weasley through London busy streets. He was not used to so many people but at least they were not wearing robes and hats…

Mr Weasley opened an old red telephone box and Harry stepped inside, wondering what on earth this was about. Mr Weasley folded himself in beside Harry and closed the door. Harry was feeling uncomfortable from the adult proximity but bore with it. Mr Weasley dialled a few numbers and a female voice sounded inside the telephone box. Mr Weasley stated their names and Harry saw a square silver badge with *Harry Potter, Visitor, Disciplinary Hearing* on it. He pinned it to his shirt – one he borrowed from Ron – when Mr Weasley told him to. Suddenly, the floor of the telephone box shuddered, they were drowned in the dark and after a minute that felt like hours the door of the telephone box sprang open and Mr Weasley stepped out of it, followed by Harry.

They were no longer in the stinky London street but in a very long and splendid hall with a highly polished, dark wood floor.
Harry followed Mr Weasley through the place and the corridors until he stopped in front of a desk. The lady told them to wait five more minutes before the beginning of the hearing.

When the time finally came for them to enter, Harry felt like he had been hit by the jelly-legs curse. In the room, there was a lonely chair in front of a long desk. Six adults were already sitting on the other side of the desk. They all had name-tags in front of them: John Tyler - Department of Magical Education; Mafalda Hopkirk – Improper Use of Magic Office; Aurora Lee – Childcare and Youth Welfare office; Lucius Malfoy – Hogwarts Board of Governors; and Madison King – Head Girl of Hogwarts 1991-92. There was also a man standing in a corner of the room, seemingly waiting for the hearing to start.

Harry’s eyes fixed the Malfoy name for few long seconds before he dared to look up to the man. He had the same platinum blond hair as Draco – his were long and easily reached his shoulder, his eyes were light blue, Draco told him once that silver eyes ran in his mother part of his family.

Harry suddenly noticed that he was staring and looked down with embarrassment. The man seemed unimpressed with him… or maybe was it the way he was dressed. He did borrow one of Ron’s old best shirt though… Harry wondered how much Draco had told to his father… the man was friend with Snape… Adults always trust other adults first and children second.

“Mr Weasley, as you are not Mr Potter’s guardian or family, I will ask you to wait outside.” Mrs Hopkirk stated in a steady voice.

Mr Weasley mumbled something Harry could not decipher ant stepped out of the room.

“Mr Potter, we are here today because you appealed on the warning that was sent to you on Friday, July the 31st after a Hover Charm had been performed at your place of residence in front of muggles the same day at twelve minutes past nine in the evening. In your letter, you claimed that you were not the one performing the charm. Do you confirm?”

“Y-Yes,” Harry answered uncomfortably.

“Fine. Miss King, could you summarize Mr Potter’s file at Hogwarts for us, please.”

“Y-yes!” the younger woman answered anxiously. “He… Mr Potter passed his first-year exams with good grades, he is in the top 10 of his school year. Despite being a first year, he’s Gryffindor seeker. All his teachers, except Sn… sorry, the Potion Professor – had given him good appreciations. During his first year, he had a detention for breach of curfew but received the Headmaster’s congratulations for service to the school at the end of the year. He had demonstrated good inter-house spirit throughout the year and is appreciated by his classmates regardless of their house.”

“As many Gryffindor, you seem to have some issues when it comes to rules, Mr Potter.” Mrs Hopkirk sneered slightly. “But your file stated that you aren’t as vindictive as most of them. You have been required to bring your wand today, do you have it with you?”

Harry nodded and got his wand out of his pocket.

“Mr Saul Croaker, here, is an Unspeakable for the Department of Mystery. He will perform the Reverse Spell on your wand. This spell will force your wand to show an "echo" of the most recent spells it had performed.”

“Mr Potter, you must know that we will see every spell you have performed with this wand until your last Charm Practical Exam on June 4th meaning the Dancing Feet Spell performed on a pineapple.” Mr Tyler said.
“We must also inform you that you have every right to refuse,” Mrs Lee specified with a kind voice. “This procedure will give us a peek at your privacy. None of the spells would be noted on the hearing transcript if not the Hover Charm and you will not be questioned about them.”

“Except if there are any Unforgivable Curses or illegal spells in the list, of course!” Mrs Hopkirk cut her.

“Mafalda… he’s 12…” Mrs Lee sighed.

“Yeah right… but that’s the law anyway. Do you agree, Mr Potter?”

Harry did not know what the Unforgivable Curses were, but he was pretty sure he did not cast them. “O-ok…” Harry finally answered not really understanding why they said all that to him. He had nothing to hide anyway so he gave his wand to the man that had been standing in a corner since the beginning of the hearing.

The man did not take the wand but pointed his own to Harry’s and said “*Prior Incantato.*”

Harry’s holly wand shined slightly, and blue sparkles got out of it.

“Colloportus, the locking spell,” Mr Croaker stated loudly. Then white sparkles. “Caput Sicco, the drying charm.” The list continued for at least ten spells, some of which Harry remembered using during his fight with Quirrell. He really hoped that the discussion would not include that part because it was already generating a few frowns… And finally, his wand shot green sparkles. “Here we are! Tarantallegra, the Dancing Feet Spell,” Mr Croaker announced. “No Hover Charm performed.” He then gestured Harry that he could remove his wand. Harry hastily tucked it into his pocket while listening to the other adults.

“Well, it seems like Mr Potter was not the one performing the spell he had been accused of!” Mrs Lee smiled.

“He could have been using someone else wand!” Mrs Hopkirk noted.

Mrs Lee sighed again.

“Mr Potter, does any other witch or wizard live with you or was any other witch or wizard present at your place of residence on the evening of the 31st of July?” Mrs Hopkirk asked.

“No.”

“Mr Potter, we all know it was your birthday. Of course, you must have had some friends or family over?”

“No…” Harry answered again lowering his eyes.

“How do you explain the magical outburst we registered then?”

“Mafalda…” Mrs Lee sighed again.

“Please answer the question, Mr Potter.” Mr Tyler dismissed her.

Harry looked at them one by one, then at his feet. Adults never believed him anyway. “…there was… there was a House Elf…” he muttered.

“House Elves are not allowed in muggle housings, Mr Potter.”
“I didn’t ask him to come! I don’t even know him. He said his name was Dobby and he used the charm on my Aunt’s pudding cake… My relatives had… business relations over.”

“And why an Unknown House Elf would do something like that at your house?” Mrs Hopkirk asked doubtfully.

“I… I don’t know. He… he said that I shouldn’t go back to Hogwarts. He tried to get me expelled, I think…”

“Must be a prank from one of the other students…” Mr Tyler sighed. “Can we send a note to the House-Elves Regulation Office to know whose family this elf is related to?”

“No need.” Mr Malfoy spoke for the first time. His voice was grave and commanded respect. “It was ours. I clothed it in June.”

“May we know why?”

“He attempted to my son life as you could read in the official report I send in June.” Mr Malfoy said calmly but his voice stated for no more questions on the matter.

Harry stared at him. Dobby did something to Draco?? Was Draco okay? Did he write to him about it? Was he supposed to know?? Was Draco okay?????

“Are you saying that a free elf went after Harry Potter to get him expelled from Hogwarts??”

“I’m just saying that this elf had been freed two months ago and that my son would never have ‘pranked’ Mr Potter since they claimed to be friends. Could you confirm Miss King?”

“Wh… yeah!” The teenager exclaimed, surprised to be addressed. “They claimed to be friends on several occasions during the year. Harry Potter even defended Draco Malfoy in front of the whole school sometime this winter. They had ridden the Hogwarts Express back to London together.”

Lucius Malfoy nodded at her statement. “If you must know, the elf was also bounded to Hogwarts since I send it with my son last year, you might go and interview Dumbledore if you really want to investigate the matter further. As for today’s case, it seems that Mr Potter was not responsible for the Hover Charm he was accused to have used in front of Muggle. I think that means his appeal is receivable and the warning must be lifted.”

“Y-yeah… right. Your warning will be erased from your file, Mr Potter. You can leave now.”

Harry blinked. That was it? But he wanted to stay and ask Mr Malfoy about Draco. However, the adults seemed to still have things to discuss together and they asked him to leave. The door opened behind him, so he got up and… bowed at them clumsily and muttered a “Thank you… good day…” before going out, sending a last worried look to Mr Malfoy.

Mr Weasley was still waiting for him outside the room.

“How did it go?” he asked as soon as Harry joined him.

“It’s okay… they’ll delete the warning…”

“Well, that’s good news!” the red-haired man exclaimed happily.

“Yeah…”

It was okay. Draco’s dad would certainly not state something like that so calmly if Draco was not
okay. Maybe Dobby tried to trick Draco too and Mr Malfoy caught him and that was why he fired him – if it was what ‘to cloth’ meant… he should probably ask Neville about it.

Draco was certainly okay. He wrote the twins after all!

Harry tried his best to convince himself that there was nothing to worry about. Draco had loving parents and not everyone – especially amongst his friends – had that! He had more urgent matters to tend to.

“Mr Weasley?” Harry asked softly on their way back to the Ministry entrance.

“How many times do I have to tell you to call me Arthur, Harry?” Mr Weasley sighed playfully. “What is it?” he asked more seriously when he saw the way Harry pinched his lips.

“Can… Could we stop by muggle London on our way back? I need to make a call…” Harry said politely. He did not dare look at the adult. Mr Weasley seemed okay, but he was not used to asking favours to people…

“Of course, Harry! I would love to see one of these telephone working!”

“We will need Muggle money… We could stop by Gringotts’ and…”

“I can give you the money Harry! I have tons of Muggle money! Don’t tell Molly.” The man whispered before taking out several coin and bills from his pocket. “How much would it cost?”

“Oh… not much… I think less than 1£… 50p or something…” Harry answered but Mr Weasley did not react, so he took a one-pound coin in his hands and thanked him softly.

“I don’t get how Muggle money works anyway!” Mr Weasley laughed before putting his ‘Muggle Treasure’ back into his pocket.

They went through the fake telephone box again and stepped out in London streets near the Leaky Cauldron. Harry led Mr Weasley to the main street and spotted the nearest metro station. There was a newer red telephone box near it.

Mr Weasley followed him in and watched him put the coin in the machine. Harry explained how the telephone worked and how every phone had a unique phone number for other people to reach it. Harry took out the old business card from his pocket and dialled the number on it. The phone rang in his ear. He really hoped the number was still active when finally, someone picked up at the other end of the line.

“Elisabeth Travers, Social Services: Child welfare and foster placement speaking.”

Harry’s voice stayed stuck in his throat. He made it!

“Hello?” the voice called on the phone.

“Hello! I… I’m Harry Potter and I… I don’t know if you remember me, but I lived in Little Whinging in Surrey and I am friend with a foster girl there. June. June Islington.”

There was a silence at the other end of the line.

“I do remember you, Harry.” She answered with a colder voice.

“Oh… great. I was wondering… I know June had moved out because of her foster dad and all, but… I was wondering… Could you… could you give me her new address or a phone number
where I could contact her? Kate, her foster sister said that she couldn’t get it, and I didn’t manage to keep in touch while at school last year, and… and the situation with my Uncle and my Aunt is…”

“Are you in Little Whinging for the summer, Harry?”

“N-no… I’m at a friend right now… he’s from Devon. Well, not today. Today, I’m at London…”

“How long will you stay at London? I would like to meet; if it’s okay with you.”

“I… We’re about to leave, but… but I will be back on Wednesday. I need to do my school shopping with friends. I… I will be near Leicester Square.” Harry answered looking at the metro station entrance through the window.

“Will your Uncle or Aunt be there?”

“N-no… I’ll be with my friends and their parents.”

“Ok. Let’s say Wednesday at 11:00 am, we will meet at the Starbucks Coffee Shop across Leicester Square station. Could you confirm with your friends’ parents and call me back at this number if they’d rather meet at another time?”

“Ok! Will Ace be there? I mean June…” Harry could not stop himself from asking.

“…no. We need to talk first, Harry.”

“Oh… okay…” He said without hiding his disappointment.

“See you on Wednesday then.”

“Yes. Thank you, Mrs Travers. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Harry hung up the phone and a few coins tilted in the receiver. He took them and gave them back to Mr Weasley.

“Was that it? It’s bloody brilliant! Kind of like the floo network but you don’t need a floo or to get on your knees to talk! No ash or burned eyebrows! Brilliant!”

Harry eyed him but did not comment. Wizards had strange habits sometimes. They went back to the burrow by floo and Harry smiled at Percy who was – accidentally – studying in the living room and not in his bedroom for once.

“It went okay.” He said softly just before the twin burst in the room and launched rice at him. “What was that for???” he asked them laughing.

“What? Is that not what muggles do when someone gets out of prison?” Fred asked.

“That’s when they get married and walked out the church!” Harry laughed.

“Well! Congratulation on your wedding then!” George cheered happily throwing more rice at him.

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAATT??????????????????”

They all turned their heads to the screeching voice of the youngest sibling of the family. Ginny was gobsmacked, and tears were already forming in her brown eyes.
“T-to…to…w-who??” she spluttered in Harry’s way.

“What? No! No one! Your brothers are just acting silly!” Harry exclaimed but Ginny had already run away.

The twins rolled on the floor laughing and even Percy snorted with a smile behind his book. Harry tried to tell them that it was not funny but when Ron came in and fell on the floor because of the rice and asked them what the hell was about, it was the end of it.

Wednesday came soon enough and Harry was ecstatic. He had never been so close to seeing Ace again, but frankly speaking, the tone Mrs Travers used in the phone scared him a little bit. But maybe it was just the phone. Aunt Petunia always said that some people had different voices over the phone so maybe it was just that. He hoped it was just that.

Mrs Weasley was not too keen to let him go to Muggle London alone, and she said they had a lot of shopping to do in Diagon Alley, Ginny being a First Year and all. Harry tried to convince her that he would be okay, and it would not take long but she would have none of it until Percy volunteered to be Harry’s chaperon. The woman argued a little more but Perfect Prefect Percy was the only one of her children that she could not say no to.

Thus, Harry was standing in front of Leicester Square Station with a very nervous Percy at ten to eleven. Percy had never been to the Muggle world alone before, but he was far less transparent than his father about it. Harry pointed the newest coffee shop with a mermaid on the window at him, and he nodded slowly.

The shop was not as crowded as the street and Percy relaxed a little bit. Harry had changed two galleons in Muggle money at Gringotts and paid for two Frappuccinos. The barista – that was what the waiter called himself – said that it was their most popular drink and that it was totally appropriate for kids when Percy asked if there was coffee in it. They sat at a table in a corner and Percy settled down while drinking his iced beverage slowly.

It was milky and sweet, and soooo cold it froze his mind. Harry loved it. They were talking about how great it would be to make this kind of beverage out of pumpkin juice when Harry jumped to his feet fixing the lady that had just passed the door.

“Mrs Travers!” he called.

The social worker nodded at him and ordered a small coffee cup before sitting next to them.

“Hi, Harry.” She said softly and then eyed Percy who straightened up immediately.

“Good Morning. I’m Percy Weasley. I’m Harry’s Prefect at Hogwarts and my mother asked me to look after him this morning while she’s shopping for my younger siblings.” He threw in a quick voice.

Harry chuckled at his nervousness and explained a little further. “Hogwarts is our school and he is kind of in charge of my dormitory and a student representative. His little brother is in my year and is a friend of mine. I’m staying at their home since the beginning of August.”

“How old are you?” the woman asked Percy.

“I’ll be sixteen in two weeks,” the teenager answered, and she nodded approvingly, but her gaze darkened when she looked back at Harry.
“I’m glad you made new friends at school Harry, but I can’t say I’m very proud of you for how you managed your friendship with June.” She sighed, and Harry froze. “Why didn’t you tell her about the other school you were applying to? I got from your relatives that it is a school for… ‘peculiar’ students, and that you may not be very proud of it, but don’t you think June deserved the truth?”

“I…” Harry did not have the words. He had blamed himself for one year about that but hearing someone else accusing him was just… “I didn’t know about it until last summer. I didn’t get the opportunity to talk to A-June after I learned about it and… I tried to tell her!”

Mrs Travers sighed heavily. “Okay, Harry… If you want.” She shook her head slightly. “Did she tell you about Mr Smith?”

Harry lowered his eyes again. He did not know what had come out and what did not. He did not even know the specifics of the real situation. Ace never really told him. He never asked more because he understood how she felt…

“She… she always said that it was okay and that I shouldn’t worry because he wasn’t ‘hurting’ her…” he answered slowly without looking at the social worker.

“And you believed her?”

“I… She was my friend and she didn’t want to talk about it. She… She rarely had bruises and… of course, I was worried because sometimes she was so tired that… and… she told me… she told me she couldn’t sleep well at her house because… because sometimes her foster dad was in her bedroom when she wakes up in the middle of the night and… she said she hated it but that he did nothing and I thought… I thought he was just watching her and… and sometimes Aunt Petunia also watches Dudley sleeping so… and Ace does have a lot of nightmares so… maybe it was not…” Harry pinched his lips and looked away, it sounded like petty excuses out loud. He knew something was wrong. “She… she said she was okay as long as I let her sleep during lunch break. She never told me a lot about it… We were supposed to go to Sutton’s Grammar because it’s a boarding school and we could leave our house for a bit…” Harry admitted, looking at the ice in his plastic glass.

“Yet, you told me nothing!” Mrs Travers accused him. “I specifically told you that you can call me at any time if something bothered you, but you did not! I could have helped her out of there sooner!!”

“She asked me not to!!” Harry cried. “She always said that she was okay!”

“I thought she was your best friend, you must have seen that she was not okay!” The woman snapped back angrily. “I mean, what this man did to her was bad! Really bad, Harry! And you must have known because you told her you understood, don’t you?”

“I…” Harry felt sick. It was not that. It was not true.

“If she was your friends, why did you lie to her?” Mrs Travers accused. “Tell me, Harry. Why did you lie about your Uncle and your Aunt? Did you try to make her believe that you were the same so what she was living was okay? Did you do it to make you feel better? So that she worried about you instead of rightfully worrying about herself?” She sighed heavily. “I’ve seen a lot of abused kids in my career, Harry, and you’re not one of them.” She stated sounding like Snape. “Okay, you had a bad start in life, but did you really have to take it so far as to make her believe that you were sleeping in a cupboard and that your Uncle was hitting and starving you? Did you tell her all those stories so that she can relate more easily and gave you the attention you feel like you deserved? Make her so worried about you that she felt guilty about changing foster home and ‘leave you behind’ – if I might quote her words? Did you know that’s why she hid her condition for so long?????”
Harry lowered his shoulders more and more as she spoke. That was it then… it was his fault. He was trembling, and his eyes were burning with tears. The ice in his plastic glass seemed to grow larger and he put his hands one his laps. His nails were now slowly cutting through his palms when a bigger hand covered them.

“Mrs Travers,” Percy intervened. “I think you are mistaken, Harry is…”

“I know about your condition, Harry.” The social worker cut him with a sigh. “I know that mythomania is a pathological disorder, and I know there is obviously some part of it that you can’t control anymore. But I want you to understand that your actions – your lies, have consequences, and I do hope that you follow your treatment and your therapy sessions seriously. June… she loved you and she believed in you. She trusted you. You might the only person she’s ever trusted. She trusted you so much that she couldn’t father the idea that you did something like that to her.” The woman shook her head disbelievingly. “She preferred to believe that your uncle had beaten you to death and hidden your body somewhere than you going to another school without her. If it were not for that, we may never have known about Mr Smith.” She explained. “But it was still not enough because she decided to trade information on her in exchange of information on you. She would only talk about what this asshole did to her if we investigate your living situation! And she refused to believe us when we tried to explain to her that you might have lied. Smith only got 5 years in jail because she refused to testify if she didn’t see you safe and sound first. Of course, it’s not your fault if your Aunt had refused that we contact you in school, but Harry, do you understand what your lies had created? Why did you lie to her of all people????”

The woman sounded really upset but Harry could not bring himself to raise his eyes. If it were not for Percy’s reassuring hand on his, he would probably forget to breathe and to live all along.

“You’re a young man with a great future ahead of you, Harry, but those lies…” she sighed. “Your lies might have cost her her life. I hope you will remember that the next time you decide to make yourself interesting…”

The chair scraped the wooden floor. She was leaving. She did not tell him where Ace was. If she was okay now. If she was safe!

“Wait!” he called her back and the woman turned back to him. “Where… where is she now?”

Mrs Travers looked away seeming really tired. “We don’t know… We tried to place her in other foster homes, but she ran away every time. We didn’t find her last time she did… It was in March and… of course, she likes to say that she is resourceful and knows how to look after herself but… well, we all know what the life expectancy of a 10-year-old in London streets is… Maybe the cops will find her again one day, but I don’t think she’ll ever be the same if they do.” She sighed again. “You should move on with your life Harry, you’re still young and you made a mistake. A grave mistake with disastrous consequences. But you can still change, so learn from it please.” She turned back to the door and mumbled a last: “Bye, Harry.”

Harry sat back on his chair lifelessly. He did not even notice Percy’s arms around his shoulders. She was gone… Ace was gone…

“What is the life expectancy of a 10-year-old in London streets?” he asked lowly, but he already knew the answer or at least the implication behind those words.

‘Your lies might have cost her her life.’

She implied that he killed her. Ace might be dead because nobody ever believed his truth…
“Harry?” he heard Percy calling for him. “Harry, we need to go back to Diagon Alley. I’ll tell mum what happened, and I’ll bring you straight back home, okay?”

She might be dead because of him…

“Come on.”

Harry was tucked on his feet and dragged out of the coffee shop. His legs just followed Percy’s lead who firmly clinched his hand in his. Harry did not notice the change of scenery around him. They entered a very loud place then they were back outside in an equally noisy street.

“Mum!” he heard Percy calling.

There was a fuss around Harry. Fred and George’s voice. Ron’s and Hermione’s too. And then, another farther away.

“Har’?”

Harry shivered and looked up. Silver worried eyes looked back him. Sure, there was the platinum blond hair and the sharp face, but he didn’t care. He was his friend too and he also tried to help him, and Dobby tried to kill him, and it was also his fault. He might have died because of him. Just like Ace.

“Draco…” he sobbed softly before launching himself into his friend’s arms.

“Harry? What is it? What happened?” Draco asked frantically in his ear.

“She’s dead… She died because of me…” Harry cried softly against the blond shoulder. He tightened his embrace. He would not let him go. He’ll never let him go and die because of him too.

She died… he killed her…

* * *

Draco Malfoy had always craved for attention, for the spotlight. His parents had repeated to him, times and times again, how unique, beautiful, and better than everyone else he was. Of course, he also had a name to sustain, he was the Malfoy Heir after all. However, at that very moment, Draco Malfoy only wanted one thing: that those people stop staring at them!

Draco stood there in the middle of Diagon Alley. One of his best-friends crying his heart out in his arms. He did not know what to do, how to help him. He was far too aware of the number of eyes turning in their way and of the whispers starting to spread around. They recognized the Boy-Who-Lived, the famous Harry Potter. However, he also knew that Gilderoy Lockhart was also signing books in Flourish and Blotts a few meters away and that a Daily Prophet journalist was covering the event. Draco did not want this kind of spotlight. He did not want for his friend to suffer this kind of spotlight. For him, he was just Harry now and he needed him.

“Harry… you need to calm down…” he mumbled in his friend’s ear, smoothing slowly the back of his head.
It was strange to have Harry this close. Harry hated to be this close. Unless he felt really really bad… And Draco knew there was only one person who could make Harry this way.

“Something happened with your Muggle Best Friend?” he asked slowly.

Instead of answering, Harry’s grip tightened around his chest and his friend cried even louder – well, thankfully, his cries were muted by Draco’s coat, but still! Draco felt helpless. Thus, he did the only thing he ever did as a kid with reliable parents.

“Father?” he called with a voice which pretended to be steady.

His father appeared immediately next to him and crouched to be at his eyes level. They shared a look through Harry’s black mop of hair. Draco thought about getting away, somewhere safe and secluded. Home. The image of Malfoy Manor appeared clearly in his mind. His father nodded understandingly.

Draco then saw him raise a hand to touch Harry but as soon as he approached the skin of the Gryffindor, Harry flung away, dragging Draco with him. They almost fell into the pavement if Draco had not stabilized them and tightly clasped Harry’s body against his.

“No…” Harry was whimpering. “No, no, no, no…”

Draco tried to hush him softly before sending a look of total despair to his father. The man had stepped back and hustled a red-haired girl with a damage cauldron and old books lying around on the ground.

“What did you try to do to the boy, Malfoy!!” A small and chubby woman with red hair and dispatched clothes screamed at his father.

“Good day to you too, Mrs Weasley. I was merely attempting to address my son’s friend obvious distress.” His father answered with his smug voice, picking up some of the books to give them back to the girl.

“Non-sense. Harry is a good boy! He has nothing to do with any of your sorts!”

Draco looked at them with awe – he had never heard anyone insulting his father so openly before, then he looked back down at Harry’s who seemed to shrink at the sound of the screaming adults.

“Come here Harry, we’ll get you home.” The woman said with a friendly voice, grabbing Harry’s arm.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

Harry’s scream echoed in the Alley, shutting out all other conversations in process. Draco immediately moved them both to place himself between Harry and the woman. He instinctively bent his back as to protect Harry further from any possible blow. What was going on?! Why did he feel so scared? He was in Diagon Alley, it was the Weasleys’ mother, she could do nothing to them.

“It’s enough Mrs Weasley!” his father’s voice ordered behind his back. “The boy needs to be taken care of, and he obviously wants to stay with my son. I will take him somewhere he can get appropriate assistance.”

“You will take the boy nowhere, Malfoy! I’ll will floo call Dumbledore!”

“Please tell me how the Headmaster of a school is an appropriate assistance for a child in
psychological distress?” His father snapped.

“Harry is not…” the woman started again.

“Leave it, Mum!” a teenage boy voice cut her short. Draco thought it might be one of the twins, but he did not know them well enough to be sure. “I’m sure Mr Malfoy won’t do anything bad to Harry!” The same voice continued. “Harry IS Draco’s friend, and Draco really cares about him, so of course Mr Malfoy won’t harm his son’s best friend!!” There were menaces in the tone used by the teen.

“This has nothing to do with you, boys! I’m the adult and I know best what…”

“Mum…” a slightly graver voice stopped her again. “Mr Malfoy has access to the best healer in the country, you know we cannot offer that to Harry. And we need to finish Ginny’s school shopping. I’m sure Mr Malfoy will take Harry somewhere safe where he can cool down and get himself together again.” There was a pause and Draco heard the woman mumbling something. “Lord Malfoy, do you promise to bring Harry back to the Burrow before 9 tonight?”

“I will if the healer judges him stable enough to go.” Draco’s father answered in his ‘Lord voice’. There were shuffles behind Draco’s back “Otherwise, I will let you know and leave Mr Potter in the care of St Mungo’s best medical professionals.” He added certainly to cut off a new wave of insults.

“That seems fair,” the graver teenage voice answered.

“I’m still flooing Dumbledore!” Mrs Weasley added.

Soft steps approached Draco then, and the reassuring hand of his father radiated in his back.

“Draco,” the man called softly in his ear. “I will apparate you. Hold him tight.”

Draco nodded, and his father put his second hand above his on Harry’s back. Soon, he felt the usual shrieking sensation of apparition. Harry did not seem so used to it, however. He gripped Draco’s body madly during the trip. As soon as they arrived at the manor, Harry moved away from them and fell to the ground to throw up.

“Dad?” Draco squeaked worriedly, kneeling next to his friend who seemed to have lost all colour in his face. With a wave from the man’s wand, the sickness and its disgusting smell disappeared from the ground.

“Tipsy.” His father called and a pop resonated next to them. “A Smoothing draught and a Calming Draught dosed for an under-25kg kid. Now.”

“Yes, Master.” The house-elf answered diligently before popping out and back again a few seconds later.

The man kneeled on the ground next to them and held out a light pink vial to Harry. “Here, drink that, Heir Potter. It’ll smooth your stomach and made you feel better.” Harry nodded absentmindedly and bottom-upped the vial. The man then held on the second vial and Draco recognized its light blue.

“To calm you down.” He explained softly.

Draco looked up at his father. He had never heard him use that tone with anyone except his mother and him. It worked well enough with Harry who drank the second vial without a word.

They stayed on the ground for long minutes. Harry’s forehead was resting against Draco’s shoulder, he was breathing heavily, and would still sniff and wailed lowly for time to time.
“Are you sure it’s strong enough?” Draco asked. “I weight way more than 25kg.” he analysed.

“And he’s way lighter than you.” His father answered with his mask on which made Draco frowned. He usually never put his mask on when they were at the manor without a guest, and Harry could hardly be considered an attentive guest right now. “I’m flooing the healer.” The man announced getting up.

“No!” Harry exclaimed suddenly startling Draco. The black-haired boy raised his head to look at Lucius but looked down immediately. “There’s no need.” He muttered.

“Mr Potter, I’m not sure you’re in any state to make that call after the scene you just performed.” The man snapped back.

Harry lowered his head a little more and Draco glared at his father. He did not have time to state his mind though because his friend had started trembling again.

“Please… I don’t want to…” he mumbled. “I… I don’t… the sickness had nothing to do with… I’m sorry about Diagon Alley I just… Please… no doctor.”

Draco hushed him softly. He tried to rub his back, but Harry tensed away. Draco refrained from sighing while noticing his friend was back to his true self. Instead, he looked at his father.

“Please Dad, if he really doesn’t want to, we can’t…”

“If he’s sick, he needs to see a healer. I’m not having Harry Potter being deprived of basic medical assistance on my watch!”

“I don’t need assistance… I’m okay. I just… I just freak out because…. The Calming Draught is enough… I’m okay now.” Harry tried to look up again, but his gaze stayed stuck around Lucius’s chest area.

“Dad, it’s okay. He… he had panic attacks. He had one in December too and the medi-witch let him out with just a Calming Draught.”

His father eyed him critically. “Is that supposed to convince me that he doesn’t need help?”

“Please, Dad.” Draco tried again.

Eventually, Lucius sighed deeply. “Fine. But you’ll be both under watch this afternoon and if anything happens, there’ll be no discussion.” He stormed away after that and Draco watched him walk to the Manor door.

“Sorry…” Harry muttered next to him.


“He’s mad because of me… I… I’ll take the blow if… It’s my fault, after all, there’s no need to punish you.”

“What blow?”

Harry did not answer and just pitched his cheek looking at the grass.

“Don’t worry about him. He’s just grumpy because Mum is out for two days because of Black Family business and he’s always grumpy when she’s not here with him!” Draco explained with a smile.
“...okay...” Harry answered looking away. “I’m still sorry though... for how I acted... I... I don’t know why...”

“It’s okay, Harry. It’s about her, right? Your Muggle Best Friend... The Prefect Weasley was explaining to his mother that your meeting with some muggle woman went badly when we saw you in Diagon...”

Harry nodded but refuse to meet his gaze. It was probably not a good idea to press the matter now. Even if Draco was dying to know. Harry had seemed so lost when he had seen him in the alley. As if his whole world had just collapsed before his eyes. Draco wanted to ask but Neville’s voice was scolding him inside his head not to do it now.

“Are you okay?”

Harry’s question brought him back to the present and he focused back on the two emeralds that were watching him worriedly.

“uhh... yeah... why?”

“... at the hearing... oh, I don’t know if you know. I got a warning for using magic in front of muggle, but it wasn’t me so Percy – the Prefect Weasley – told me to appeal, and I did, and I got a hearing in the Ministry, and your father was there...”

“Yeah, he told me. Because of Dobby, right? I’m so sorry it put you into troubles. I don’t know what got to it.”

Harry shook his head to dismiss his apology and continued. “Well, at the hearing, your father told them that Dobby attempted at your life and that’s why he was ‘clothed’. I think that means ‘fired’.”

Draco frowned. “It’s ‘it’ not ‘he’. House-elves are not human...” He corrected his friend. “And, yes, it means ‘fired’ or more specifically ‘freed’ from the Family’s magic. But, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Dobby did nothing to me. Dad told me he clothed it a few days after I came back from Hogwarts but that’s all. I’ll ask him about it later...”

“Don’t!” Harry stopped him. He looked terrified but quickly turned his face away. “I don’t want to put you into more troubles with your father...” He mumbled.

Draco looked at his friend. Something felt terribly wrong with him. Maybe he should have let his father call the healer.

“I’ll not get into troubles for asking questions about myself,” Draco stated softly. “Harry? Did Dobby get you into troubles? I mean, not with the Ministry, but with your family. You told us that they hated magic, and... well, the Ministry thought you did magic in front of them...”

Harry looked deeply at his feet – as if he was thinking about the answer he could give to this simple question. He took at least five seconds before opening his mouth again and Draco knew that whatever he would say would be a lie.

“No... They just grounded me to my room... The Weasleys came to take me less than a week later anyway so... Don’t worry. I’m okay.”

Draco was biting his inner cheek not to accuse his friend of lying and call his father immediately for him to see the healer. However, he knew that he would hurt Harry’s feeling if he did something like that now. Harry would not forgive him. He secretly wished Neville was there. Neville had always
been better at manoeuvring Harry…

“Want to go to my room?” Draco said for a change of topic.

Harry nodded, so Draco got up and offered him his hand to help him out. Harry accepted it and kept it even when they began to walk to the manor. Draco tried his best to hide the fact that it was making him ecstatic. He still felt the stupid smile blooming on his face. Unfortunately, this sudden happiness made him remember gloomier thoughts he had had about his friend since the beginning of summer.

“I thought you were mad at me…” Draco said softly as they were walking through the main corridor.

Harry stopped looking at the pictures in the wall and turned his face to him.

“Why?”

“Well… you never answered my letters… And I get that you didn’t answer Neville’s either, so it was surely your relatives that did not let you… I mean we even tried by this thing you used all year… ‘Muggler Smuggler’? Well… It’s just… We were worried and then I wrote the twins and they told me they were worried too because you didn’t answer them, their stupid brother or Granger either, and then they told me that they went to get you and that you were safe at their home but you still didn’t write so I guess that it was not just your relatives but also because of what I wrote in my letters and…”

“I didn’t get your letters!” Harry cut him. “Dobby stole them. I didn’t get any letter since the end of school term!”

“Oh…” was the only decent thing Draco managed to say. “Why didn’t you tell us when you went to the Weasleys?”

He regretted his last question. Harry’s mood had darkened again, and he looked like he was going to be sick again.

“I… I didn’t know what to write.” He finally explained. “I didn’t know if or what you wrote me and… I was afraid that you might think that I was back at ignoring you, or that I was purposely hurting Neville again, and that you were mad at me so… I wanted to apologize but I didn’t have the words and… Sorry.”

Draco said nothing at first. Harry seemed genuinely sorry, but his words were still hurtful. Why was it so hard for him to just tell them the truth? “You should write Neville. He’s worried sick.” He said softly, resuming his walk to his room.

“Hum.” Harry nodded pensively before following him.

His hand was no longer holding his – and it was a shame – but it would be too awkward to just grab it back.

“What did you write into your letters? Why did you think I would be mad?” Harry’s soft voice came behind him.

“Nothing… just…” Draco sighed. “I was telling you that I was thinking about running for the Slytherin Quidditch team next year, probably as a seeker, and I was asking you if you were okay with it…”

Draco tried his best not to turn and look at his friend. Of course, he had had two months of sulking during which he had repeated to himself that he did not care about what Harry thought because it
was his life and he had always wanted to be a seeker. But still... He would feel better if his friend was okay with it. Neville told him that Harry would not mind, but it was different from Harry actually stating it!

“Cool!” was Harry’s immediate answer. “But I need to warn you right now. I won’t go easy on you! Wood would kill me if I do!”

A genuine smile irradiated Draco’s face and he looked at his friend with shiny eyes. “I didn’t bet on it! I will defeat you square and fare, you’ll see!”

“Don’t be so arrogant, you newbie!” Harry laughed mischievously. “Don’t forget that I’m the younger seeker in a century and I ended a match in less than 5 minutes last year!”

“It’s all just Gryffindor favouritism and it was a match against Hufflepuff! There’s no pride in that!” Draco puffed.

“Don’t be mean to the Puff!” Harry warned him with a smile. “Neville’s dad was a Puff after all!”

“Yeah but Neville is not here and luckily, his mum was a lioness otherwise… otherwise, I don’t what we could do for him…”

“You’re mean…” Harry laughed, and Draco followed him.

They spent their afternoon playing around. When they arrived in Draco’s room, sandwiches and lemonade were waiting for them. Draco showed most of his games to Harry, not even managing to hide the more shameful ones from his youth. Harry did not make fun of him, however. He listened to him telling him the stories around each of them, asking him how they worked, what was the magic behind them, admitting that he did not get magical toys growing up since he did not know that he was a wizard and so on…

Far too soon, Tipsy, his father personal house-elf, popped into his room to tell them that it was time for Harry to go. To Draco’s delight, Harry hugged him goodbye before flooing away. It was only later that day, at an hour when Draco was supposed to be heading to sleep that he softly knocked at his father’s study.

“Enter.” His father’s voice answered from the other side.

Draco did so and looked at his father working at his desk. He seemed busy, but he really needed to talk to him.

“Dad?”

His father sighed softly and pushed the papers he was working on aside. “Yes Draco, what is it?”

“Harry told me that you clothed Dobby because it attempted at my life. Is it true?”

His father watched him intensively and Draco shivered, understanding that it was.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked without hiding the betrayal he was feeling.

His father sighed and moved away from his desk. “Come here, Draco.” He called him in his softer voice and Draco almost ran to him.

His father gently combed his hair that was not styled since he just got out of the bath and smiled sadly at him. They were not really tactile in his family. Well, not since he had turned 6. Plus, his
father had always been colder than his mother even if Draco knew both loved him deeply.

“I know that you think you’re a grown-up now, but there are some things that you’re still too young to know about, and your mother and I decided that we didn’t want to worry you with that. I caught Dobby before it could do anything, and I clothed it, so it couldn’t do anything else. You’re safe.”

“But it went after Harry!”

“I know. And no, I don’t know why.” He continued before Draco could ask him. “If you must know, the Ministry did open an investigation.”

Draco nodded but stayed within his father’s reach anyway.

“Is there anything else?” his father asked gently.

Draco clenched his fists. Could he tell him? He was worried, and he had always counted on his parents no matter what growing up… But after what happened with Uncle Sev’ at Yule…

“It’s about Harry Potter, right?”

Draco looked up and there was so much understanding in his father eyes that he took a step ahead and suddenly he was in his father’s arms which did not happen since… since very long ago. The tears fell naturally down his cheeks and after a second of hesitation, his father held him tight.

“I think… I think they hurt him…” he sobbed. “The muggles he lives with. I asked him if he got into troubles with them because of Dobby and he lied… he lied about being okay and about just having been grounded…”

His father’s arm tightened around him and he could not stop anymore.

“When you left earlier he told me that he could ‘take the blow’ for me if you were mad… He thought that you could hit me because I took his side and that made you mad… He really thought that you could hit me…”

“I would never hit you, Draco!” His father said horrified.

“I know!!” Draco cried louder. “I know but he was so… He thinks that it’s normal to be hit when an adult is mad right? That’s why he didn’t want you to go to the muggles last December to ask them about Yule break… Because he was afraid that they’d get mad and that they’d hit his friend because he was not there himself… It’s wrong, Dad… it’s very very wrong…”

“I know, Draco. I know.”

Draco cried long and loud. It was so strange to be in his father arms like that but also so reassuring. He felt bad to impose him that… His father probably thought that he wished his mother were there to take care of him.

“I’ll talk to Severus again. I think he’s mistaking about Potter, and that your concerns were accurate…” His father said after long minutes.

“Uncle Sev’ hates Harry… He had been really cruel to him… we fought because of him…”

“I know… Severus and Harry’s father has… history. And I think he’s not really objective when it comes to his old nemesis’s son…” His father explained. “But he needs to be a grown-up from time to time and, regarding Harry Potter… You’re right, there is something wrong and I think he got further
than just occasional beating… he’s far too small for his age…”

Draco sniffed and moved back to frowned at his father. “Maybe his parents were just small too…” he tried to explain not understanding what the man was implying.

“James Potter was only a few centimetres shorter than me,” his father said. “And I didn’t know his mother that well, but I didn’t remember her as being very short next to her husband…” He shook his head. “No Draco, there’s something wrong there too. He was far too lightweight, that’s why I misbalanced the side-along apparition. I thought he would be more or less the same weight as you, but he was at least 5 to 10 kg lighter.”

“I’m not big though…” Draco stated pensively.

“No, you’re not.” His father confirmed but did not elaborate.

After long minutes, Draco finally managed to get himself together and looked his father straight in the eyes.

“Will you help him?”

His father did not answer immediately and sighed eventually. “I’ll try but it’ll not be easy.”

“Why??”

“Because he’s the Boy-Who-Lived and we are Malfoys.” His father stated matter-of-factly. “You saw how that Weasley woman reacted when we just tried to take him away to see a healer? That’s how the whole light society will react if I try and act carelessly!”

Draco frowned. “He’s my friend.”

“I know, and you’ve been a really good friend today, Draco. I’m proud of you.”

The compliment took him short and he blushed away. He heard his father laughed softly at him and was ready to scold him, but the man’s hand came and caringly fixed his hair again.

“I promise you, I’ll try. If we can’t help him, I’ll find someone that this dumb society will find more appropriate to take care of him, okay?” Draco nodded, and Lucius smiled. “But it still isn’t going to be easy…”

“…why?” Draco whined.

“Because Albus Dumbledore himself is the one spreading around the tale about the Boy-Who-Lived’s far too loving and spoiling Muggle family…” Lord Malfoy ended in a dark tone.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, sorry for the late update... I hope this chapter isn't too long. Please tell me what you think!
Thank you for reading!
When Harry came back from the Malfoys’, he had thought that the worst was behind him and that he was now detached enough to put himself together and manage his guilt… Well, that was before the Calming Draught wore off.

They were all playing wizarding chest in the living room after dinner when everything seemed to become darker and darker around him. He could almost hear Ace screaming his name in a grim and cold street of London, sobbing her heart out. Voldemort’s laugh.

“…ry? Harry?”

Harry looked up at Ron.

“It’s your turn!” his friend told him.

Harry looked down at the game. It seemed so useless. So selfish, being there in a warm and dry room while Ace was somewhere unknown and unsafe because she tried to find him, and no one believed her… Maybe she was still looking for him right now!

“Harry!” Ron called again impatiently.

“I… I’m tired…” Harry mumbled. He could not do it. He could not pretend he did not know. “I… I think I’m going to go to bed…” He tried to get up despite his shaking legs and burning eyes.

“What?!! You can’t leave the game as it is!”

Harry froze and looked at the game again. His vision was getting blurry. He did not have the strength for that now… He just wanted to isolate himself somewhere before he broke down. Maybe he should go back to London and look for her… That was what she would have done for him.

“I’ll take his place!” Percy announced, clapping his book.

Harry was about to thank him, but his voice got caught in his throat. He needed to breathe. It was important that he breathed… He hoped Ace was still breathing too…

‘Well, we all know what the life expectancy of a 10-year-old in London streets is…’

“We’re tired too!”

“Going to bed sounds like a wonderful idea!”

“Coming Harry?” the two similar voices echoed in the room without waiting for an answer.

Suddenly, two sets of hands were pushing him to the stairs. Harry just follow the flow, not really noticing where the twins were leading him.

A door slammed distantly as he was sat on a bed. Somewhere in London, another door slammed, and not so friendly hands were tossing Ace’s body into a dark corner…

“Still there, Harry?”
“Here… it’s not as strong as a Calming Draught but it should help you have a peaceful sleep…”

Harry looked at the small vial that was set in his hand. Drops were falling onto his arms. It was selfish. Ace did not have anything to keep her from worrying about him last September. She had been alone when nobody believed her because of him.

“Don’t worry, it’s not one of our experimental products.”

“It’s real Potion for Dreamless Sleep. We brew it last year, Snape gave us an O…”

“Well he gave us an EE, but he told us afterwards that we’d have got an O if we were snakes…”

“Which, for the record, he told us he would deny completely if anyone ever asks him if he ever said that!”

“Percy confirmed that it was okay too.”

“Come on, Harry.”

He was shaking. Harry noticed it because the purple liquid was trembling in the vial. There was no way Ace had had this kind of help… He had left her alone… It was his fault.

Soon, he could not see anything anymore because his glasses were filled with mist and tears.

‘Your lies might have cost her her life.’

“Bottom-up, Harry!” the voice told him, and a hand raised his so the vial touched his lips.

He sniffed and drank the potion. It was tasteless. Or maybe he could not taste anything anymore. Someone took the empty vial from him.

“Okay. You will fall asleep soon.”

“You shouldn’t have nightmares. You will feel better tomorrow.”

“Do you want us to bring you back to your room or to help you in your pyjamas?”

Harry shook his head. He didn’t want anyone to touch him. If they saw his back, he would be in trouble again… He wanted to be left alone. He deserved to suffer. Ace had suffered so much… she was maybe still suffering if she was not already…

Harry cowered on the bed, sobbing lowly. He didn’t want Uncle Vernon to hear. If he woke him up, he’ll be in so many troubles. He didn’t want to be wiped again. Ace was not there to help him heal up anymore. Nobody had been there to help her heal up…

She had called for him…

He failed her.

Harry barely noticed that a blanket had been drawn upon him. Keeping him warm and safe. He slowly stopped sobbing when sleep claimed him.

The twins had been right. He had not got any nightmares that night… or any dream at all either.
However, he did not feel better the next morning.

He woke up in a strange bed. He opened his eyes to see the twins sleeping soundlessly in the second bed. Then, he remembered, and he decided to shut down.

He stayed in bed for two days. He just got up to go to the bathroom and to say ‘hi’ to Mrs Weasley around dinner time. He told her he had a cold and she told him to rest with a pitying smile. The twins let him stay in their room during that time. They did not joke or insist he laughed with them. They were just there from time to time, asking him if he needed anything. Ron was not as understanding. He asked him to go out flying with him few times a day, complaining about the fact that he stayed in his brothers’ room and not his, even if ‘He was is BEST FRIEND’.

Every time he said that, Harry went back hating himself. No, he was not his ‘Best Friend’. He never was. Neville and Draco could claim the title now… even if he had been awful with them all year and was still convinced that he had put Draco into trouble with his last scene. Had Ace been searching for him at the same moment that he decided to open up to other people? Has she been fighting to make people believe his story while he was just deciding to bury the truth from everyone else, laughing around in the Great Hall?

A few days later, Harry was lying down on Fred’s bed again. It was raining outside, and he had been dragging on and out of sleep for a few hours. There were sounds in the room. The twins were there… Percy too…

“… answer from Dumbledore,” Percy said.

“What did he say?”

There was a long sigh and the sound of parchment being unfold.

“Is he serious?!!” One of the twins exclaimed louder and one of the others shushed him immediately.

There were a silence and Harry did not move. There were probably thinking that he was sleeping, and they did not want to wake him up. He did not want to face them either.

“… I mean, you told him about what we saw?” the twin’s lower voice continued. “The locks, the blood, the bucket?!!”


“There is nothing to worry about. I can assure you that Mr Potter’s relatives had taken perfect care of him for years. As a young man with so many brothers, you must certainly understand that pre-adolescence is a difficult time for every boy. Mr Potter might have fought with his relatives occasionally and be grounded to his room, just as you might have from time to time,” the twin said, imitating another voice Harry guessed must have been Dumbledore’s. “This occasional punishment can hardly be called abuse. Outsiders should not judge one’s educational choice for their ward.”

“How can he be so… so… RAAAH!”

Something fell to the floor, probably books.

“George…” Fred tried to calm him down.

“He’s so condescending! ‘not even considering anything that we told him!” George continued
They shut up for a few minutes and Harry hoped that they would change of subject. It was strange to hear people worrying about him behind his back like that. He was not used to it. Usually, they would rather speak about how much he must have deserved it… without knowing… just like Dumbledore. Only Ace knew.

“… I… I could write to the ministry…” Percy proposed. “They… I know a Gryffindor graduate that started working on the Childcare Office. He used to be in Charlie’s year.”

“Maybe contact Malfoy too. He said that his dad…”

Oh no! They would not!! If they did, they would just end up like Ace, accused of being liars, of having been deceived by him! They had been so kind to him – like he had always imagined real brothers would look like! He could not do that to them!!

“Please don’t…” Harry muttered, and the three older boys stopped talking at once. He straightened up a bit and looked at them.

George seemed upset, Fred was holding his shoulders, a parchment into his other hand. Percy had a worried frown on his face that made him look older.

“Sorry Harry. Did we wake you up?” Fred asked.

Harry did not like to see the twins so serious, it did not fit them well… It was strange. “It’s okay…” he said softly, looking away.

This too was his fault. He was destroying the lives of so many people… People could not be themselves when he was around because he was a freak… Ace had not told him the truth about her foster dad because she thought he had it worse… It was his fault. If he had been normal… if he had not been such a freak, she would have talked and be saved earlier… then she would not be dead.

His hand naturally found his forearm and scratched it lightly. The burning sensation was soothing. It kept his mind off other things. He remembered when Ace would stop him from doing that, looking at him straight in the eyes. Then she would tell him that it was okay, that she was there. But she was not there anymore, and it was his fault. He was a freak… he should try harder to pretend to be normal, so he would not spoil any other person’s life.

“You don’t have to do all that…” he said nodding to the letter in Fred’s hand.

The brothers shared a look and Percy was the one to talk. “Harry… We don’t believe what that muggle woman told you. We don’t think that you lied to your friend and even if you did, what happened to her is not your fault. She was wrong to imply something like that, you are just a kid.”

Being a kid did not make you less guilty, Harry thought but he said nothing. He just eyed a second to his Prefect before looking away. He did not want them to say that it was not his fault. It was. Just like his parents, just like his mum… Voldemort did say that he had not intended to kill her, but she insisted that he did in exchange for his life. He did not ask for that… He did not ask for anyone to die for him. He did not ask Ace to lie about her foster dad to protect him or to stay with him. He did not ask but he did not stop them either… They did it for him. They did it because of him. It was his fault.

The burn on his forearm brought him back to the Burrow. The three older boys were still looking at him with pity in their eyes.

Harry sighed. He was the only one who could prevent them from dying for him like everyone else.
“You don’t know what it was like back there…” He said in a low voice. “They don’t like me, and I don’t like them but… Maybe Dumbledore is right… maybe it was not that bad…”

“Harry! We went to your house! You saw what you were going through!!!” George said.

“You saw nothing.” Harry reckoned in a calm voice. “You’re just overreacting.”

“Your window was doomed!” Fred reminded him.

“… it was broken. It was better to shut it close than to leave it open…” Harry answered. “It’s cold outside at night.”

“The locks on your door?” Percy tried.

“… I sleepwalk. I fell on the stairs once. It was for my safety.”

“They starved you!!” Fred interjected.

“… I got fat at Hogwarts… I was just trying a new diet.” His nails were scratching and scratching again. “My own decision…”

He knew they did not really believe him but if he kept on, maybe they would or that at least they would stop. He hoped they would stop soon.

“Harry! There was a name tag with your name on it, written by a kid, and a mattress on the cupboard where they kept your trunk,” George sounded desperate. “They used to keep you there too, right??”

Harry paused. What could he say? What did the Dursleys say to the police when they came to their house? He shook his head slowly. “… na… just stupid things between siblings… You know, ‘it’s not yours if your name is not on it’? Well, for some reasons I claimed the cupboard under the stairs… But, mind you, Dudley claimed the toilet so… Just child play.”

The burning was pulsing peacefully in his arm. It was okay. They will stop asking. They had not seen anything anyway. Just the environment and it was night time. The Dursleys had managed to dupe the muggle social services, he could easily dupe his friends!

“Why did you keep a bucket in your room? They don’t let you go to the bathroom?” Fred guessed cautiously.

“… you came at a bad time… the toilet was broken. The plumber was supposed to come in the very next day.”

The twins and Percy were looking at each other. Harry hoped they would not get too mad with him. Of course, they had every right to be! But still… Uncle Vernon always said that boys their age did not know their strength…

“Harry…” Percy had come close to him and kneeled to look at him straight in the eyes. “Fred and George told me that they had seen blood on your sheets back there. Care to explain that?”

“I…” Harry looked down. How to explain blood without ringing an alarm bell. His nails were scratching his arm, waiting for an answer.

He remembered Ace scratching her own arm one day in class. She was fixing Susie, another girl, with an expression of utter revulsion in her face. Susie was biting her nails. Ace hated when people were playing with their nails. Harry did not understand what was so awful about it, but Susie was
biting her nails so much that she started bleeding and the teacher noticed at some point and ordered her to stop because she was staining her test sheet. The teacher had just seemed annoyed, not so concerned with the blood in itself.

“I bit my nails when I’m bored,” Harry explained raising his hand as to prove it. He had not expected his nails to be actually covered in blood. He stayed frozen until his hand started shaking on its own. What the hell?! Where did that blood come from?! Could he lie so well that Magic made his lies came true?!*****

Harry shivered when two hands grabbed his wrist and elbow. He focused back on Fred and George looking carefully at his bleeding forearm.

“It’s okay Harry,” George said softly. “We won’t ask anymore…”

“I…”

“Don’t worry, Mum will heal that at the drop of a hat!”

“NO!” Harry could not stop himself from screaming. Adults would always ask questions and never believed him when they did not like his answers! He did not have an answer for that! He could not find an answer to that!!!! Where did that blood come from?! Why?!!

The three Weasleys stayed silent and Harry became very conscious of their eyes on him.

“I… I don’t want her to worry…” Harry tried to explain. It was not true. He did not want her to find out! She would get so mad when she would understand that he was lying to her sons and he made his own arm bleed out… Maybe that was what the Dursleys told the social services… that all his bruises were self-inflicted… Maybe they were right…

Oh… he was shaking again.

“Okay… Okay…” Fred calmed him down. “We should have emergency ointment somewhere in there…”

He started to rummage through the room until he found a medium size vial.

“It will burn a bit,” George warned him when Fred come back with a yellowish liquid. “It’s marigold flower oil, it’s great to sanitize the wound…”

“Ready?” Fred asked.

“Put a cloth under his arm, or you will soak the bed!” Percy stopped him with a sigh before getting an old shirt laying on the floor and giving it to George. He also found cotton in a jar. “If we are doing it the muggle way, we should at least pretend to do it seriously.” He sighed.

Once they were ready. Fred asked again if Harry was ready and Harry nodded. Everything rather than letting an adult know!!

He let out a low moan when the liquid touched his burning skin, but the smell of the potion immediately brought back memories of stupid jokes and big primary school bathroom. The first time Ace had talked about how far the ‘Evil Old Witch’ really went…

A soft cloth was now caressing his skin and Harry looked at the bandage Percy was fixing around his arm. “Do you have an ochre pen?” the soon-to-be 6th year asked his brothers.
George nodded and searched the room again before giving him what he had asked for.

Percy secured the bandage, sat next to Harry on the bed before taking his forearm again and settled it on his knees. He slowly drew a big symbol on the bandage over the wound. “It’ll help you heal faster…” he explained without breaking his focus.

“W-what?!!” Harry’s coaxed.

How many times had he made fun of Ace because she kept on drawing on every bandage or first aid plaster she managed to put on his skin?! It was a real thing?? A real magical thing?!!

“It’s a healing rune,” George explained.

“Some healers say that it’s better than overuse of healing charm since it taps on your own magic to heal and not external power,” Fred added.

“Well, it’s a bit controversial… not so used anymore in St Mungo’s…”

“It’s… is it… common knowledge? Do the muggles know about that?!!!” Harry cut them.

“Well, it’ll be useless for muggles since they don’t have personal magic to tap in but… well, it’s old magic really, it’s quite old fashion. Maybe it was already around when our peoples were more… interconnected.” Percy clarified.

“Ace… my friend…” Harry supplied. “She used to draw the same kind of stuff on my bandage whenever I got hurt…”

“Oh… so you do get hurt often!” the twins picked up in synch.

Harry shut his mouth and looked down at his arm. Crap, he made a mistake… he should not have said that. Now, they would go on and on again…

Thankfully, Percy glared at his brothers and the twin left it as it was.

“Do you think… she could be a witch?” Harry asked softly a few minutes later without daring to hope more about it. “It’s witchcraft, isn’t it?”

“I… I don’t know, Harry.” Percy sighed. “That alone is not enough to be sure…”

“I saw several muggle kids with plastered arms or legs and drawings on it,” George said.

“Maybe it’s just something that had to pour down to them…” Fred agreed.

“It’s not the same!” Harry exclaimed. “She’d never wrote stupid messages to be well, it was really the same kind of forms as that!” he explained pointing at Percy’s rune.

“Listen, Harry…” Percy hushed him down. “Even if what your friend was drawing were to be real runes, it doesn’t mean that she is a witch. What about her family?”

“… She is an orphan, just like me. She doesn’t know her real parents…”

“Let’s say that she really knew runes… She must have picked it up from somewhere… there’s a possibility that’s from a wizarding home… and probably a pretty old one because very few muggleborns and muggle-raiseds took that class every year and I can’t imagine those wizards having enough runes in their home to soak in a toddler,” Percy explained. “However, there is no way a magical orphan from an old wizarding family could end up in the muggle social system. The
Childcare Office of the Ministry would never let it happen. They controlled this kind of thing. The only reason you had been raised by your relatives is certainly that they were direct family and probably on your parents’ will.”

Harry saw the twins beginning to fuss as soon as Percy said that, but he shut them off.

“The only reason, a child from a wizarding family could end up in the muggle social system is if they are a squib. Some families decide to obliviate them before leaving them… That was probably why she did not remember her real family…” Percy finished in a calm voice.

“What’s ‘obliviate’?”


“But… but she had some memories!” Harry objected. “She… They…” They tortured her, he wanted to say but why would they… Neville had been pushed from a window just to test if he could do magic. Did magical people often do that to their kids when they were not magical enough? “Is it bad to be a squib?” he finally asked. Neville did they that his relatives were relieved that he was not...

The three brothers stayed silent too long for Harry not to know the answer to his question.

“It’s not ‘bad’ as it is…” Percy explained carefully. “But for some families it’s… well, not something to brag about.”

“To the point that you try to kill the child or to decide to abandon them?!!!” Harry accused.

“Not everyone is like that Harry.” Percy corrected him.

“Some people think that they would never find a place in our world…” George said.

“…so, it’s better to send them off to the muggles when they are still young, so they can adapt more easily…” Fred continued.

“Some remain in our world but…” George sighed. “They would hardly find a job and… I mean, could you really say that Filch seems happy?”

“He’s a squib?”

The three brothers nodded.

“I really don’t understand why Dumbledore keeps him… I mean, there are dozens of House-elves at Hogwarts! They clean the Castle more than he could ever do.”

“He’s there to teach you respect!” Percy snapped. “And that magic is a gift and not an owed!”

“You use… like… what you consider ‘disabled people’ to teach your children a lesson?” Harry asked in a whisper, a little bit disgusted.

Percy quitted glaring at his brother and sighed softly. “Our world is not perfect Harry… but it’s how it is.”

Harry nodded and became suddenly quite aware of the proximity of the three red-heads around him. Percy was still holding his bandaged arm and the twins had settled on the bed on his other side. How did the conversation go there? It was not what they were talking about. They were talking
about Ace. Ace might be a witch!

“…if… if she’s a witch… she will go to Hogwarts?” Harry asked.

“IF she is, she’ll receive a letter on the summer following her 11th birthday,” Percy agreed.

“– Or a little before if she’s born on July or August.” Fred completed.

“Just like you and Percy!” George smiled.

“Even if… she’s… lost?”

“Yes. Wherever she is, Hogwarts’ owls will find her. It’s part of the enchantment created by the founders.”

“If you want to know more…” Fred started.

“… Ask Hermione about the Quill of Acceptance and the Book of Admittance,” George finished with an evil grin.

“…It’s all in Hogwarts a History!”

“Not sure you’ll hear the end of this answer before the end of the holidays though.”

“Even if you ask her now!”

Both twins laughed, and Harry felt a little better to find them back to their true selves.

“You shouldn’t put your hopes up, Harry…” Percy reminded him softly. “Maybe you’ll find your friend again, and maybe there is a tiny chance that she’s a witch… but I want you to remember one thing: You have other friends too.”

Fred and George nodded with determination at this last sentence. “And we’ll all be very sad if you disappeared after her without asking us to come along!” They specified.

Harry managed to give them a timid smile and the twins suddenly attacked his hair – which did not need it. Percy put some distance between them not to get a random bullet. And Mrs Weasley’s voice resonated from downstairs announcing that dinner was ready.

A few days later, Harry had been getting better at pretending he was okay. Hermione would be coming at the Burrow that day – Ron had said that he desperately needed her to finish his homework. Sometimes, Harry wondered how Ron managed to pass his first year if he was so constantly desperate about his school works… But that was not important, Hermione was there, and Harry was glad to have someone else to talk to.

He had not expected that having another friend around meant having some else who had worried about him and fussing around about it.

“Oh, Harry! How are you feeling???” Hermione raided at him as soon as she stepped out of the floo with Percy – who had gone to the Leaky Cauldron to fetch her.

Harry’s nails attacked the palms of his clenched hands waiting for her to release him from a tight hug he was finding suffocating. Hermione had never really got his boundaries issues… But Harry did not really know how to tell her that she was too… too close and too inclined to touch him and
that he hated that. He did not want to hurt her feelings or anything... It was his issues to work on. Maybe with time, it would get better just like Draco and Neville...

“Ron had been telling me that you had locked yourself up sulking in the twins’ room for weeks...” She explained softly, looking at him straight in the eyes. Her hands were still on his arms. “You shouldn’t isolate yourself like that, it’s rude to the people who accepted you in their home.” She scolded him. “You should talk to an adult if something is wrong...”

“Hermione! Dear~” One of the twins screamed imitating their mother’s voice.

“Don’t be rude and come here say hello to Mum!” the other twin continued, driving the bushy girl away from Harry.

Fred and George winked at Harry from the kitchen door and the raven-haired boy nodded at them with a soft smile. From then on, Hermione was so busy asking Mrs Weasley how everything worked in her kitchen that she did not have any time to pester Harry about his mental and physical health.

After lunch and after Mrs Weasley went outside to take care of some of the plants, the twins solemnly got up from their chairs and declared: “It’s almost 2! Let’s go to the Diggory’s!”

“What?! Whyyyy?” Ron wined probably wanting to spend a lazy afternoon.

“So, we can play some Quidditch? Cedric got a new broom as an early birthday present, he could probably lend his old one to you...” Fred told him.

“Really????”

“Err... My parents only agreed that I came to your house, I’m not supposed to go to any other place without their consent...” Hermione reminded them.

“Too bad... Mr Diggory has a quite large book selection in his study... I’m sure Cedric would have let you around.” George said dramatically. “But, I guess you can stay here with Ginny.”

“I’m going to the Lovegoods’ this afternoon...” Ginny said. “Luna expects me at 2:30...”

“Well, I supposed you can stay here alone then Hermione!” the twins said with a grin.

“We’ll read a book in your name,” Fred announced solemnly.

“Well, we’ll read the title of a book. We’ve better things to do, dear brother mine.” George mimicked.

Hermione pinched her lips. “… Is it far?”

“Five minutes walking,” Harry answered. “I’ll stay here with you if you want.”

“No way Harry! You can’t stay here!!!!” the twins exclaimed.

“Why?”

“Because we cannot play Quidditch without our best seeker!”

Harry stared at them. He could tell that they were up to something, but he did not know what.

“... I guess I could come then...” Hermione conceded. “But just for the books! I won’t do anything else against the rules!!” she specified.
“Brilliant! Let’s go!” the twins shouted in synch.

All sudden, they grabbed Harry’s arms and carried him out of the kitchen. They just had time to gather their brooms and they followed an ecstatic Ron and an excited Hermione through the fields. Ron was muttering how Cedric’s broom was ten times better than Charlie’s old one and how it was a shame that Charlie took his best broom with him when he left, whereas Hermione was babbling about wizarding home and how the Burrow could never pass for a muggle house ever and how wonderful magic was.

The twins were surprisingly silent, and Harry wondered how much he should worry about that. He knew the way to the Diggory’s’ quite well now. The Diggory’s’ had a training ground behind a hill where no muggle could go, so Fred and George had invited him to practice with them and Cedric a few times during the summer.

This time, though, the twins told them that they would first go to the house and not directly to the training field. “So, we can drop Hermione off!” George said.

At this point, Harry was leading their little group and so he was the one who knocked at the door and opened it. As soon as he stepped into the hall, a thick cloud of confetti and steamers assaulted him.

“Happy Delayed Birthday!!!” Five people shoot at the same time: Fred and George behind him, Cedric, Neville and Draco from the living-room door just in front of him. Hermione quickly joined them, whooing and clapping enthusiastically behind him. They all had big smiles on their faces and shiny eyes. They seemed way too happy for Harry to have imagined it all by himself. He was not dreaming then…

“What?!!” Harry managed to croak as Neville and Draco were coming closer.

“Well…” Fred murmured in his right ear.

“You see…” George copied him on Harry’s left ear.

“We were keen to notice that we certainly were not good enough to cheer you up on our own…”

“So, we tried to find a solution…”

“… and we decided to seek other worried people to help us up…”

“And, well, you did tell us that that house-elf stole all your mail…”

“Which mean, including your birthday presents…”

“So, here we are…”

“A bunch of worried people who love you and think you deserve a real Birthday…”

“Not a Machiavellian setup plan orchestrated by a renegade House-elf!”

“Oh! ‘Machiavellian’, care to explain that word to Ickle Ronnikins, Hermione?” Fred told out loud getting away from Harry’s ear.

“Happy Delayed Twelve Birthday, Harry!” George wished him again before pushing him slightly toward Neville and Draco.

“Hello, Harry,” Neville said softly.
“How was it? Were you surprised?” Draco asked over excited. “I told them we should have put more confetti but Diggory said I would be the one to clean the house if we put more so… How was it??” He suddenly frowned. “You liked it, right?”

“Sorry, Harry…” Neville muttered. “I told them you probably don’t like surprises and after… I mean, Draco told me about what happened and… We just wanted to cheer you up…”

“We overdid it, didn’t we?” Draco asked worryingly.

Harry forced himself out of his shock and shook his head slightly before smiling shyly at them. He then took one step further and hugged them tightly. “Thank you.” He told them fighting his nose not to sniff loudly. “I missed you…”

“We missed you too, Har’…” Neville said softly against his ear, hugging him back with one hand.

“I’m sorry I didn’t write.” He said softly before noticing something strange.

He stepped back and frowned at Neville. “You’re taller.” He stated. Neville was now clearly five centimetres taller than him. He was still not as tall as Ron, but still, far taller than Harry!

“Not thaaaaaat much!” Draco complained. Draco was shorter than Neville too now, but he was still taller than Harry. Why was Harry the only one to stay that small?????

“The best part about it is that it pisses off the Slytherin pride…” Neville murmured in Harry’s ear and Harry chuckled.

“What did you say??”

“Nothing, nothing.” Neville smiled. “We love you Little Dragon…”

“Don’t call me that!!!” Draco moaned again.

“His mother calls him that,” Neville explained to Harry.

“Don’t tell him that!!!!!!!”

Harry laughed. He laughed for real. He laughed so much he could have started to cry. He missed the shared looks between all his friends and the genuine smiles his laughs created. He really did have missed them.

“Come, we have presents…” Neville told him, pulling slightly on his long sleeves.

“What?! But you didn’t need too! You’ve already sent me presents!!” Harry argued.

“But you didn’t get them, did you?” Draco pointed out.

“Yeah, but… It’s not your fault if I didn’t get them! You didn’t have to pay for another one!”

“Oh, there is more than one!” the Slytherin announced brightly.

“And don’t worry about the money Harry, we could afford them,” Neville assured him. “There’s no trouble at all.”

In the end, Harry decided that he would first make a big cake for all his friends to thank them. Draco and Neville stayed with him to help and ended up covered in eggs and flour when Neville tripped on the table leg, bringing Draco in his fall. After that, Harry tried hopelessly to convince
Draco that there was no need to be as precise in his measurement of the size of the apple slice as when he was making a potion for Snape. Neville almost died trying to beat the egg whites until stiff and Harry had to come and rescued him. He had to explain to Draco what an electric mixer was when Hermione questioned the existence of magical ones. Then he had to explain electricity to Neville. It was like a never-ending story. They laughed a lot during the whole process and Harry wondered how long it had been since he last laughed so much.

In the meantime, Ron went playing Quidditch with Fred and George, while Cedric was showing his parents’ small library to Hermione – Cedric happened to be a really good student and the best student of his year group, he took his OWLs very seriously even if he was just about to beginning his 4th year, as they all should, she told them later.

The cake was a success – after Cedric tenth attempt to make his mother’s oven magically heating without a wand. Neville’s present was a set of rocks which were supposed to detect, and free possessed people and Draco’s a new quill enchanted to help him improve his handwriting – “which is disastrous, Harry. And I can’t let one of my best friends write like a four-year-old troll. I can barely read you and I seriously pity our professors! Don’t you dare take it as an excuse to write even less!!!” Draco had warned him.

The afternoon went by in a blur, full of laughs and happy memories, and the evening came far too quickly for all of them. Hermione, Draco and Neville had to get home, so had the Weasleys and Harry and Cedric’s parents would be back from work soon enough.

They all parted way, promising that they would see each other on the 1st of September – maybe sooner for Neville who confessed to Harry that he was trying to convince his Gran to took him to Diagon Alley with them (since he didn’t get any school shopping done last time, “but we don’t have to talk about that if you don’t want to, Harry!”).

That night, Harry went to bed with a smile on his face. Maybe everything was not that bad in his life. Maybe he could still make it in the end. And, maybe, Ace would be there on the 1st of September too and everything would be okay.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry! I'm really not on schedule... too much work leaves me with no motivation in my free time to work on my fic. But don't worry, I'm not giving up just yet! (Even if Harry's 2nd year has never been my favourite... we need to go through it! There's no other option!)

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this chapter! See you soon!
The 1st of September came quickly and suddenly, they had to get up at 5 in the morning and charged all their six large trunks, two owls and eight of them in the one small Ford Anglia of Mr Weasley. Mrs Weasley insisted that they went to Hogwarts the muggle way, meaning a three-to-four-hour ride in the early morning – why was it better than flooing directly to London? Harry would never know… Mrs Weasley seemed too overwhelmed for him to even think about asking…

Of course, all the Weasley children – excepted ‘Perfect Prefect Percy’ – claimed to have forgotten something in the house before they even went down the alley and it was already 7:30 in the morning when they really hit the road. Mrs Weasley strictly forbade any flying around with the car and they arrived at King’s Cross at a quarter to eleven – Harry reckoned Mr Weasley had stuck out his wand just before miraculously finding a parking slot in front of the main entrance, but he would not complain about it.

They all hurried to the station and to the wall between platforms nine and ten. Percy, Ginny, the twins and Mr and Mrs Weasley went first. However, when Ron and Harry rushed to the barrier –

CRASH.

Both trolleys hit the wall and bounced backwards. Harry was knocked off his feet, and Hedwig’s cage bounced onto the shiny floor. She rolled away, shrieking indignantly. Harry immediately jumped to his feet and ran to her, stopping her before she went too far. “Are you okay, girl???” He asked worryingly, softly stroking the frantic owl through her cage.

People all around them stared at them and Harry heard some people muttering about cruelty to animals and he could not accept that. He would never deliberately hurt Hedwig!

“What in blazes d’you think you’re doing?” a guard nearby yelled.

Nobody answered, and Harry looked up at Ron who were touching the barrier between platform 9 and 10 with awe. “We… we lost control of the trolleys…” Harry tried to explain without looking the adult in the eyes. “Sorry…” He muttered, and the guard just snort before scatting the crowd forming around them.

Harry quickly went back to Ron, “Why can’t we get through?” he hissed.

“I dunno…” Ron looked wildly around. “We’re going to miss the train,” he whispered. “I don’t understand why the gateway’s sealed itself…”

Harry looked up at the giant clock with a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach… Eleven rang loudly in the station.

“It’s gone,” said Ron, sounding stunned. “The train’s left… What do we do?”

Harry looked around. People were still watching and discussing them, and he hated it. Plus, if someone was trying to get out of Platform 9 ¾ now, they would crash into them and bring even more attention to the barrier… What if they were accused of breaching the Statute of Secrecy because of that and got expelled?!?
“I think we’d better go and wait by the car,” said Harry. “We’re attracting too much atten- “

“Harry!” said Ron, his eyes gleaming. “The car!”

“What about it?”

“We can fly the car to Hogwarts!!!”

A giant rock settled on Harry’s stomach and the ring on his finger suddenly felt like ice. Huh… bad idea. He did not like this idea at all. It sounded like the worst decision they could make.

“Come on! Don’t be such a ‘Puff about it! It’s gonna be fun! Just like the next great adventure!!!”

Harry wondered where Ron had ever heard that. He absentmindedly turned the freezing ring on his finger. For him, it sounded more like the next great beating for doing something incredibly freaky… He did not want to do that.

“Can you fly it? I mean… we’re only twelve… Do you know how to start the engine?” Harry tried to deter Ron.

“No problem!” said Ron, wheeling his trolley around to face the exit. “C’mon, let’s go. If we hurry, we’ll be able to follow the Hogwarts Express and we’ll be just in time for the Sorting Ceremony!”

The Sorting Ceremony… Harry couldn’t miss it! What if Ace was there, searching for him in the crowd?!!!!! Harry had spent the last two weeks thinking about Ace and about the fact that she might be magical. She did break into the Dursleys’ house more often than not! She could have magically opened the door! She always managed to open his very locked cupboard door. And… and the time they ended up on the school kitchen rooftop, maybe it was not him but her! How could they know for sure that it was him? And if Ace was magical, she would be at Hogwarts! There was no way Harry missed her again! He had to be there for her no matter what!!

“Ok.” He breathed and followed Ron out of the station to where the old Ford Anglia was parked. Ten minutes later, they were flying in the sky.

They were supposed to be invisible, but they soon realized that the invisibility button was faulty. Harry suggested they flew above the clouds, peeking down from time to time just to be sure they still followed the train, so less people had a chance to spot them. Sadly, it was quite sunny that day…

Ron was laughing but Harry was not so overjoyed by the situation. He still thought it was a bad idea and did not really know how he ended up agreeing with it. Ron said he was hungry and wanted to pee, it was going to be at least 6 hours before they arrived at Hogwarts… Harry did not want to think about it. The ring of his finger was really cold, and he turned it around… He was not used to it yet.

Harry got the ring the previous week when Mrs Longbottom took him to do his Hogwarts shopping with Neville in Diagon Alley. Neville’s grandmother was a stern woman and seemed very strict. She was tall, thin and bony. She reminded Harry of Professor McGonagall, but with a stuffed vulture as a hat and a bright red handbag that she always kept close to her heart.

Mrs Longbottom had insisted that they stopped by Gringotts first and had harassed the Desk Goblin about why Harry was not given his Heir Ring upon his first visit to the Bank the previous year.

The goblin had looked at them and then muttered something about not asking for it and specifying that they were in a hurry for an errand for Dumbledore. Harry winced thinking back to the Philosopher Stone and the end of the school year. At this point, Neville had stepped close to him and tugged his arm to support him. Harry had managed a smile, but it faltered when he heard the
goblin asking for his blood. Neville had been quick to reassure him. It was just three drops to prove his lineage. Even him had been asked to do so when he was 7.

Harry had complied and used Mrs Longbottom’s scarf-pin to conjure three drops of blood onto the parchment the Goblin had presented him. His blood had traced strange arabesques on the paper before setting to red letters.

‘Harry James Potter
1980.07.31

~Direct Heirship~
Heir Presumptive of the Noble and Most Ancient House Black – No current Lord (1991.08.10). Lordship unclaimable until the death or renouncement of Heir Apparent.

Other distant heirships available.’

Mrs Longbottom had turned frantic about the Black Family Heirship, but the Goblins refused to disclosed information on the matter to someone who was not part of the main family. When Harry asked about it, Mrs Longbottom muttered something about a godfather but that it should not be possible since he had been disowned and sent to Azkaban.

Regarding the other distant heirships, she explained to Harry and Neville that, nowadays, most wizards from pureblood families had at least one, but it was really difficult to be accepted by ancient and dormant family magic, so they were hardly ever claimed.

She then had requested the Potter Heir Ring since Harry’s right had been proved. The Goblin had complied with a smirk and clacked his fingers. Two seconds later, another Goblin had come from the door behind the first with a small ornamented wood box. Inside was a large gold ring with triangles crave on it.

Neville had excitedly told Harry to try it on – even if it seemed far too big for Harry’s finger. However, as soon as it passed his second phalanx, the ring had shrunken to adjust him. Neville had clapped happily, and Mrs Longbottom had given him what Harry knew to be a rare smile. The Goblins told him that the family magic had accepted him as the Heir and confirmed that his vault access could now be extended.

“What vault access?” Harry had asked but had regretted immediately when he saw the faces made by the Longbottoms and the Goblins.

“Surely you came last year with a key… This was your Trust Vault, willed for you by your parents. They set up a ceiling of one hundred galleons by school year until your graduation. With your heirship confirmed you also have access to the Family vault – with limited access to 1000 galleons a year until your coming of age and Lordship claim.” The Goblin at the desk explained. “If you have your key with you, and for 10 galleons we can settle a connected purse to each vault, so you can withdraw money without coming to the bank. With an additional fee of 10 galleons, we could also add a seal, that would allow registered merchants to settle any sealed bill directly from the bank.”

“It’s really useful for owl-order selling,” Neville told him.

“Okay… but I don’t have the key, Hagrid kept it with him last year.” Harry explained.

The goblins and Mrs Longbottom went frantic again. Apparently, since Hagrid was not his ‘Magical
Guardian’ he should not have kept his key. Then, the goblins refused to tell Mrs Longbottom who Harry’s magical guardian was – because of banking confidentiality. So, Harry had to ask, and they revealed that there was currently a claim on his guardianship from one Albus Dumbledore, but that Sirius Black was still his legal magical guardian.

“He’s in Azkaban for betraying the boy’s parents, for Morgana’s sake!” Mrs Longbottom objected vehemently. “Upon other matters…”

“No transcript of the trial had been received by the Bank. Thus, the decision of the wizarding community had not been transcribed in goblin law.” The gobbling stated matter-of-factly.

Mrs Longbottom had growled at that but decided not to argue more. She requested a new key for Harry and a connected pursed and a seal. The goblin accepted with an additional fee for the missing key. The old lady was still muttering about swindler and deuced goblins as they got out of the building thirty minutes later.

The rest of his trip on Diagon Alley went smoothly, and Harry had greatly enjoyed his sudden wealth. Mrs Longbottom had to lecture him about not abusing it until he is older and could need things that really mattered. He still bought presents for all his friends – and for all the birthdays he had missed the past year – and a fancy cake as a thank you gift to the Weasleys.

The last week of summer had gone by so quickly that Harry had not had really time to think back about what he had learned at Gringotts. Mrs Longbottom had seemed really angry at that Sirius Black, so he had not dared asking. He wondered now if he was one of the people cut off his parents’ photos in his album… Maybe he could ask Neville later…

The car was flying lower now, and the engine began to whine, drawing Harry out of his deep thoughts.

“It’s probably just tired”, Ron said. “It’s never been this far before… Can’t be much further, can it anyway?”

They both pretended not to notice the whining growing louder and louder as the sky became steadily darker.

“There!” Harry shouted, making Ron jump on his seat. “Straight ahead!”

Silhouetted on the dark horizon, high on the cliff over the lake, stood the many turrets and towers of Hogwarts castle.

Of course, the landing could not go as smoothly as the rest of the ride and they ended up crashing on the Whomping Willow. The car ran – or wheeled – away and Ron broke his wand but at least they were not hurt, and they managed to sneak into the Castle just in time to see the beginning of the Sorting.

Harry tried to see if he spotted Ace’s silhouette, but he could only see the back of the first-years. Ginny was easy to find with her fire red hair but Ace… Well, there were a few light brown girls but…

“Hang on…” Ron muttered next to him. “Where’s Snape? Do you think he’s ill?! Or maybe he’s left!!! Because he missed out on the Defence Against the Dark Arts job again! Oh, that would be glorious!!”

“Or maybe,” said a very cold voice right behind them that made Harry felt sick in his stomach, “he’s waiting to hear why you two didn’t arrive on the school train.”
Harry let Ron talk. Snape was in no mood to listen to their story anyway. They had been seen. It was far far worse than having a house-elf doing magic in front of his family who already knew about magic. He would have no going around it this time. Would Neville and Draco come and see him in prison? Wait, prison… what were magical prisons like?

Ron seemed relieved when Snape told them that McGonagall would choose what the appropriate punishment would be as their Head of House, but Harry did not agree with him. McGonagall was fair, and fairly, they should be expelled…

Harry felt extremely sick. Uncle Vernon would kill him if he went back. He would die. He needed to run away. Maybe live in the street just like Ace… maybe, if she was not a witch, he could find her there… or die.

What is the life expectancy of a 12-year-old in London streets?

McGonagall joined them ten minutes later. She sounded really angry but once again, Harry did not dare to look up and let Ron do the talking. Dumbledore arrived at some point and Ron told their story for the third time.

“Don’t you have anything to say, Potter?” Snape sneered suddenly.

Harry blanched. He did not really trust his voice to be steady but now he knew that all the attention in the room was on him. He could not stay quiet anymore. “I… Before you expelled us… could you tell me if…” He looked up at McGonagall. “If there was a ‘June Islington’ amongst first years? Oh… she might not go by this name anymore… she… she has light brown hair and striking silver eyes, much like Draco’s and… Oh. Could you tell them, I mean Draco and Neville, that I’m sorry…?”

His question had taken the adults aback. They shared a look and the two heads of house frowned a bit.

“I don’t recall the name…” McGonagall finally said. “And I can’t say I have seen the eyes of every new first year…”

“Oh… yeah… sorry…”

“… as for apologizing to your friends, I think you can do that yourself tomorrow, Mr Potter.”

“What? We are not expelled?!” Ron exclaimed.

“Don’t push your luck, Weasley…” Snape sighed.

“Nevertheless,” Dumbledore cut him. “I must impress upon both of you the seriousness of what you have done. I will be writing to both your families tonight. I must also warn you that if you do anything like this again, I will have no choice but to expel you.” He looked deeply at them both before turning to the door. “Now, I must go back to the feast. Minerva, I leave those two boys in your hands, as Gryffindors they are your responsibility. Come, Severus, there’s a delicious-looking custard tart I want to sample.”

When they left, Professor McGonagall told them they would be having detention until Halloween and they were to eat their dinner there tonight, in Snape’s disgusting dungeon office. Then she left too.
They ate in silence but after a while, Ron could not keep quiet anymore. “What would your muggle childhood girlfriend be doing here? Isn’t she muggle?”

Harry stopped eating to stare at his plate before deciding that he did not want to answer that question. He still hated when Ron was saying the word ‘muggle’ as if it was an insult or a disease. He just wanted to go to their dorm room and sleep. The day had been way too long and full of Ron for his liking.

When they had eaten as many sandwiches as they could – Harry decided to never take a bet about how much Ron could eat – they left the office and found their way to Gryffindor Tower.

As they were one turn away from the last corridor, Harry was thinking about how McGonagall had forgotten to give them the password, or how maybe she did not forget, and they were supposed to wait for someone to fetch them… Did they just break the rules again? When suddenly, Hermione’s shrill voice echoed ahead of them.

“There you are! Where have you been?! The most ridiculous rumours – someone said you’d been expelled for crashing a flying car…”

Before Harry could answered another voice came running at them.

“Harry! Are you ok??! We were so scared! We thought something might have happened to you! Draco contacted his dad!”

Neville stopped only centimetres before hugging Harry. He grimaced and stepped back, ready to apologize. Harry smiled at him, thankful for his consideration. He currently felt like a ball of nerve and did not know how he would react to being touch right now.

“Well, we haven’t been expelled,” Ron was explaining to Hermione.

“You’re not telling me you did fly here??!!” Hermione scolded sounding almost as severe as McGonagall.

“Can we keep the lecture for another day?” Harry asked tiredly.

Hermione seemed ready to argue but one look from Neville shut her up. Harry was surprised by that, he felt like he missed something there. He would have to ask Neville later.

They finished their way to the Fat Lady, Hermione scolding Ron in a low voice, and Harry and Neville taking slow steps to create some distance between them.

“How are you really feeling?” Neville whispered next to Harry.

“Tired.” Harry breathed. “Sorry, I didn’t want to worry you… the gateway was closed, we couldn’t access the platform…”

“Why didn’t you use Hedwig for an emergency mail?”

Harry sighed heavily. “I didn’t think about it… and then Ron decided that we could borrow his dad’s car and… I know it’s stupid, don’t remind me please…”

Neville looked at him side-way then back at Hermione and Ron’s backs. “I’m glad you’re okay and that you didn’t get expelled.”

“I’m glad to…” Harry muttered as Hermione was giving the password to the portrait.
Harry froze in place at the sudden storm of clapping and wooing coming from the Common Room. It looked as though the whole of Gryffindor house was still awake, packed into the room, standing on the lop-sided tables and squashy armchairs, waiting for them to arrive.

“Brilliant!” yelled Lee Jordan with his commentator’s voice. “Inspired! What an entrance! Flying a car right into the Whomping Willow, people’ll be talking about that one for years!”

Other upper-years congratulated Harry, fewer Ron. Harry did not know the name of most of them. Fred and George pushed their way to the front of the crowd and had a silent conversation with Neville before saying together, “Why couldn’t you’ve called us back, eh? We’ll have to disowned you if this continue, dearest little Ronikins~” Ron was scarlet in the face, grinning embarrassedly.

Harry was not that comfortable with the spotlight. He looked around and crossed Percy’s severe stare. There was something like worry, relief and disappointment in his brown eyes, and Harry felt suddenly quite ashamed, so he lowered his head.

He tucked Neville’s sleeve and came closer to him to be heard despite the crowd, “Do you know if the new First Years are still up?”

Neville looked at him, then around him. “I think they went to sleep already. Why?”

Harry still had in mind Ron’s sharp comment on the stupidity of his wish to have his ‘muggle girlfriend’ here, so he just dismissed Neville’s question by shaking his head. “Nothing… I’ll see at breakfast tomorrow…” He could not repress a yawn. “I think I got to go to bed – bit tired…”

“Ok, I joined you in a sec’!” Neville answered with a smile before turning to the twins.

Harry did not hear what they were talking about, but he yawned again so he just found his way to their dormitory. The door flew open as soon as he got in front of it and the other second-year Gryffindor boys clapped loudly at him.

“Unbelievable!” beamed Seamus.

“Cool,” said Dean.

They were far too excited for Harry to handle alone so he just shrugged, grabbed his night stuff from his trunk and hurried to the bathroom to get changed. When he got out, Neville was sitting on his bed, getting ready to sleep too.

“What did you want with the twins?” Harry whispered when he settled in the bed next to his.

“Oh, I wanted to send a message to Draco to tell him you were okay. He wouldn’t sleep otherwise…”

Harry looked away. He hated it when he was making his friends worrying, he felt like he was doing just that all the time. Ace had been through hell because of that…

“Harry?”

Harry looked up at Neville and smiled at him, pretending not to see the worry in his eyes. “Could they do that? Send a message to Slytherin in the middle of the night?”

“They said they have their way. Cost me 15 sickles…” he muttered sounding like Draco.

Harry sniggered. “Draco always complains about several galleons each time he deals with the
“Yeah, apparently there is a ‘Slytherin tax’ or something. Since I’m Gryffindor, they said it’s ‘tax-free’!” Neville laughed before stopping abruptly. “I think they are making a business out of our friendship…”

“That’s very likely of them!” Harry agreed. He could not stop smiling and then he thought back at his summer and the time the twins and Percy had spent with him even though he was just their little brother’s friend. “They had been great this summer…” He whispered and felt Neville’s eyes on him.

He decided to pretend that he was sleeping but he heard his friend quiet comment. “That’s great.”

Harry did not sleep well that night. He woke up every few hours, casted a Tempus charm and grunted discreetly when he realized it was still too early to wake up. At 5:30, he could not fall asleep anymore, so he took a book and waited. At ten to 7, Neville’s magical alarm clock rang but he did not wake up. Harry waited for two more minutes before getting up and shake his sleeping friend awake.

“Neville, wake up! It’s time for breakfast!”

Neville grumbled something unintelligible before opening an eye. He frowned seeing Harry’s excited face and grunted some more in his pillow.

“I’m going without you, otherwise,” Harry announced.

Neville jolted straight up. “Don’t! I’m coming…” He then looked at his magical clock and whined. “Harry! It’s not even 7 yet!”

“Your alarm clock rang.” Harry pointed out.

“And it’ll again in ten minutes and then at 7:15 when I should have actually got up!” Neville said rolling his eyes before sending him an accusing look. “And you know that…”

Harry smirked, yes, he knew because he always woke up five minutes before Neville’s first alarm. “Are you coming or not?”

“Can I, at least, go to the bathroom before going?” Neville pleaded.

Harry nodded. “I’m waiting for you in the Common Room,” he said brightly. Neville sighed again and grabbed his uniform before going to the bathroom. He was not a morning person and Harry knew it very well after spending one year in the same dorm as him, but he was still better than the three other Gryffindor boys who were snoring loudly in their beds.

By the time Neville had finished getting ready, Hermione had joined Harry in the Common Room and started lecturing him again about the stupidity of his and Ron’s decisions the previous day. Harry almost jumped on Neville when he came downstairs.

“What again?! I didn’t take that long!” the taller boy complained before noticing Hermione and frowning.

“H-hi, Neville…” Hermione very uncharacteristically greeted him.

“Hi…” Neville sighed. Harry looked at him quizzically, but he ignored him. “Let’s go, I’m hungry
now... And you still have to tell me what you’re so excited about, Harry.”

He started walking while Harry humphed, “I’m not excited,” he denied.

“I hope it’s not because you’re so proud of your little attention seeking act yesterday and you can’t wait to know what the other Houses think about it!” Hermione commented, and Harry’s feet just stopped.

Neville, who was walking at the same pace as he stopped just one step after him while Hermione kept going ahead unaware of her sudden loneliness.

Harry clenched his right arm to prevent himself from drawing his wand. She did not, did she?

“Harry?” Neville called him softly and Harry quitte staring at the bushy-haired girl’s back.

“I’m not proud of it,” he muttered looking down, stroking his arm lightly.

“I don’t think you are,” Neville confirmed.

“It wasn’t on purpose, we were just blocked, and we panicked.”

“I know, and she knows too,” the other boy assured him. “She’s just being annoying. She was like that in the train too, when we were looking for you with Draco.”

“Did you two fight?” Harry guessed.

Neville looked away. “I might have got angry when she insinuated that you were just hiding to draw attention to yourself... as you did, and that’s her words not mine, this summer in Diagon... and that Draco...” Neville shook his head. “Anyway, I think we can say that we had an argument and I made it clear that we won’t let it slide like last year...”

Harry looked at his friend, feeling conflicted. Of course, he felt angry with Hermione for thinking that about him but on the other hand, she did not know, and he did not want her to know... And sure, he felt happy that Neville defended him, but he did not want his friends to fight over him...

Harry sighed. He did not have time for that. Ace might be waiting for him in the Great Hall. He missed her last night despite his desperate measures, but she would be here this morning!

“Let’s go.” He only said, ending the discussion.

Neville nodded and followed him before chuckling lightly. “You still haven’t told me what you’re actually excited about, you know?”

Harry smiled, “Can’t wait to see the new first years!” he explained as they entered the Great Hall.

“What?!” Neville laughed behind him.

Harry was already scanning the tables. There were not many students yet. Slytherin table was completely empty. Less than ten students were currently seating around Hufflepuff and Gryffindor tables. Only Ravenclaw table seemed to be almost full of students reading books and already discussing revision timetable and summer homework.

Harry braced himself and headed to the youngest group of Ravenclaw students.

“Hi,” he said to draw their attention, but he immediately felt uncomfortable, he did not know any of their faces. “Are you Ravenclaw’s first-years? Err...welcome to Hogwarts.”
They all looked at him as if he was an alien. No... definitely no Ace amongst them.

“Err... Are you... all...” Merlin, they needed to say something. Harry had not planned for it to be so weird. Some whispers started to spread amongst the Ravenclaw upper years until someone decided that he might need some rescue here.

“Hi, Harry!” a girl called him a few seats away.

Harry looked at her and gave a desperate smile. “Hi, Padma.” He left the first years and came near her.

“What are you doing here? You’re not usually up this early.”

“Oh, just looking around...” Harry answered wondering why the girl knew and remembered his morning routine from last year. “Is that all your first-years?” he asked softly.

The Indian girl looked at the group of students and nodded. “Yeah... I think so...”

“Oh...” was the only decent but still disappointed sound Harry managed to produce.

“Oh no wait, there’s a girl missing...” Harry looked up and could not stop himself from feeling hopeful. “Morag, where’s the blond girl?”

“Lovegood?” a tanned first-year girl responded. “Still sleeping...”

The other first-year girls began to mutter something to each other.

“What?” Harry asked.

“Nothing...” the girl named Morag answered.

“She’s just strange...” another girl explained.

“She’s been talking none sense all night.” A third one filled in.

“Nargle and Wrackspurt are not even real creatures! I checked it up this morning in a 3rd-year book!”

The Ravenclaws started discussing the matters between themselves and Harry felt very much out of place again.

“Sorry about that...” Padma told him.

“It’s okay...” he sighed. “Tell me, when you said ‘blond’, how blond is she?”

Padma smirked. “As blond as Malfoy!” She said. “She rode the train with the Weasley girl, they seemed to know each other well.”

Lovegood... the name did ring a bell. Maybe Ginny mentioned her during the summer... “Is her first name ‘Luna’?” he guessed.

“Err... yes. I think so.” Padma confirmed. “Do you know her?”

“Just by name. Ginny Weasley went to her house quite often this summer...”

“And you know where this Ginny was because...” Padma mused, and Harry felt his ears becoming
red when he understood where she was going.

“I stayed at Ron’s and the twins’ house! Who happened to be her brothers!” he defended himself but thankfully the Slytherins entered the Great Hall as one group at this very moment, offering him a perfect excuse to leave her. He still very much knew that Padma would repeat their whole conversation to her sister and that the whole school would know about it before lunch.

“That was odd…” Neville commented when Harry went back to where he had waited for him.

“Oh… shut up…” Harry mumbled.

Neville was ready to talk back when a blond tornado stormed to them. “Harry! Are you ok?? Where were you?? You’re not hurt, right? What happened???”

“Wow! Draco! Calm down! I’m ok!” Harry chuckled as Draco’s eyes seemed to scan him and detect any lie.

“Didn’t you get my message last night?” Neville wondered.

“I did. How did you manage to…? No, wait… I know. The twins, right?”

Both Gryffindors nodded brightly and Draco sighed. “What were you doing with the Ravenclaws?” he asked more seriously.

“Looking for a first year,” Harry eluded. “Could you introduce me to Slytherin’s first years?”

Draco looked at him quizzically before eyeing Neville who shrugged. “Well, there’s not many this year… only 4 boys and 3 girls…” he explained.

“Who’s the girls?” Harry asked.

“The Carrow’s twins and Flint’s little sister, Ursula,” the blond boy pointed them with his chin.

Harry looked at the green table to the two identical long faces and a square face girl who did look a bit like the Slytherin Quidditch team captain. No Ace there either.

Well, she did decide to break into the Dursleys’ and face his Uncle Vernon so that might count as stupid Gryffindor bravery… Harry eyed his House table. Maybe they could wait a bit for them to come in.

Draco made them promise to catch up later before going to his table while Neville grabbed Harry and tried to force a breakfast down his throat. However, Harry was not very interested in eating.

The Hufflepuff group came first, but there were only two girls among them and still no Ace.

The Gryffindor first-year group entered the Great Hall a few minutes before the owls. Ron, Dean and Seamus were following them.

“Hi, mate! Why didn’t you wake me up?” Ron asked when he sat next to them.

Neville muttered something about Harry waking him more than one hour ago, but the raven-haired boy ignored them. He almost stood up in the bench to see all the newcomers’ faces.

“Are all the first-year girls here?” he asked Neville.

“Err… I don’t know, I didn’t really follow the sorting yesterday… I was kind of preoccupied by
Harry was too focused on the first-years to feel guilty about it. Ace was not there either. Where was she? His heart started bouncing into his ears. Why wasn’t she there?? She should have been here!!!

“Harry?” Neville’s voice sounded far away.

It was not possible, right? She was supposed… She must be a witch!!

“What’s going on?” came a slightly older voice.

“‘don’t know,” Ron answered unconcernedly.

“Harry is devastated because there’s no one doable among the new first-year girls!” Dean joked, and Seamus laughed loudly next Harry.

“Harry, what is it?”

Two strong hands grabbed his arms and suddenly, Harry was facing Percy’s face.

“She… she’s not here…” Harry mumbled without really believing it.

He was having a hard time staying focused. He heard a first-year boy asking if he was Harry Potter and if he could take a picture. The owls were now flying through the hall. She was not here. She was not...

“Let’s get outside for a minute okay?” Percy offered before pushing him outside the Great Hall, Neville following them and Draco quickly catching up.

As they were passing the door, Harry thought he heard Mrs Weasley’s voice which was impossible because they were at Hogwarts… they were at Hogwarts and Ace was not here…


Harry did his best to comply, but it was too hard.

“She’s not here… She was supposed to be here…” he explained to him.

Percy sighed. “Harry, what did I tell you about high hopes?”

Harry did not want to answer that question. When he opened his mouth, he choked on a sob. “She could have been here…”

“Who are we talking about?” Draco asked worriedly.

“His childhood friend,” Percy answered. “But we talked about it, Harry. There were very few chances that…”

“You don’t know that!” Harry cut him. “You don’t know that. You weren’t here! It might have been her accidental magic!!” He argued. He was crying now, and he felt pathetic, but she was not here… Ace was not here.

“Why would you think…” Draco started.

“Isn’t she muggle?” Neville asked at the same time.
“She knows runes! Runes are magic! She should have been here!!”

Neville and Draco grimaced but did not argue. They seemed to hesitate to come closer, but Harry needed them. He did not want to be alone, but Ace was not here…

“If she’s not here… if she’s not at Hogwarts and if she’s not a witch…it… it means that… that she might be dead… and it’s my fault…” He let out before bursting into more tears and the two other 2nd-years gave in and grabbed him before his knees touched the ground. They hugged him tight without saying a word. They did not know everything but at least they were there.


He left, and Harry stayed in his friends’ arms for long minutes.

She should have been there.

Chapter End Notes

Hello!
Once again sorry for the delay! Don't worry, the inspiration isn't the issue there... just tiredness and work!
Thank you for all of you that leave comments and kudos! I hope you still like this story!
The first few days of the term were hard for Harry. He tried not to think about Ace too much. Neville
and Draco had been great, but he knew they were holding back on their questions. Ron and
Hermione were not as understanding.

Ron kept on asking him “what’s wrong, AGAIN?” clearly annoyed with him as he had been during
the second part of summer. Hermione was stuck on the stolen flying car incident and reminded him
how stupid that decision had been at every minute of every day.

Harry eventually decided to talk to them all about what was happening. He explained that his friend
was in the foster system and had had issues with her foster home after he left for Hogwarts the
previous year. That he knew she had been worried about him because he did not have had the
opportunity to tell her that he was not going at Sutton’s Grammar School with her. Because of that,
she had thought that something had happened to him. He also told them that she ran away from her
new foster family sometime during the year and that they did not know where she was now. He had
been hoping that she was a witch, so he could meet her in Hogwarts, but it had been a false hope.

Neville asked him why his friend would immediately think something might have happened to him.
Later Draco asked why his relatives did not tell her the truth and why she did not believe them if they
did. Harry shook his head at their questions and did not answer. He knew that if he told them that the
police had been involved because Ace thought that the only explanation was that his Uncle killed
him, they would never let it slide. He would not talk about it and they did not insist.

Ron did not understand why he was caring so much about her if she was a runaway and wondered
how he could mistake a witch and a muggle. If she were a witch, it should have been obvious.
Hermione could not father the idea that someone could run away when they have the opportunity to
study in one of the best secondary school in the country. They were both really loud about their
opinions. These remarks made Harry angry, but he did not want to argue with his friends, so he
decided to spend more time with Neville and Draco until he was calmer.

“You said she knew runes…” Draco told him in the library on Friday afternoon. “Do you perhaps
have an example of them? Maybe we could ask Professor Babbling if they mean anything.”

Harry looked at him. Draco and Neville had been the only ones that had not tried to persuade him
that there was no way Ace was a witch. Even Fred and George were not that comfortable with his
theory.

“I… I’m not sure…” he answered looking at his History of Magic essay. “She sometimes scribbled
on my notebooks so maybe…”

“Do you have them with you? Can your relatives send them to you?” Neville asked.

Harry could not stop himself from pinching his lips at the idea of asking something like that to his
relatives. “They’re on my trunk…” he said grimly.

“Can we go fetch them now? The Giant wars are killing me…” Draco whined while lying on the
table pretending to be agonizing.

Harry immediately lightened up and chuckled at his antics. “Ok,” he agreed and started to pack his
They went to the Gryffindor Tower and Neville stayed waiting with Draco in front of the Fat Lady while he went to his trunk. There were three of them… drawing notebooks Ace had gotten him along the years. It felt strange to have them in his hands again… They had stayed hidden in his trunk for more than a year, but he had not ever gathered the courage to look at them again. He was afraid of never being able to get out of the nostalgia if he was to do it alone.

He went back to his friends and the three of them found an empty classroom and sat on the floor. Harry was not so sure he was ready to look at his old drawings even with his friends. What if they found them awful… what if there was blood from an old injury in one of them…? What if…

“We can let you go through it alone if you want…” Neville offered kindly next to him as he sensed his growing awkwardness. “You would just have to tell us if you found one of the runes.”

Harry looked at him as to be sure he did not imagine those words. Neville was so supportive all the time… It was the reason why Ron was always making fun of him for being missorted as it was obvious that he was a Hufflepuff.

Harry sighed internally. He was the one who should have been sorted in Hufflepuff… If he had not betrayed Ace so badly, he probably would have been!

It was stupid! It was just old drawings and maybe he could find clues about Ace in there! He needed to find the Gryffindor in himself!

Harry shook his head and finally put the notebooks on the floor before them. “It’ll be quicker if we do it together!” he said to convince himself before prompting his friends to take one each.

They started going through the pages. Harry had the older one. He opened it on and immediately remembered that summer between 2nd and 3rd year… when Ace had invited him to spend a few days at her house while the Dursleys were on vacation… A Polaroid picture was taped on the very first page. Her proud smile, his astonished face when she told him that they would be in the same year-class starting next September. The note next to it, “I totally Ace-d it!” written in childish yet well-defined letters. “Your puns are so lame!” he had written in his already unreadable writing. “I know you love them!” His fingers traced her words again. He had almost forgotten about that picture…Their first picture together… one of the only ones… He missed her so much.

“Is that her?” Neville asked suddenly, showing one of the draft drawing of Ace on the kitchen building rooftop. He froze as soon as he noticed Harry’s lost eyes. He looked down at what Harry was fixing.

“Is that you on the picture?” Draco asked, mirroring Neville’s reaction. They both came closer to Harry to look at it. “Why isn’t it moving?”

“How old were you?” Neville said at the same time.

“It was my 8th birthday… her 7th…” he explained. “Muggle pictures don’t move…” What would he do to see her move and smile like his parents’ pictures…

“Oh! Was she born in July too?” Neville wondered.

Harry shook his head. “Her official birthday is in June, but she hates that date…” his voice was trembling again, and he felt as if his nose was running.

Draco and Neville shared a look above his head and Neville decided to take the notebook from
Harry’s laps. The raven-haired boy tried to protest but it sounded like a sob and before he knew it, Draco’s arm was around his shoulders and his crying face secured on the blond boy’s neck.

“We’ll look for the runes for you,” Draco said with a firm voice. “You don’t have to look to everything.” And then he started leafing his notebook with one hand while the other kept smoothing Harry’s arm.

Neville nodded as to approve his friend’s words and started going through his own notebook.

After a few minutes, they found some runic characters scribbling on some pages and asked Harry to confirm that they were Ace’s doing. Harry nodded, trying not to look too much at the drawing of his sleeping, laughing or focusing best friend on the rest of the pages. Half an hour later, Draco and Neville had put magical sticking notes on the pages with runes on them and were ready to go and see Professor Babbling. Harry, on the other hand, was not sure that it was a good idea… He wanted to believe again… He did not want someone to prove him wrong and lost him his last and only chance to find out about Ace… Come on Harry, you’re a Gryffindor!

“Are you ready to go Harry?” Neville asked, and Harry nodded before straightening up. He felt kind of cold out of Draco’s arms.

“Sorry about that…” he mumbled while trying to get rid of the shivering feeling.

“It’s okay. We know you miss her a lot…” Neville smiled.

“Yeah… we can guess of how much you liked her…” Draco snorted grabbing the notebooks before getting up too.

Harry looked at his feet. He did not know what to answer to that. Maybe Draco thought that it was lame to have so many drawings of his friend. They started walking to the Ancient Runes classroom. For some reason, Draco knew where it was even though they could not take that class just yet.

“Harry?” Neville said. “Do you mind if we talk a bit about her?”

Harry thought about it a few seconds before shaking his head. Neville and Draco deserved some answers after all.

“Why… Why is she sleeping in almost all the drawings?” Neville asked.

“Especially the later ones…” Draco completed.

Harry lowered his head. “She… She was tired… she couldn’t sleep at home, so she did it during lunch break or sometimes classes…”

Draco and Neville did not say a word. Harry wondered if Percy had talked to them about his discussion with Mrs Travers… The twins had suggested that he did.

“I should have noticed… I should have said something to an adult…” he muttered.

He looked up when a hand grabbed the forearm he had been absentmindedly stroking. Draco was frowning. “Don’t be so hard with yourself!” He scolded him. “If she was sleeping during classes and lunch breaks, the teachers should have noticed!”

“But… I was her friend… and I said nothing…”

“You were worried!” Draco cut him. “It shows you know? In your drawings. It shows that you were
worried and that you cared a lot about her.”

“It’s not your fault, Harry.” Neville confirmed.

Harry did not answer. Of course, it was his fault… he sighed releasing his arm from Draco’s grip. He did not need them to lie to him…

“Would you say it was our fault that you had to go back to your relatives last summer?” Draco asked him.

“What?” Harry choked. “Of course, it’s not your fault!”

“Yet, we were the ones who didn’t manage to convince Uncle Sev’ something was wrong at your home! If we had insisted, then, maybe you would not have had to go back… Don’t you think?”

“Stop Draco! It’s not like that!” Harry snapped back anxiously. Was that what his friends were thinking?

“If it’s not our fault what’s happening to you, then it’s not yours what happened to her,” Draco concluded with a smirked.

Harry looked at him – Draco seemed so happy about himself… Harry suddenly felt like slapping him. His ring was burning cold in his finger and if it was not for Neville who grabbed his hand at this moment, he would probably have run away.

“We are just worried about you, just as much as you are worried about her,” the Gryffindor chubby boy told him softly. “We know you won’t talk about it… but, can you at least stop blaming yourself for everything? What Draco wanted to say is that we’re sure that your friend wouldn’t want you to feel guilty like that… She probably doesn’t think that you’re responsible for anything.”

Harry’s anger went away as quickly as it had come. He tightened slightly his grasp on Neville’s hand to thank him before letting him go. It was not that easy but he understood what they were trying to do. However, they were not there, they did not know Ace or what really happened to her, so they just did not understand… “It’s almost dinner time, let’s go before Professor Babbling leave…” Harry said, closing this debate.

He started walking and Draco quickly took the lead again. None of them spoke until they got to the classroom. 6th-year NEWT students were getting out of it and Harry nodded at Percy Weasley when he saw him. They waited until the classroom was empty to knock at the open door to get the teacher’s attention.

“Hi, Professor Babbling…” Draco said. “Sorry for intruding…”

The old lady frowned at them, “You’re not part of my new 3rd-year class, are you?”

“Oh, no! We’re only 2nd years…” the blond boy answered. Neville and Harry stayed one step behind him, Neville out of shyness and Harry out of habit – he really did not like talking to teachers… even those who were not his… “My name is Draco Malfoy, and these are my friends Neville Longbottom and Harry Potter.”

Professor Babbling raised an eyebrow at the name, “Well, I’m relieved! So early in the year I still have some troubles remembering every new student name! What can I do for you? Isn’t a bit early in the year for elective counselling?”

“I already know I’ll take your course next year!” Draco announced proudly and continued quickly
when he noticed that the other two would not talk. “We’re here because Har… I mean, our friend
used to draw some symbols that look like runes, but we thought that she was a muggle so… We
want to know if they were real runes and… well… are they real runes?”

He showed the notebooks to the teacher while he was speaking.

Harry looked at his friend’s back. It was strange to hear him referring at Ace as his friend too… It
was like something from one of Dudley’s cartoon: *The friend of my friend is my friend.* Was that
how he really thought about Ace?

Professor Babbling looked at them, turning the page to the next sticky note.

“You say that you thought that the person who drew that is a muggle?” the woman repeated while
studying the symbols.

“Y-yeah… well, Harry met her in the muggle world…” Draco said.

“How old is she?”

Draco looked back at Harry who consented to answer, “… she’s one year younger than me. But
she’s not here.”

Professor Babbling blinked up. “I see…”

“Could those runes be real? Or are they old one that had poured down into the muggle culture?” Neville asked.

The woman flicked through the notebooks a few more times before answering. “Well, it’s strange. Those seem to be accurate runic formula… but the runes in them are not old enough to be muggle appropriation…” She got up and went searching for a book on the shelves on the side of the classroom. “You see, most of the runes that muggles know are from Elder Futhark period, but those ones possessed some characteristic of the 19th Century. Ah! There it is!” She came back with an old black tome, the name *P.N. Black* was curved in silver letters on the cover.

The teacher went through the book until she produced a victory sound. “Here! Look, it’s really similar isn’t it?” She pointed at them a page with a big marigold drawing on it and what seemed to be a recipe of a healing balm. The author then explained how to use a concentrated version of the balm to draw a specific rune could faster the healing process. The rune was completely identical to Ace’s drawings.

“Is it a healing rune then?” Harry asked unbelievingly.

“Yes, it is.” Professor Babbling confirmed. “Not a common one, mind you, since this book is not really widespread, Professor Black had to stop his studies when he became Headmaster, and healing potions and charms had known a small revolution in the early 1900s which put healing runic theory on the background… but yes, this rune is supposed to be used for cicatrisation purposes.”

“I… I can’t believe it…” Harry muttered.

“What is it?” Neville asked softly.

“She… She used to draw them on my bandage when I get injured… she… once, she used marigold
to make an ointment…”

“Well, whether your friend is a healing prodigy, or she perfectly knew what she was doing,”
Professor Babbling smiled at him. “She might have learned from her parents? Are you sure one of them might not be a wizarding folk?”

“She… she doesn’t have parents… she… she’s an orphan just like me…” Harry answered. It was making no sense. How could Ace know that?! Was she really…

“Oh… that’s strange…”

“Professor, do you mind if I could make a copy of your book for my parents?” Draco asked. “I mean, this is clearly an evidence that Harry’s friend might be from a wizarding family! Maybe my dad can find which one!”

“You said that this book is not widespread…” Neville added. “Do you perhaps know which families are more likely to have it at home?”

The woman assessed the two boys and Harry’s withdrawing figure. “Well… it was written by a Black so… If I’m not mistaken Mr Malfoy, your mother is Narcissa Black?”

“She is,” Draco confirmed.

“I think she might have more specific tracks than me on this, but I would say that only students of Modern Runes’ Mastery and maybe some Curse Breakers might have a copy of this book.” She sighed. “It’s too advanced to be even of use to NEWT students here.”

Draco nodded and asked for a copy of the page again which was quickly produced from a wave of the teacher’s wand. “Could you also copy this picture?” he asked showing her the Polaroid picture of Ace and Harry.

Professor Babbling hesitated. “You know that the girl is probably a squib, right?” she questioned them.

Harry clenched his teeth, remembering what the Weasleys told him about how the squibs were seen in the wizarding society. Draco and Neville shared a knowing look.

“For now, we just want to know who she really is and help her if we can,” Neville explained.

Professor Babbling nodded at his words and proceeded with the second duplication. They thanked her deeply after that and Draco asked her if she could recommend a book of rune study to beginners which she happily provided.

On their way to the Great Hall, Harry grabbed Draco’s sleeve to make him stopped. He felt nervous when the gentle silver eyes questioned him. “Draco… Ace, she… she has the same eyes as you, you know? Like… the exact same colour and even the shape is really similar…” Harry felt like crying again just because he was thinking about it. He looked down at his feet. “…if… if she was related to you… somehow… and she was a squib… would your family… is it possible that your family had hurt her… like… physically… before they abandoned her to the muggle world?”

Draco stayed silent and when Harry looked up, he knew he had his answer. When a tear burnt his eyes, Draco forced himself to answer with words. “I… I’ll ask my mum. If… I mean, if there was a baby around my age in her family, she might have known and… Well, if I’m related to your friend, I’m sure my parents will do everything to find her and help her!” he promised.

“Really?”

“Y-yeah,” Draco answered but Harry could tell that he was not that confident about his answer and
On another note, Harry officially needed to review his list of his most hated teachers. Gilderoy Lockhart, the new Defence Against the Dark Art teacher had clearly outclassed Snape in the few days of this first week of school.

First, there was the fact that the DADA classes were now complete jokes even compared to Quirrell-Voldemort’s stuttering and headache induced classes from the previous year. Lockhart only ever talked about himself and what he supposedly did in every part of the world… It did not seem to bother him that what he wrote in his books was sometimes in complete opposition with what they already learnt in First-year.

Second, there was the feeling that Lockhart seemed convinced that Harry was an attention whore that could not stand that someone more famous than him – naming Gilderoy five-time winner of Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award Lockhart – was in school. According to the peacock, Harry was a lost lamb in need of guidance that he, in his infinite wisdom, was willing to offer freely. Harry did try to tell him that he did not like and did not want to be famous, but Colin Creevey – a Gryffindor 1st-Year who had decided to follow Harry everywhere with his camera and to ask him to sign them later – did not help that matter and the teacher had not been convinced at all.

However, what Harry hated most about Lockhart was neither his complete ineptness as a teacher or unwelcomed position as his mentor, but the fact that the man seemed unable to be in the same room or area as Harry without trying to make physical contact with him at every occasion… Whereas it was by clutching his shoulders to take a picture with him for Colin or gripping his forearm when he talked to him or about him or just pass by and wanted to acknowledge him or whatever… Harry felt like he was about to have a panic attack every time the man grabbed him out of nowhere and without prior notice in class or in the corridors and one time even in the Great Hall while Harry was eating!

Of course, Harry knew he had an issue with personal space and touch aversion. He had decided to work on it at the end of the summer holidays, so his friends would worry less, and the twins could no longer use that as a proof there was something wrong with him. By now, he had managed to stop moving away from Hermione or Ron when they sat a bit too close in class or in the Great Hall. He was almost always ok with Neville and Draco, even when the Slytherin gradually stopped asking him verbally beforehand… Knowing how to read his friend body language did help him to see it coming anyway and it seemed that it worked on both side because when Harry really felt like it was too much, Draco instinctively backed away.

But Lockhart… Merlin, the man was seriously freaking him out! He could not get used to that! Even though his grasp was far from being as brutal as Uncle Vernon’s or as vicious as Aunt Petunia’s, Harry felt like a trapped animal, barely able to move or to breathe. He hated that! He hated that but admitted it would make him a freak, so he had to shut up… he did not want Lockhart to point out his freakiness in front of everyone if he dodged him openly. So, for now, he had just decided to avoid the man as much as humanly possible. The castle was big enough…

However, fate has always been a bitch to Harry or, so he remembered when Professor McGonagall told him that it would be Lockhart who would rule his detentions until Halloween. At that moment, Harry wished that Snape had expelled him already…

That first Saturday had already started badly when Wood wake the whole team up at 6:00 am to go training in the freezing rain. They flew from 6:30 to 9:30, then they had to leave the pit because the
three other houses were taking turns to do their try-out session. Gryffindor was the only team to keep
the exact same members as the previous year which was not uncommon according to the twins. They
had a young team after all and it would probably stay the same until Wood leaves Hogwarts at the
end of the next year. When Harry voiced that the other teams did not seem that older last year, Wood
dismissed the idea arguing different strategies and not changing a winning team – even though they
had not won the Cup the previous year but that was only because of Harry’s absence during the last
match.

Harry decided to make himself forgotten after that comment. He did not want to discuss his health
with Wood or to have the twins voicing an opinion about it. He was far behind the rest of the team
when he entered the Castle and of course, alone when Filch stormed in screaming about ‘Filth! Mess
and muck everywhere!’ pointing at the muddy puddle that had dripped from Harry’s Quidditch robes
(on from his teammates’ before him but no longer there to take the blow).

The only highlight of that encounter was when Peeves – encouraged by the Twins – saved the day
by blowing a vanishing cabinet up just above Filch’s office. After that, when the caretaker came
back he accused Harry of reading his correspondence – something about correspondence courses in
beginners’ magic – and knowing that he was a squib – which was not really a secret if anything the
Weasleys told him about that summer was true – and let him escape with only a warning if he
promised not to talk to anyone about the correspondence course.

Then Harry had a late breakfast with Neville and a very nervous Draco. That was when McGonagall
– eying suspiciously at Draco who was sitting with them at the Gryffindor table – dropped the bomb
and killed Harry’s unusual appetite.

“You’re okay there Harry?” Neville asked softly.

Harry smiled tiredly at his friend. “Yeah, of course. Rough morning training, that’s all.” He lied, not
wanting his friend to worry uselessly about him for one more reason. “I swear Wood is going to kill
us all if we don’t win the Cup this year,” he sighed and then noticed that Draco had lowered his head
slightly. “Sorry about this afternoon Draco, I won’t be able to make it.” He apologized softly.

His detention would take place during the whole afternoon, so he would not be able to see Draco’s
try-out – not that he would be officially able to attend it, as he was a member of another House team,
but he had hoped that his father’s Invisibility Cloak would be useful for something else than finding
troubles for once…

Draco looked up and smiled weakly, “It’s okay. You weren’t supposed to be there anyway. And
stop trying to use me to spy on the Slytherin team!” he joked.

“Ah! I’m unmasked!” Harry complained loudly. “Neville, you’re our only hope! Find their weakness
and go tell Wood!”

“No way!” Neville screamed, and Draco smirked, ready to claim his victory until the Gryffindor
finished his sentence. “Wood is way too scary! I’ll go to the Twins and Cedric… Hufflepuff
deserves a chance too.”

“What about Ravenclaw?” Harry asked amused.

“No. Ravens are flying creatures, they already have a competitive advantage, they don’t need more!”

“What about Slytherin?” Draco asked.

Harry and Neville stared at him as if he had grown a second head.
“Everything is better than letting the snakes win another cup…” Neville copied Wood’s words.

“Wood will really get my neck if Slytherin wins… Draco! Please, don’t try-out! I don’t want them to have a decent Seeker!!!!” Harry exclaimed grabbing Draco’s hands in his and trying to imitate Ace’s imploring puppy face.

Draco stared at him in silence before flashing red.

“I mean, it’s really unfair! You’ve been trained by the youngest seeker in a century for a whoooole afternoon this summer! The others don’t stand a chance…”

Neville burst in laughs and Harry followed him, and soon Draco was laughing too, all nervousness had gone from his face.

“Stop dreaming, Potter! I’ll be in the team, and Diggory and that Raven girl will stand no chance! I will make my one-afternoon teacher proud.”

They kept on laughing until Harry noticed something. “Wait! How do you know who’s going to be Ravenclaw’s seeker? Their try-outs are still on as we’re speaking…”

“Yup. But the seekers went first.” Draco smirked.

“Did you…”

“For his defence, we were looking for you!” Neville explained.

“And I’m not technically a House team player yet so… nothing against the rules anyway…”

“You, sneaky cheating snake…” Harry growled.

“Hey! You were planning on doing just the same! And Neville was with me! He can pass by the information to your team!” Draco raised his hands as surrender.

“Neville is useless when brooms are involved… we both know that.” Harry said very seriously.

“Truth,” Draco confirmed in the same serious tone.

“Hey! I’m still here and I can still hear you!” Neville whined. “I’m not that bad on a broom! The school brooms are just… untameable. Just as much as my Gran’s.” He grimaced. “And I thought I was the team’s only hope?!?”

They all laughed again and proceed to go to the library to work on their remaining homework that had been abandoned the previous day in their quest for Professor Babbling and Ace’s actual runes. They managed to keep the light mood until lunch. Then, Draco and Neville went with Harry to Lockhart’s office and shared some encouragements before leaving him to his almost forgotten sorrow.

“Ah, here’s the scallywag!” Lockhart said when he opened the door. “Come in, Harry, come in.”

Instantly, the man’s hand was on Harry’s back to guide him into the room and the Gryffindor had to repress a wince.

Harry spent the next few hours addressing envelopes to Lockhart’s fans and trying to ignore the teacher when he laid a hand his chair back to read over his shoulders. He let Lockhart’s voice wash over him, occasionally saying something about “Fame’s a fickle friend, Harry” or “Celebrity is as celebrity does, remember that”.
There were so many pictures of the man in the room that Harry felt like his eyes were always on him. It was suffocating, and the candles were burning lower and lower making the room even gloomier. He moved his aching hand over what felt like the thousandth envelope. It must be nearly time to leave… Was Draco over yet? Please Merlin, let it be nearly time…

And then Harry heard something – something quite apart from the spitting of the dying candles and Lockhart’s prattle about Harry’s life choices.

It was a voice, a voice to chill the bone-marrow, a voice of breath-taking, ice-cold venom that felt as bad as if Lockhart had tried to hug him suddenly…

“Come... come to me... let me rip you... let me tear you... let me kill you... no little hatchling is safe... kill you...”

Harry gave a huge jump when a hand gripped his shoulder and a large lilac blot appeared on the envelope he was addressing.

“Oh… Sorry, I didn’t want to startle you, Harry!” Lockhart said joyfully next to him leaving his oppressing hand on Harry’s body. “You looked lost in your thought. A little too young to play the mysterious yet hot silent boy, don’t you think?” He joked.

Harry was having a hard time finding his breath back and moved his shoulders to free them quietly. “Did you hear that voice?” he asked but only a whisper managed to go through his lips.

“What? What voice?” said Lockhart, looking puzzled. “What are you talking about, Harry? Perhaps you’re getting a little drowsy? Great Scott – look at the time! We’ve been here nearly three hours! I’d never have believed it – the time’s flown, hasn’t it?”

Harry did not answer. He was sure he had heard that voice and those menacing words… He was so concentrated on straining his ears to hear the voice again that he barely registered that Lockhart’s hand was leading him to the door again. The man was saying something about not expecting to be treated like this every time he got detention. Feeling a bit dazed, Harry left without a word.

“Harry!” a voice called him in the corridor.

Harry jolted in its direction and let out a sigh of relief when he saw Neville and Draco running in his way.

“Hey!” he greeted them tiredly.

“How did it go?” Neville asked concerned.

“Boring…” Harry answered. He hesitated two seconds, balancing the idea of telling them about the voice. He did not want them to think he was a freak. Maybe Lockhart was right, and he was just tired. “I just wrote addresses for his fan-mail… nothing interesting.”

Neville and Draco frowned a little bit, but Harry decided to ignore this sign of disbelief. “And you? How did it go?” he asked Draco.

The silver eyes flashed up and a grin formed on his white face.

“Harry, let me introduce to you the new Slytherin seeker~” Neville announced with a theatrical bow. “Really???” Harry yelled. Draco bowed too and pulled out his Quidditch uniform from his robe as a confirmation. “Congratulation Draco!!!” Harry exclaimed. Before he knew it, he jumped into his friend’s arms and
hugged him tightly. He felt so warm. Nothing like Lockhart’s chilling touch. “I’m so happy for you!” he declared stepping back.

“T-thank you…” Draco stuttered, his cheeks slightly pink.

“He was so great!” Neville explained excitedly. “Not as bold as you but so fast! Merlin, Harry, I swear it must be cheating if he uses that broom on an actual match!”

“Your Nimbus 2001?” Harry guessed.

“Yup! I caught seven training snitches in 30 minutes,” Draco said proudly. “The second place only got four.”

Harry smiled. “Well, I think that means that I finally get to have some competition then!”

Draco smiled back, and Harry laughed without stopping himself from hugging his friend again. Merlin, had hugs always felt so great?

Neville laughed-coughed beside them. “There’s a problem though…” he said worryingly. “Who am I supposed to cheer for during the Gryffindor-Slytherin match?”

Harry and Draco looked at him with disbelief.

“Neville… You know you’re a Gryffindor, right?” Draco wondered.

“You won’t be mad if I supported Harry then?”

“Well, I know you have to in order not to be bullied, so of course, I won’t be mad! Plus, I know that deep down, you will always be rooting for me because Potter only got in the team out of fame and not pure talent like me!”

“Hey! You just got a better a broom!” Harry snarled.

“And the best teacher for one glorious afternoon this summer!” Draco completed with a bright smile.

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone!
Just a little self-congratulation row because this story has now officially more than 100 kudos and subscribers and that's just awesome!
Sorry for the delay and all... I hope to post another chapter before the end of the year.
Please tell me what you think!!!
The school year settled in quickly as everybody was falling back to their studying habits.

Between class, Quidditch, school work and his detention with Lockhart, Harry had very few free times to spare but most of it was spent with Draco and Neville. For some reasons, he really had a hard time tolerating Ron’s bigotry this year. It was as if all his patience and forgiveness from the previous year had run off and he did feel a little bad about it and about their failing friendship but was he really to blame?

Overall, Harry knew Ron was having a rough year too. Between his mother’s howler and his broken wand. He had told him he should tell his parents about his wand because he was going to kill himself – “or even worse, fail all his classes” Hermione had added – but Ron was having none of it. He said he did not want to receive another howler but still! Someone would really get hurt at this rate… Harry wondered if he should buy Ron a new wand himself… maybe he could ask the twins…

“Harry? Are you working on your History essay? Do you mind if we join you?”

Harry looked up from his scrolls to Hermione and Ron, and then to Neville who was working next to him, asking him silently if he minded. They had retreated to Gryffindor common room to do their homework since Draco was having Quidditch practice that evening.

“Sure,” Harry answered after Neville had shrugged. He moved a little on the velvet couch and create more space for one of them. Hermione smiled at him and took the silent offer. Ron sat on the floor gloomily. It sounded as if he did not really want to be there… No one was forcing him though… Merlin, it was easier to like the guy when he was not there…

Harry absentmindedly stroke his heir ring. He got a little more used to the jewellery over the weeks, but he did not really like when it felt so cold on his finger. He shook his head, deciding Ron’s mood was not his problem and went back to his work.

They managed to keep silent for less than three minutes before Hermione interrupted Harry again.

“Harry? You made a mistake…” she said reading his essay above his shoulder. “You wrote here that the Witch Hunts from the fourteenth century had a huge impact on the magical population and the way day to day life went on, but it’s wrong. Bathilda Bagshot wrote in A History of Magic that the use of the Flame-Freezing Charm makes it possible to resist burning so the muggles’ methods were completely ineffective in actually decreasing the wizarding population,” she explained with her teaching voice.

Harry gave a long look at his friend. He did read A History of Magic as it was compulsory reading, but this passage had never settled in his mind. Nothing was that easy in life and at least the first few witches and wizards might have been taken by surprise or not have thought of the flame-freezing charm soon enough to escape their death. And even after it was well-known. “Well…” he sighed looking back at his essay. “What about if the witch or wizard didn’t have their wand on them or wasn’t able to perform the flame-freezing charm in time or without the muggles noticing? What if they were knocked off before being burnt or if they were persecuted by other means like hanging or drowning?” A long silence followed his pessimistic scenarios. “You see…” he continued. “Draco lend us a book that doesn’t agree with A History of Magic version of this story…”
Hermione frowned. “Surely you must be mistaken, maybe you read the book a bit too quickly? Hanging was primarily used in the US but not before the seventeenth-century witch trials. Do you still have that book?”

Harry turned to Neville with a sorry look. The chubby boy smiled slightly at him and put a sticky note on the passage he had been copying.

“Harry’s right,” Neville told Hermione while giving her the book. “It says here that children were especially at risk as it was harder for them to master the flame-freezing charm or to hide their burst of accidental magic when they felt at risk. They could neither blend in nor protect themselves. It’s impossible to evaluate the number of muggleborns that had been killed, we only know the ones that already went to Hogwarts and were killed when they went back home for the holidays… It’s likely that a lot of kids died before even being properly introduced to the magical world.”

Ron humphed at that. “You sound like an old purist…”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked.

“That argument. ‘Muggleborns are at risk and a risk to the Statute of Secrecy’. Classic purist propaganda. It’s used to justified that we should kidnap muggleborns and erased their real parents’ memory, so they can be ‘properly’ raised by an old pureblood family. It’s either that or we let them be killed by the big bad muggles – who can’t possibly love their own children apparently. My Grand Aunt Lucretia used to add that it’s not that big of a sacrifice for our own security anyway… and just so you know, she was a Black…” He shook his head as if it explained everything. “Anyway, I’m glad that bitch is dead now… Mum hated her. Ah!” He exclaimed pointing a line in the book. “See here? The casual use of the M-word? No wonder coming from Malfoy!” He said with a satisfied smirk.

Harry and Hermione looked at the book and the word Ron was pointing: ‘Mudblood’. Harry had asked about it to Neville a few days earlier because it was used a lot in this book and Draco had seemed quite uncomfortable with it. He had explained that it was an old word to designate muggleborns, but it was not used anymore. Apparently, it was a really offensive insult nowadays. It had Harry think about the use of the word “nigger” in old English literature.

“The book is from the early 19th century,” Neville sighed. “It didn’t have the same meaning back then and you know it…”

“Really Neville? Is it what you Gran tells you to justify herself?” Ron taunted. “I didn’t know you were from that side…”

A cold shiver went through Harry’s veins. He really disliked the tone the ginger-headed was using to talk to Neville. “Ron! You stop right now!” He warned in a low voice.

“What? We knew that Malfoy was a purist prick, but I didn’t know that Neville was just the same and that they are both trying to corrupt you with racist propaganda…”

“You’re the only one acting like a racist idiot right now! Why do you always feel the need to insult my friends and their families on every occasion?! I’m sick of you!” Harry exploded.

“Harry…” Hermione tried to calm them down. “You don’t mean that…”

Harry just stared at Ron who did not seem apologetic or like he would take out his words at all. “I’m tired,” he announced clapping the book and gathering up his things. “Want to go finish this in the dorm Nev?”
“Yup.” The other boy answered mimicking his move.

“Harry…” Hermione tried to stop him from getting away, but it was too late.

The next morning, Harry was still feeling pissed by the whole argument. Why Ron could not just let Neville and Draco be? Harry would know if the two others were trying to manipulate him. And even if that book was controversial, Harry was old and smart enough to make his own decisions. To be honest, Draco’s book made more sense that *A History of Magic*. Of course, it fostered the fear and the hatred of muggles and muggle culture, but it was about facts that happened in the fourteenth century! Harry knew that the muggle culture had not always – if ever – been understanding to what was considered ‘abnormal’… Even now… himself was a good example of that… Not that he would give that argument to his friends… And he knew not everyone was like the Dursleys… Hermione’s parents seemed ok…

“Hey, Harry, Nev’!” Draco’s voice greeted them as they were arriving in front of the Great Hall.

“Morning, Draco,” Harry sighed. He did not want to think about that or about the Dursleys… He was at Hogwarts know. He would be safe for the next 8 months.

“What’s wrong?” the blond boy asked.

“Ron’s been a twat yesterday…” Neville explained.

They proceed to the Slytherin table and sat together. It was a habit they had taken since the beginning of the year. They would seat together for breakfast at either table every other day. Nobody had openly told them anything so far – except Ron the first time Draco had sat at the Gryffindor table of course.

Neville quickly explained what happened the previous evening to Draco while Harry put some fruits and bread in his plate.

“Harry?” Draco called him warily.

“Hum?”

“I know that that book is a bit… old-fashioned, but I want you to know that I’m not…”

“Draco, stop.” Harry cut him immediately. “I don’t think you’re a racist prick or whatever. You’ve never said anything alienating about muggles or muggleborns since I know you. I don’t care what Ron says about you and your family. He’s the only one I know who use the word ‘muggle’ as if it was a contagious disease.” Harry sighed. He did not like to complain about people behind their back. He should stop now. “What I mean is that… I trust you Draco and I know you weren’t trying to manipulate me or my opinion with that book.”

Harry looked up and Draco’s uneasiness faded slowly from his eyes. He smiled at him. “Ok. Thank you.”

“No need,” Harry dismissed before going back to his plate.

“I’ve got mail from my dad, last night. Artemis found me on my way back to the castle, I guessed she didn’t want to wait this morning to give me my letter,” the Slytherin chuckled.

“Anything new?” Neville asked.
“Well… Actually, Dad asked me to confirm with you that… this –“, he took out a picture from the envelope, “– is your friend.”

Harry looked up again and saw a stern picture of Ace. She looked just like the last time he saw her… well not exactly. He took the picture from Draco’s hand. She had dark circles under the eyes and not a single spark of joy in her look. She wasn’t smiling nor crying. She was just fixing the camera with a slight frown. What happened to her that day to deserve that closed expression on her face?

“Yes, it’s her,” Harry answered giving the picture back and looking away.

“Ok. Dad wanted to be sure before he asked for her complete file,” Draco explained, and Harry only nodded as an answer. “Mom agreed with you by the way. She said that your friend does have Black’s eyes… ah, that’s what we called our signature silver eyes. Mom doesn’t have them, but she said that her cousins did and that there definitely are some family resemblances there. She intends to dig into every family cupboard to see if we are related to her…”

“That’s nice of her…” Harry muttered.

To be honest, Harry did not really want Ace to be from Draco’s family. If she was, that meant that Draco’s family was the kind of people that could beat up a child – a toddler?! – just because she was not magical… What if they found out that Ace did kill that crazy old witch? What if they wanted revenge? They would not, right?

“Draco…?” he said slowly. “If… if your parents find her… do… do you think they could protect her?”

“Of course! They’ll make sure that she’s okay and if they find her real family, maybe they can…”

“No!” Harry stopped him. “No. Ace, she… she ran away from that family when she was 5 because… Well, your father will read her file from the social services, so he would know why and…” Harry shook his head. “They can’t give her back to that family without asking her first. Can they do that?”

Draco seemed startled by his request. “I… I guess… I’ll tell them.”

“Thank you…”

Harry missed the shared look between his friends as he went back to his breakfast and try to eat some more. He felt full already. Maybe he should stop.

“Draco? Do want to go out and fly a bit?”

“Err… I still have my essay for Binns to finish…”

“Oh…”

“But I can do that later! So sure, let’s go out so you can show me your new moves!” The blond finished his sentence brightly.

“Hey! Did Flint put you on this?”

“I won’t answer that question,” Draco smirked.

Neville shook his head and giggled a soft “Snakes…” before following them out of the Great Hall.
The end of October came as a blast and soon the Great Hall was full of pumpkins and fake spider web.

Harry was glad to finally see the end of his detentions with Lockhart. Even after two months, he was still unable to calm his nerves when he had been near the man for a significant time period.

“I don’t know what I’ll do without your help, Harry!”

It was the 31st of October and Harry was having his very last detention that afternoon. For once, Lockhart was at his desk and not above Harry’s shoulders.

“I told some of my dearest fans that I was tutoring you on how to handle your celebrity and some of them started to send some kind words for you too.”

Harry was currently focused on the list of addresses he was supposed to be copying. He decided not to look up, he had come to know how much Lockhart loved the sound of his own voice. His wrist was starting to ache again, it must be meaning that he was almost done… Or that yesterday Quidditch practice was worse than what he first thought…

Harry jolted out of his thoughts when a set of arms enlaced him from behind.

“Here, see?” Lockhart continued, shoving a rose smelling letter in his face and unconcerned by Harry’s reaction. “Dear Mrs Armelthouth said that I’m a blessing for taking up the father figure you so desperately need and deserve.” Lockhart sighed heavily against Harry’s neck. “Such a dear…” He exhaled dramatically.

Harry did not comment, and the man finally let him go of his grasp, only leaving a lingering hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“It’s been eleven years today, hasn’t it?” Lockhart said. “Such a shame I was not there… I mean, of course, I was still at Hogwarts myself at the time… Yet, I was already a renown young prodigy who just got the most flying colours on his OWLS.” He shook his blond wig. “Sadly, I couldn’t sacrifice my brilliant education to save everyone just yet… And you know what they were saying at the time… The Dark Lord was only the shadow of what he once had been, already declining, it was only a matter of time before he would encounter his equal… According to all accounts, your parents were just ill-prepared. I knew James Potter, gave him some advice on Quidditch strategy when we were in school… He has always been the reckless type… such a shame, really… They said that your mother’s body was found in your nursery… I didn’t know her that much, but they were always saying that she was a charm prodigy. Maybe she was the one who defeated the Dark Lord and not really you… Well, I guess there’s no harm for you to try and take the credit, she died for you after all…”

“Stop…” Harry hissed, feeling his last layer of patience running short. He could not stand that this fraud of a man was criticizing his parents…

“Eh?” Lockhart turned his face to look at him. “Did you say something? Oh! Look at the time! I’ll need to let you go! We wouldn’t want you to miss the Feast celebrating your only moment of glory! I’ve got several feasts on my honour myself, I must admit, it never gets old! Don’t get too used to it though, nobody likes big-headed boy and I feel a little bit concerned for you on that part… Anyway, we could talk about it next time, don’t you think?”

“Professor… it’s my last detention…” Harry dared to say out loud.

“What? Oh yes, you’re right! I totally forgot. It’s easy to forget when we are spending such valuable
time together every week! Oh, I know! Let’s take a picture together to immortalize this moment!” He seized Harry who had got up to gather his things and had him face the old trivet camera sitting in a corner of the room. Once again, his arm was around Harry’s shoulders, imposing him to stay in place. “You know of course that you’re always welcome in my office, Harry. As your mentor, I would hate that you hesitate to come and talk to me.”

“Leave me alone… You’re not my mentor…” Harry muttered, fixing the ground. He was losing it; a heavy stone had settled in his stomach. Were all his friends really celebrating the fact that he became an orphan tonight? The Dursleys had always made the 1st of November the worst day of the year for Harry, as a commemoration of the anniversary of the day he screwed their life by getting abandoned on their front door.

“What did you say, Harry? Don’t be so sad, I’m serious with my offer. My door will always be open to you, you don’t need to be ashamed.” Lockhart was now holding both Harry’s shoulders and facing him with deep false concern. It reminded him of Aunt Petunia when she wanted to make sure he would behave because one of her ‘friends’ was coming over.

“Get off me.” Harry rustled between his clenched jaws.

“What? Come on, Harry, don’t be like that. There’s no need to act like a rebel teenager… I know what you think, and of course, it’s never pleasant to be in someone else light… But it’s not a reason to put yourself in that shadowed path. I’m more than happy to share the spotlight with you for the time being. What about sharing this very picture with the Prophet? I’m sure that if I can get in touch with my dear friend Rita, we could be on the front page. How do you like that? It would certainly make your parents proud, don’t you think?”

That was it! The man was an asshole! “Shut up! Get off me! Leave me alone!!!”

Harry jerked out his grip, grabbed his bag and stormed out the room. He was suffocating. He needed fresh air. He needed to be alone to get hold of himself!

Unfortunately, he got caught into the flow of students heading to the Great Hall. They were all so loud, screaming, laughing, joking happily. All ready to celebrate his parents’ death… Harry needed to hide or find somewhere safe. If Vernon found him, he would be screwed… That day was not worth celebrating. Nothing involving Harry was worth celebrating… Especially not the fact that he had had to live with the Dursleys because of what happened that day.

“Harry!” several voices called for him.

Harry pressed himself against the wall, trying to disappear in it. His heart was bumping against his ears and his breath was running short. He crouched, protecting his head with his hands. Maybe if he was small enough, nobody would notice him, and he could calm down on his own.

“No, Granger, don’t touch him!” Draco’s voice screamed.

Something touched his shoulder and he flinched. Dudley would be so glad to be able to humiliate him in front of the whole school. He hoped Ace would not see…

However, no pain came immediately. There were sudden moves around him. People were arguing. He would always take to blame if people argued around him. Harry looked up to see if he could find a way out. A flash blinded him.

Harry knew that the light had been white, but his mind insisted that it should have been green. A maniacal laugh echoed in his head. A body on the floor… red hair… His mother died for him… He
closed his eyes shot at the second flash. What was Ace’s body doing next to hers?

Someone stepped before Harry to protect him from the crowd. The shadow was comforting…

“Stop that! You stupid mudblood!” Draco barked.

“Draco!” Neville’s voice was just next to Harry. Right, Neville, Draco… he was at Hogwarts… he was safe… he was supposed to be safe…

“What?! I’m sure that even muggles would find it inappropriate! How would you feel if we take pictures of you when you’re sick, eh?!!”

“Creevey, leave. Please.” Neville’s voice pleaded just next to him.

There were whispers all around them. They were talking about him… Harry knew they were talking about him. He did not manage to keep his freakiness away. Everybody knew that he was a freak… His mother died for a freak… Ace died because of a freak…

“Harry?” Neville called softly. “Listen to me. We need to move. I’ll take you somewhere safe, ok?”

Harry wanted to nod but he was not sure that his muscles had really followed that order. Nevertheless, Neville gently grabbed his wrist and led him away from the crowd.

Harry came back to his sense an eternity later. They were in an empty classroom. Neville was sitting on the bench next to him, lightly stroking his arm. Draco was sulking a few rows away, he seemed upset.

Harry blinked. He felt good in Neville’s arms, but he was worried about Draco. He straightened up and both his friends turned their faces to him.

“You’re back?” Neville asked, letting go of his arm. “Are you feeling better?”

“Y-yeah…” Harry muttered. “Sorry…”

“Don’t worry,” Neville smiled.

“What happened?” Draco asked.

Neville frowned and glared at Draco, but Harry knew that they both deserved an answer. They were always such good friends and he was just a constant mess.

“Lockhart…” Harry started but did not find the words to describe what happened to his mind.

“Did he do something to you during detention?” Neville tried to help him.

“I knew it!” Draco exploded. “I’ll tell my Dad immediately! The guy isn’t only incompetent, he’s also a bloody paedophile! Dumbledore will be in so much trouble for having hired him!”

“What?! No! Eh? Why?!!” Harry looked at his friends. Neville seemed to agree with Draco’s conclusion but… Where did that idea come from?!

“It’s okay Har’!” Draco continued. “We figured out you know… I mean, Nev’ told me about how he was always on your back during class. And even I noticed how he can’t stop making physical contact every time we encounter him in the corridors… We hoped it was just that but… He’s clearly obsessed with you. It’s creepy…”
“I won’t argue with that but… paedophiles are people who have sex with children and… I mean he never… I didn’t…” Harry felt his cheek and ears burning at the mere idea. “I mean, we’ve always kept our clothes on!”

Neville and Draco shared a look as if he did not make any sense.

“Harry…” Neville took over. “Even without going so far as to… I mean, even if you had your clothes on… You seem always so stressed out and distraught when you came back from your detentions… We saw how he’s touching you in public so… we’re concerned about what he does to you in… private. Did he touch you somewhere that makes you feel uncomfortable?”

“Any touch makes me uncomfortable,” Harry reminded him and winced. He was such a freak.

“Not to the point that you have a panic attack in the hallway!” Draco snarled. “He crossed the line today, didn’t he? I knew we should have reported him earlier…”

Harry watched Draco… He seemed so upset for him. It was his fault. Because he was a freak who could not handle his emotions… Harry looked down, ashamed. He missed the deadly glare Neville send to Draco.

“We are just worried about you, Harry…” The Gryffindor explained softly. “Can you tell us what happened today?”

“He… It’s not because he was… I mean, he always touches me somehow but it’s not… I don’t think it’s like that.” Harry told them. “As it was my last detention, he wanted to take a picture…” Draco jolted up, ready to explode again and Harry winced when he understood the possible implication of what he just said. “Not like that! Just a portrait! With clothes on! He asked if he could send it to the Daily Prophet… Anyway, he just…well, touched me like he always does… just the shoulders and sometimes the hips but… never… I mean he never went to my underwear!” Harry tried to convince them. “It’s more what he said… He talked about my parents… about their death and… Is it really what the Halloween Feast is about? Voldemort killing them and disappearing trying to kill me?”

Harry sent imploring looks to his friends. They grimaced… it was true then.

“It would be a lie to say that no one celebrates the end of the last war on that day… Especially last year as it was the 10th anniversary… There were several articles about it on the Prophets and the Minister hold an official ceremony,” Draco said.

“I… I didn’t notice… I was kind of busy with a troll situation…” Harry explained.

“Not to look down on you or anything, Harry, but you don’t really strike me as the newspaper type anyway…” Draco smirked. “Anyway, Halloween is not only about that. It’s also an older tradition that we used to call Samhain. The muggle word took over a few decades ago. It’s a magical holiday. They say that the veil between the world of the livings and the deads is the thinnest on that night which makes it easier to perform certain types of magic…”

Neville moved uncomfortably next to Harry and the raven-haired eyed him. There was more behind that.

“It’s not really legal or socially accepted anymore,” Draco supplied when he noticed their reaction. “Anyway, there are also rituals that you can perform on that night that allow one person to speak to their ancestors… I did it with my mum once after my 10th birthday, she called for my godfather who was also her cousin… He died a few months after I was born…”

“How was it?”
“Strange…? He didn’t talk much… He was so young… It was kind of scary…”

“Can we do it to speak to my parents?” Harry asked.

Draco seemed uncomfortable with his request. “I’m too young to do it on my own but if you want, I can ask my mother if she can help us prepare for next year…?”

Harry nodded. He was not sure if that was a good idea… What would his parents say when they realized that he was a freak?

“Rituals aside, it’s the day we pay our due to the dead,” Neville explained. “So even amongst the people celebrating the end of the war, most of them know the sacrifice your parents and others who fought during the war made. They usually paid their respect on their grave in Godric Hollow. I went with my Gran a few times. You see, even if my parents aren’t… dead, I lost them on the 31st of October 1981 too… One of their old colleagues told me once that they were on a lead and had decided to take action that night because they hoped the suspects would be distracted with Samhain celebration… Of course, they didn’t know it was just a set-up…” Neville shivered, and Harry took his hand while Draco came and sat next to them. “Gran told me that, even if they’re not dead, a part of their soul went through the Veil that night and that… it’s ok if, for one night every year, we mourn them properly by paying our respect to those who fought for the same ideals as them…”

“Neville…” Harry started without really knowing what to say.

“It’s okay, don’t worry… It’s just that… well just like you, I don’t really like that some made a Feast about it… as if it was something happy when it’s just… I’d rather have a quiet evening on that day, really.”

Harry nodded and squeezed Neville’s hand lightly as Draco side-hugged his friend. They stayed like that for long minutes.

Harry thought back on his evening… everything they talked about… the scene he put on the hallway… He was sure everyone in school was talking about it by now…

“I don’t want to go to the Great Hall…” he admitted to his friends.

“Me neither…” They both answered at the same time.

“Maybe we could ask a House Elf to bring us food here?” Draco suggested.

“Can we do that?” Harry asked.

“Well, last year I would have asked Dobby but… maybe I can call Uncle Sev’ personal house elf… Linkle?”

They waited a few seconds and a small house-elf dressed in a Slytherin green towel popped in the classroom. The elf looked at them warily before frowning.

“You is not allowed to call for Linkle unless it’s an emergency, Young master Slytherin,” She said. “What is it that you need? Should Linkle call Master Potion Master Snape?”

“No! No, no… there’s not really an emergency but we were wondering if you could bring us a light dinner here?”

“Please?” Harry added.
The elf eyed him before answering. “The dinner is being served in the Great Hall. Master students need to go to the Great Hall if they are hungry.”

“We were thinking of having a quiet dinner here, so we can pay our respect to our lost ones properly…” Neville explained.

The elf seemed to think about it before tinkling her head to the side. “Young master students may try to go directly to the kitchen… The staircase is on the left of the Great Hall entrance, you needs to go down and tickle the pear. Linkle will tell Pitts to expect young master students now.”

She popped out.

The three friends shared a look.

“Well, I think that means that we need to move…” Neville commented.

“It was worth trying…” Draco shrugged.

“How do you know Snape’s personal elf anyway?” Harry joked, getting up and leading the way out of the room.

Most students were still at the Feast, so the corridors were completely empty.

“Well… I know he’s been a dick to you last year and… well, I’ve already told him how I felt about that but… well… he’s still my Head of House and my parents’ friend and…” Draco was dancing around his words.

“It’s okay Draco. I won’t force you to hate a family member just because they don’t like me,” Harry smiled at him.

There was so much hope in the look Draco sent him that it made Harry chuckled. He took a step toward Draco and slightly side-hugged him.

“Thank you for caring…” he said softly before letting him go and served the same treatment to Neville. “You’re great friends and I love you.”

Draco blushed, and Neville chuckled shyly.

“Yeah… well, don’t forget that next time you tried to cast us off ok?” Draco snarled.

“We love you too Harry,” Neville cut him off promptly. “You both are the best friends I ever have!”

The two Gryffindors brightly smiled at each other.

“Merlin, when did we become so cheesy?” the Slytherin complained.

And then Harry heard it.

“…rip…tear…kill…”

It was the same cold and murderous voice he had heard in Lockhart’s office during his first detention.

He stumbled to a halt, staring at the stone wall where he thought the voice was coming from.

“Harry, what are you…”
“Did you hear that?” Harry shut Draco off, trying to listen with all his might.

“… sooo hungry… for so long…”

“Listen!” said Harry urgently, and Neville and Draco froze, watching him.

“…kill… time to kill…”

The voice was growing fainter. Harry was sure it was moving away – moving upwards. The ring on his finger felt suddenly freezing cold. A mixture of fear and excitement gripped him as he stared at the dark ceiling.

“This way,” he shouted, and he began to sprint up to the staircase to the first floor, Neville and Draco ran after him.

“Harry, what are we…”

“… I smell blood… I SMELL BLOOD…”

His stomach lurched. “It’s going to kill someone!” he shouted.

“What?!!”

Harry ran up the next flight of steps, he needed to know. Someone might be in danger!

“Harry, wait! What’s that all about?!!” Draco called after him. “I didn’t hear anything…”

But Neville gave a sudden gasp, pointing down the corridor. “Look!”

Something was shining on the wall ahead. They approached, slowly, only their heavy pants breaking the silence. Large red letters had been daubed on the wall between two windows.  

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

“What’s that thing – hanging underneath?” Draco asked.

As they edged nearer, Neville almost slipped over because of the large puddle of water on the floor. Harry grabbed him and stabilized him without moving his eyes out of the immobile body Mrs Norris… Oh… they were going to be in so much trouble…

For a few seconds, they didn’t move. “Let’s get out of here,” Draco said. “We don’t want to be found here…”

But it was too late. A rumble, as thought of distant thunder, told them that the feast had just ended. From either end of the corridor came the sound of hundreds of feet climbing the stairs, and the loud, happy talk of well-fed people. A second later, students were crashing into the passage from both ends and the noise died suddenly as the people in front spotted the hanging cat.

Harry, Neville and Draco stood alone, in the middle of the corridor and Harry spotted Hermione’s disbelieved face in the silent crowd.

“What have you done now, Malfoy?!!” Ron shouted next to her. “I knew you wouldn’t stop at insults. That’s why we told you you shouldn’t hang out with him, Harry!”

Harry felt Draco starting to tremble next to him and grabbed his hand, ready to defend his friend when another voice resonated in the corridor.
“What’s going on here?” Filch came shouldering his way through the crowd. Then he saw Mrs Norris and fell back, clutching his face in horror.

“Mrs Norris!!! My cat!! What have you done to Mrs Norris?” he shrieked, and his popping eyes fell on Harry. “You!” He screeched. “You! You’ve murdered my cat! You’ve killed her! I’ll kill you!!!”

And it reminded Harry so much of Uncle Vernon’s threats that Harry knew no more if Draco was the one shaking in the end…

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading. Please tell me what you think~
The atmosphere was heavy in Lockhart’s office. Dumbledore had decided they would retreat there at it was the nearest office to the crime scene.

Harry was waiting nervously clinching Draco’s hand while Neville was grabbing forcefully his robe sleeve. He knew there was no way out of this situation. He used to know better than to get caught around any suspicious circumstances. His relatives had always made sure that everybody knew he was responsible no matter what.

Dumbledore was currently inspecting Mrs Norris. Snape was looming behind him, half in a shadow while Professor McGonagall was trying to comfort a very distraught Mr Filch. Lockhart was hovering around all of them, making suggestions that no one seemed to really listen or even hear.

At last, Dumbledore straightened up.

“She’s not dead, Argus,” he said softly.

“Not dead?” Filch choked. “But why’s she all – all stiffed and frozen?”

“She has been petrified,” the headmaster said. “But how, I cannot say…”

“Ask them!!!” Filch shrieked pointing at the trio. “Potter knows I’m a squib! And we all know how old Sacred 28 pureblood families like the Longbottoms, or the Malfoys treat squibs!”

“They haven’t done anything!” Harry said loudly, taking one step ahead to place himself between the adults and his friends. He was uncomfortably aware of everyone looking at him, but he could not let his friends go down because of him. It was his fault if they were there because he was stupid enough to follow an unknown and invisible threatening voice!

“Are you suggesting that you, on the other hand, are not as unrelated to this situation as your friends, Potter?” Snape snarled lifting an eyebrow.

Harry lowered his head. He knew it was useless to defend himself because no one ever trusted him, especially not Snape.

“Harry has nothing to do with it either,” Draco said calmly next to him. “We have been together since he left his detention with Professor Lockhart. We were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“And may we know why were you in the upstairs corridor at all? Why weren’t you at the Hallowe’en Feast?”

The three friends remained silent. Neither of them wanted to talk about Harry’s panic attack or the voice that drove them to the 2nd-floor corridor and that no one else had heard.

Surprisingly, it was Neville who finally answered the Potion Master’s question. “We wanted to have a quiet commemoration for our parents... it’s the anniversary of their…” He did not finish his sentence, but Draco quickly took over.
“We were in a classroom but we got hungry so I called Linkle and it told us that we could grab sandwiches in the kitchen.”

Snape assessed this answer while pitching his nose. “You called Slytherin Head Elf because you were hungry and didn’t want to bother to go to the Great Hall?” Draco nodded and Snape snarled. “You’re not supposed to call it unless it’s an emergency that requires immediate assistance.”

“I know. It told me,” Draco snapped. “It just told us how to get to the kitchen! That’s all! You can ask it!”

“It’s a lie!” Filch screamed. “The kitchen is in the dungeon! You were nowhere near it!”

“We were on our way when we found the cat,” Draco provided.

The Slytherin hold his Head of House’s gaze for long seconds.

“Well, that, on top of your unethical outburst from earlier, that would be four nights of detention and a written essay on Magical beings equality rights due on Monday, Mr Malfoy,” Snape sighed.

“Yes, sir,” Draco answered promptly.

“What about the others?!” Filch shrieked.

“I could administrate their det…” Lockhart started but was cut short by Professor McGonagall.

“There is no evidence at all that Potter or Longbottom has done anything wrong,” she stated.

“But my cat had been petrified! I want to see some punishment!”

“Innocent until proven guilty, Argus,” Dumbledore said firmly. “Don’t worry, we will be able to cure her. Professor Sprout recently managed to procure some Mandrakes. As soon as they have reached their full size, I will have a potion made which will revive Mrs Norris.”

“I’ll make it,” Lockhart butted in. “I must have done it a hundred times, I could whip up a Mandrake Restorative Draught in my sleep–”

“Excuse me,” said Snape icily, “but I believe I am the Potion Master at this school.”

There was a very awkward pause.

“You may go,” Dumbledore said to Harry, Neville and Draco.

“No, you may not!” Snape immediately quitted sending his killing stare to focus back on the Headmaster. “We don’t know what attacked the cat, I’d rather escort my student back to his dorm myself. I recommend that you do the same, Minerva.”

“I agree, Severus,” the stern woman said. “Oh, would you be so kind as to stop by the kitchen and ask that the sandwiches were sent directly to Gryffindor common room? We wouldn’t want the boy to go to bed on an empty stomach, would we?”

Snape snarled but stiffly nodded before gesturing Draco to go with him. The Slytherin said a quick bye to his friends before following his Head of House.

Harry and Neville followed Professor McGonagall through the castle in silence. When they arrived at the Fat Lady Portrait, a house-elf appeared in a red and golden pillowcase with a plate full of sandwiched and pumpkin pastries.
“I think that’s your dinner, boys,” the Transfiguration professor said. “Off you go.” And with that, she left them.

They decided to keep a low profile and to go directly to their dorm. On the staircase leading to their room, Harry stopped Neville.

“Do you think we should have told them about that voice?” he whispered.

“What? What voice?”

“Didn’t you hear? Just before we found Mrs Norris?”

“What? No. We didn’t hear anything. You just start running on your own and… Harry, did you hear a voice?” Neville asked worriedly.

“I…” Harry grimaced and looked down, feeling like a freak again.

“Hey, maybe it’s nothing… Maybe you were tired from your… episode from earlier and… I mean…”

Great, now, Neville thought he was crazy and had a hallucination… a hallucination that led them to a petrified cat… “Yeah… you’re right… I’m tired…” Harry dismissed quickly resuming their quiet journey to their dorm. He could feel Neville’s worried eyes on him, but he did not want to tackle the subject anymore. Tiredness was a better excuse after all.

“Here you are!” Hermione’s shrieking voice greeted them as they opened their dorm door. “Are you okay? Are you in trouble???”

“We saw Snape going in after you, this couldn’t be good…” Dean grimaced.

Harry had to repress a sigh. He knew his friends would not let him sleep as long as they hadn’t got the complete story. Thus, he started explaining what Dumbledore found out about Mrs Norris, and no, she was not dead, and yes, he believed she would be okay after the potion was ready.

“How can Professor Dumbledore be sure that the Mandrake Restorative Draught will cure Mrs Norris if he doesn’t know for sure what had put her in that state?” Hermione wondered.

“Err… I don’t know…” Harry answered honestly. He did not think 2nd years were supposed to have this kind of knowledge so Dumbledore surely knew what was best.

“And why does he have to wait for Professor Sprout’s mandrakes to mature? Can’t an external shop provide it?”

Harry sent a desperate look at Neville. He did not have the energy to go through Hermione’s interrogatory and he did not have this kind of answers anyway.

“We don’t know why he decided to wait for Professor Sprout’s to mature,” Neville answered for him. “Mandrake root has the power to restore those who have been transfigured or cursed to their original state… maybe the fresher they are the better the result will be. As Professor Dumbledore doesn’t know for sure what caused the petrification, he might want to go for the strongest cure…”

Hermione seemed satisfied by this answer and nodded approvingly.

“So, none of you got detention?” Ron asked.

“Well, Draco got detention with Snape…”
“I knew it!”

“Not because of Mrs Norris!” Neville cut him off angrily. “He has nothing to do with it… He got detention because of… what he called Colin Creevey earlier…”

“Didn’t expect Snape to give him detention about that,” Ron smirked.

“Of course, he got detention,” Hermione commented. “It’s forbidden to use that word, isn’t it? Professor Snape only applied the school rule…”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t have been punished if there weren’t so many witnesses from other houses… The other teachers surely forced Snape to sanction it…” Seamus analysed. “But you don’t seem that bothered about it…” He added, looking at Neville and Harry. “Still want to be friend with that guy after that?”

“Draco is not always like that!” Neville argued. “He was stressed out and didn’t think before he spoke.”

“One more reason not to trust him! I mean, he just revealed his true nature, didn’t he?”

“Can we stop talking about Draco behind his back, please?” Harry sighed. “I’m tired, I’m going to bed.”

“You haven’t eaten…” Neville said. “You’re sure you don’t want a sandwich first?”

Harry considered the plate, then looked at his friend and shook his head slightly. “I’m ok, Nev’. Thank you.” He took his night clothes and went to the bathroom door, but a soft hand stopped him.

Harry looked at Hermione. She seemed worried and they were now apart from the rest of the boys who were all eating the sandwiches and pastries with delight. “Harry… about earlier… before dinner…” the bushy girl started looking out-of-characterly unsure. “Are you alright?”

She seemed so genuinely concerned that Harry did not feel like lying to her. “I’m… I’ve been better. I don’t want to talk about it now… I think I need to sleep some parts off…” He saw her opening her mouth to argue so he quickly finished expressing his thought. “Maybe we can talk tomorrow? Only you and me? If you have time, of course.”

“I always have time for you, Harry.” She beamed. “You’re my friend.”

He smiled at her and she smiled back brightly before looking unsure again. She looked like she wanted to ask him something, but she decided otherwise as she shook her head and told him a soft: “Good night, Harry. See you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” he answered as she left the room.

The next day was a Sunday and it was quite sunny for a 1st of November. But even the sun was not strong enough to get rid of the gloomy atmosphere spreading inside Hogwarts castle.

During breakfast already, Harry could hear the whispers following Neville and him. The Great Hall was not that crowded though… But it was nothing compared to the utter silence that welcomed the Slytherin students as they entered as a united House. They usually only did this kind of appearance on the first day of school or at the End-of-Term Feast… Harry spotted Draco amongst them, but the blond was surrounded by upper-years and clearly trying to keep a low profile.
Harry and Neville wondered what had happened the previous night in the Slytherin Common Room. They just hoped that their friend was not in too much trouble. At least, the Slytherins seemed protective but was that necessary? Some might see it as a confession… The two Gryffindors were hearing that theory being spread along their table and Ron was not even there yet.

After breakfast, Neville went playing gobstones with Susan, Hannah and other Hufflepuff. Hermione found Harry and they went for a walk around the Black Lake.

As expected, Hermione did most the talking. She spoke about the Chamber of Secret being Salazar Slytherin’s secret quarter that he built because he did not agree with the three other Hogwarts founders. Only Slytherin’s true heir was supposed to be able to open it and release the monster sleeping within its wall. She read all about it in *Hogwarts: A History*. She eventually noticed Harry’s lack of interest in this topic and quieted down a bit.

“You said you wanted to talk about what happened yesterday…” she said after a few minutes of awkward silence. “Did you change your mind?”

Harry blinked out of his starring at the Giant Squid and looked back at her. She seemed upset but also worried. He did say he would talk to her… It was just more difficult than he thought.

“I’m sorry…” he said. “I just… I don’t know where to start…” he admitted.

“Did something happen during Professor Lockhart’s detention? I know you guys don’t like him very much but there’s really no reason to be jealous. I know it sounds like he brags a bit, but he has no reason to be ashamed of what he has done in his life! He…”

“Hermione!” Harry cut her off and she seemed even more upset. “Can we just not talk about Lockhart, please?” He sighed. “It’s not about him anyway.”

She seemed ready to protest again but managed to control herself. “Ok.” she said. “What is it then?”

Harry looked away. “It’s just… I… I have some issues at home, and… I told you about Ace, my best friend? Well, last year I was worried she would be mad because I didn’t tell her I was going to Hogwarts but… at least I thought she was okay. Now, I know the truth and… I can’t stop thinking about what happened and sometimes it’s a bit too much…”

“You seem quite obsessed with that girl… Don’t take it the wrong way but not everything is about you. It’s not your fault if she screws her life over.”

“You don’t know her. You don’t know us! We were everything for each other and… I left. Sometimes I just hope I never came to Hogwarts at all.”

“You cannot say that! Of course, Sutton’s Grammar is a good school, but you wouldn’t have been able to learn about magic, potion, your people history literally anywhere else than Hogwarts! You wouldn’t have known about how your parents really died!”

“Well, about that, it was easier when they just died in a car crash and not because a psychopath murdered them but somehow didn’t manage to finish the job and now is actively trying to kill me from his grave…” He snapped at her. “Everything was easier when I was just the freak kid from Privet Drive,” he sighed. “Yesterday, Lockhart told me that they found my mum’s body in my nursery… I didn’t need that kind of detail but now I can’t forget about it… It’s just… like I said, sometimes it’s a bit too much and, yesterday I just freaked out… I’m sorry if I hurt in any way, I was not really… aware of what was going on around me…”

Harry was now staring at his feet and Hermione stayed surprisingly silent.
“Neville and Draco didn’t seem that surprised to see you like that…”

“It’s not the first time that’s happened… Remember last year when there was a rumour about Draco pushing me into the Black Lake?”

“Why didn’t you say a word about it last year? Did you speak to a teacher about it? Do Professor McGonagall know?”

“Madam Pomfrey probably told her…” he said evasively after a few seconds of silence, but he knew it was not the answer she was hoping for.

“You’re insufferable! If you’re feeling so bad, you must tell an adult! Especially if you’re suffering it from last year! I’m disappointed in you Harry! Really! Not only you didn’t tell Professor McGonagall, but you didn’t even tell us! Ron and I, we’re your friends and you’ve never talked about it! It’s what happened in August too, right? In Diagon Alley? And you went straight to Draco! Neville and him, they knew. You talk to them! You spend all your time with them! Do you even consider Ron and I as your friends too?”

“Of course, you’re my friends, Hermione!”

“Really? Then why are you avoiding us since the beginning of the year?”

“I’m not… Okay… I might have… But Hermione, it’s… Every time I’m around you, you can’t stop yourself from judging and patronizing me! You’re my friend, not my teacher. And Ron… What Ron always talk about is Draco and how he’s that awful character despite being one of my best friends!”

“Come on, don’t you think Ron has some right to be jealous of Draco? And I’m sure Draco says mean things about Ron too.”

“No, he doesn’t. Not in front of me, at least,” Harry honestly added. “I know they don’t like each other but last year, I told them both that I won’t have my friends fighting over me, and Draco got it. When we are together, neither Draco nor Neville would really talk about Ron or you. They respect that I’m friend with you four without distinction.”

“Neville isn’t so fine about that when you’re not there! In the train, he…”

“See?” Harry stopped her. “I… I know I haven’t been fair to you guys but, I don’t want you fighting.”

Hermione opened her mouth again but did not say a word. She must have realized some parts of what he said was true.

Harry stopped staring and absentmindedly stroke the ring on his finger. “You’re still my friends, Hermione. But I won’t cast Neville and Draco out again like I did last year.”

“We didn’t ask you to cast them away!”

“I know. But I did and… I’m bad at letting people in, Hermione. It’s not easy for me to tell you all that… I… Sometimes I just don’t want to talk about some stuff because I prefer not knowing and you, you hate not knowing and you never let go so…”

“Are you telling me that you don’t want to be our friend anymore?”

“I… no. I still think of you as my friends, Hermione. I’m just not very patient lately and I don’t want to fight with you two…”
“Okay. I’ll talk to Ron…” she finally said. “I… If we promise not to talk about Draco again… Would you spend some of your time with us?”

Harry eyed her. She was so determined all the time. He wished he had her spirit. “Okay… but no talking about the Chamber of Secrets either. You know how Ron is when he starts about Slytherins…”

“We’ll find other topics of conversation then!” she smiled.

“First Quidditch match is coming, might not be that hard!” Harry chuckled.

“Oh… don’t remind me! I still can’t understand why half of the rules were implemented in the first place!”

And indeed, the next Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Slytherin quickly put Mrs Norris in the background. Everyone seemed to have an opinion about how Harry could tackle Draco’s must faster broom.

Hermione and Ron kept their promise and managed to stay civil during that week. The fact that Draco mainly stayed with his fellow Slytherins during that time certainly helped. He had quickly explained to Neville and Harry during their shared Potion class that he did not really have a choice and that his House required it until the match. The snakes seemed worried that his Gryffindor friends were rubbing off their new seeker, and just did not really like the idea just before the big game. At least, it was what Draco quickly managed to write down to them before Snape noticed and forced them to quit any new attempt to communicate.

Harry woke up early on Saturday morning and lay for a while thinking about the coming Quidditch match. He was nervous, mainly at the thought of what Wood would say if Gryffindor lost but also at the idea of what his victory against Draco could do to their friendship.

They both knew this day would come, and so far, the competition had stayed friendly. But what would happen in a real game? When both of them would be under crushing pressure from their respective captain? Playing it easy against his friend was not an option, of course, but what if Slytherin played it dirty like they did the previous year? Would he be able to forgive his friend if he plays by Flint’s rules? Would it cost Draco his position in the Slytherin team if he did not?

Harry spent the morning with his teammates. They were all equally anxious. Slytherins had better brooms, if not all as good as Draco’s, and they knew this match was always the hardest of the season. Soon they all pulled on their scarlet Gryffindor robes, then sat down to listen to Wood’s usual pre-match pep talk.

Wood ended his speech with Harry, “It’ll be down to you, Harry, to show them that a Seeker has to have something more than a good broom. I know you’re friend with the lad, and that’s probably why they chose him. Flint expects you to go easy on Malfoy. I count on you to prove him wrong. Get that Snitch before Malfoy or die trying, Harry, because we’ve got to win today, we’ve got to.”

“So, no pressure Harry,” said Fred winking at him.

As they walked out onto the pitch, a roar of noise greeted them. Madam Hooch asked Flint and Wood to shake hands, which they did, giving each other threatening stares and gripping rather harder than necessary. Harry exchanged a glance with Draco who looked like he was going to be sick. The raven boy gave his friend a shy smiled, mouthed “good luck” and managed to lighten a bit the
“On my whistle,” said Madam Hooch, “three… two… one…”

With a roar from the crowd to speed them upwards, the fourteen players rose towards the leaden sky. Harry flew higher than any of them, squinting around for the Snitch when a heavy black Bludger came pelting towards him. He avoided it so narrowly that he felt it ruffle his hair as it passed.

“Close one, Harry!” said George, streaking past him with his club in his hand, ready to knock the Bludger back towards a Slytherin. Harry saw George give the Bludger a powerful whack in the direction of Adrian Pucey, but the Bludger changed direction in mid-air and shot straight for Harry again.

Harry dropped quickly to avoid it, and George managed to hit it hard toward Flint. Once again, the Bludger swerved like a boomerang and shot at Harry’s head.

This scenario repeated itself a few times despite how strongly George and then Fred hit the Bludger.

“What’s going on?” Draco yelled from a few feet above them.

The twins snorted at him. There was no inter-house friendship during Quidditch match! Fred hit angrily the Bludger that came back again.

“This Bludger won’t leave me alone,” Harry answered hastily to his friend while manoeuvring to avoid a new attack.

“We need a time out,” said George, trying to signal to Wood and stop the Bludger breaking Harry’s nose at the same time.

Wood noticed them and they had their time-out. The twins explained what was happening and Harry looked at the Slytherin team. Draco was arguing with Flint and pointed him at some point. The Slytherin captain seemed furious with what his seeker was saying.

The Gryffindor team was arguing too. Fred and George wanted an inquiry. If they stopped now, they will have to forfeit the match and the Cup would be doomed for them.

“Listen”, said Harry, “with the twins flying around me all the time the only way I’m going to catch the Snitch is if it flies up my sleeve. You two, go back to the rest of the team and let me deal with the rogue one.”

“Don’t be thick,” said Fred, “It’ll take your head off.”

Wood was looking from Harry to the Weasleys.

“We’re not losing to Slytherin just because of a mad Bludger!” said Harry. “Tell them to leave me alone, I can handle it.”

“This is all your fault,” George said angrily to Wood. “‘Get the Snitch or die trying’, what a stupid thing to tell him!”

Madam Hooch joined them at that point and Wood looked at the determined look on Harry’s face before agreeing to resume the game, ordering George to keep an eye of the rogue Bludger but to focus on the rest of the team if Harry was not in immediate danger.

Harry kicked hard into the air and began dodging the Bludger which was already on him. He used
his speed and agility to lose the angry ball.

“Why Wood didn’t call off the match?” asked Draco, coming near him.

“I asked him not to,” Harry answered promptly changing direction. The Bludger came whistling in Harry’s ear.

“What?!! Why!!!”

“I want to win this match fair and square,” the Gryffindor answered.

“But it’s not fair if someone tampered with a Bludger! I asked Flint if he did it and…”

Harry did not hear the end of his friend’s sentence as he needed to dodge the Bludger again and flew away.

“Listen Draco, if you really want to help me, concentrate on the game and find that Snitch so we can end this!” He yelled. “I want to fight you fair and square, do your part!” With that, he went on a kind of twirl in mid-air, the Bludger trailing a few feet behind him.

Draco came back to him. “But Harry, that’s too dangerous, you could…”

“WATCH OUT!” Harry shouted, pushing Draco out the Bludger’s way.

WHAM!

The Bludger smashed into Harry’s elbow at the exact place where Draco had been an instant before. Harry felt his arm break.

“HARRY!” Draco yelled.

Dimly, dazed by the searing pain in his arm, Harry saw a golden flitch under Draco’s feet. The Bludger came pelting back for a second attack and Harry leaned on his broom, ignoring his friend’s worried inquiries.

“What the –” Draco gasped, careering out of Harry’s and the Bludger’s way.

Through a haze of pain, Harry took his remaining hand off his broom and made a wild snatch. He felt his fingers close on the cold Snitch but was now only gripping the broom with his legs. He began to drop and the Bludger hit his shoulder instead of his head.

“HAAARR’!!!!!”

The crowd’s yell covered Draco’s cry. Harry was trying hard not to pass out, but he did not know how to stop his fall. Green robe entered his view and a firm hand grab his broom, slowing him down. A red blur and flat sound behind him told him that one of the twins must have taking care of the never stopping Bludger.

He hit the ground and rolled off his broom.

“Harry? You’re alright???” Draco asked frantically next to him.

Harry raised his valid arm and focused on the Snitch clutched in his hand.

“Aha”, he said vaguely, “I’ve won.”
And he fainted.

When he came around, he was still lying on the pitch, with someone leaning over him. He saw a glitter of teeth and smelled lilac.

“Oh no, not you,” he moaned.

The pain prevented him from hearing the exchange that followed. He understood that his friends were around him too. Even blurry, Draco seemed pale, but Harry could not tell which of them was shaking. Neville was here too… and Hermione, and Ron… A click and a flash… and Colin Creevey...

Harry heard Draco lashing out against the first year and Neville arguing against Lockhart, something about bringing Harry to the Hospital Wing. Oh, Wood was here too. Harry thought he might be congratulating him. He wondered where the twins were…

Then a strange and unpleasant sensation started at his shoulder and spread all the way down to his fingertips. It felt as though his arm was being deflated and the pain subdued noticeably. Harry managed to focus a little more and looked down at his arm. People around him gasped, Colin Creevey began clicking away madly above Draco’s shoulder. Harry felt sick.

He really did not know how he ended up in the Hospital Wing, but the next thing Harry managed to be really aware of was Madam Pomfrey’s displeased face as she was inspecting his arm.

“… I can mend bones in a second – but growing them back –” she was muttering.

“You will be able to, won’t you?” said Draco desperately.

Harry looked up at his friend. He looked like he had been the one hit by the Bludger, he wondered if Draco got a side blow.

“I’ll be able to, certainly, but it will be painful,” said Madam Pomfrey grimly, putting a pair of pyjamas on Harry’s bed. “You’ll have to stay the night…”

He could do with pain, he quite used to it… He cannot think about his life with the Dursleys if he were to be permanently one-handed. Harry tried not to think about it while Neville and Draco were helping him into his pyjamas. He had not anticipated his friends’ gasp while discovering his back.

Fuck.

“Harry… what…”

“It… it’s nothing… just…” Just what? Would they believed if he told them he fell down the stairs? Into a bush of brambles?

“Wow? Is that from the Devil Snare, last year?” Ron said. “ Didn’t Pomfrey gave you a salve for that? My scars went off a few days into summer and they looked nowhere as bad as yours!”

Thanks Merlin for Ron! “That’s it!” Harry said brightly before realizing the shocked looks on Neville and Draco’s faces. “I mean… She gave me a salve but I kind of forgot to use it as it’s not painful and all and… well, no big deal… I’m cold.” He added hastily trying to put the pyjama top on his own.

Hermione and Madam Pomfrey came around the curtain when he said he was done. Madam Pomfrey was holding a large bottle of something labelled ‘Skele-Gro’.
“You're in for a rough night,” she said, pouring out a steaming beakerful and handing it to him. “Regrowing bones is a nasty business.”

So was taking the Skele-Gro. It burned Harry’s mouth and throat as it went down, making him cough and splutter. His friends were now arguing about Lockhart’s abilities and the match. Everything went back to blur for Harry. A stabbing pain soon appeared in his limp arm. He hardly heard Madam Pomfrey telling his friends to leave because he needed rest and fell asleep.

Draco could not sleep that night. He had tried and asked around, no Slytherin bragged about the tempering Bludger. Flint got angry with him when he accused him. He even yelled about him not noticing the Snitch before Harry. But how could have he focused on the Snitch when a rogue Bludger was attempting murder against his best friend?!! Harry got his arm broken while saving him!

Then there were the scars on Harry’s back… Harry had seemed far too happy when Weasley had talked about the Devil Snare… It was a lie. Draco was sure of it. He even borrowed a Herbology Book from one of the 6th year who took that discipline to NEWT level. There was a chapter on Devil Snare burns on it, he was almost certain that it did not fit Harry’s scars…

Maybe he could go and check again. He knew the secret passage from the Dungeon to the Hospital Wing thanks to the Weasley twins. Harry would be asleep anyway. He would not know that Draco was there. Once Draco would have evidence of his friend’s lie, he could confront him and learn the truth. He so desperately wanted Harry to tell him the truth.

That was how Draco found himself sneaking in the Hospital Wing in the middle of the night. He certainly did not expect to find his friend very much awake and sitting in his own bed.

“How do you feel?” Harry breathed. “But I think it was to be expected…”

Draco’s stomach clenched at the weak smile the raven-haired boy was sending him. “I’m sorry…” he muttered. “I asked around but… I don’t know who tampered with the Bludger… Flint said it was not on his order…” Draco shook his head. “I promise you, I’ll find who did it… I just need more time…”

“Hey, Drake, calm down,” Harry whispered turning a little more his way but clearly hurting himself in the process. Draco stepped ahead and grabbed his arms to help him. “He said it was to protect me. To force me to go home.” Harry grimaced at that. “He said it was too dangerous to stay here
because, according to him, whoever freed the *monster of Slytherin* would not be able to control it…”

“What?! How did it know that?? It’s not…” Then Draco noticed it; the warm coming from Harry’s body; the numerous drops of sweat soaking his mop of hair and falling down his chin. “Harry? Are you okay?!!”

“…no… not really…” Harry whispered. It seemed that he was not able to stay in a sitting position anymore. “It hurts…” He admitted. “It’s worse than I thought…”

“Harry?”

“I don’t want to go back there Draco… Don’t let them send me back…”

Harry was shivering madly in Draco’s arm. It reminded Draco of what happened that summer, but it seemed so much worse. Harry looked like even breathing was hurting him.

“Harry? Where do you hurt, precisely???”

“… everywhere…” Harry sighed and then Draco saw his eyes rolling up white.

“Harry???” he yelped. “HARRY???”

Draco did not notice the footsteps drawing nearer the doorway nor the teachers coming in.

“Mister Malfoy? What are you doing here?” Professor McGonagall addressed him.

“Harry! Something’s wrong with Harry!!” Draco frantically explained meanwhile, Albus Dumbledore himself was laying what seemed to be a statue on one bed.

“What have you done…” The Transfiguration Professor started hurrying in his direction.

“What is it?” she asked Dumbledore. “What happened?”

Another attack. Gryffindor 1st year, Colin Creevey,” said the Headmaster, his twinkling eyes were fixed on Draco. “Minerva found him on the stairs. He’s petrified…” Draco’s arm instinctively tightened around Harry’s weak body. “I think Mister Potter is in more immediate need of attention.”

The matron agreed at stepped in, gesturing Draco to release his friend. The Slytherin stepped back anxiously. The woman actively agitated her wand above Harry’s body. Her frown deepened.

“What’s going on?” Uncle Sev’s deep voice asked suddenly. “What are you doing here, Mister Malfoy?”

Draco looked up to his honorary uncle, trying his best not to break down. He opened his mouth to answer but Madam Pomfrey cut him.

“I think Potter is having an allergic reaction to the Skele-Gro,” she said.

Severus frowned and stepped in. “When was the potion administrated?”
“Around 5 pm.”

“Then it’s not an allergy, otherwise you would have noticed it earlier. How much did you give him?”

“Three spoons. He had a whole arm to grow back! And it worked. His arm seemed almost as new. I don’t understand what’s wrong!”

“He… he said he was hurting everywhere…” Draco mumbled, “…before passing out.”

Severus eyed him and muttered a spell above Harry. A shivering light shined under the Gryffindor skin, illuminating his arm then more softly, his torso, his other shoulder, his left wrist and some of his fingers, his knees, even his cheekbones…

“The potion is indeed done with his right arm and is now working on other parts of his body…” Severus analysed slowly.

“But…” Madam Pomfrey started before getting hold of herself. “We need to give him more Skelegro otherwise it would be too long and painful for him. We also need to give him a painkilling potion. No wonder the poor boy passed out, it’s a wonder he was awake at all!”

“I agree…”

“Do you perhaps have Draught of Living Death ready in your cabinet? We might need to put the boy in a medical coma for a few days…”

“I will have an Elf bring it to you,” Severus nodded his black eyes found Draco’s, but the blond boy could not get his eyes out of his friend’s lifeless body.

The acrid smell of burnt plastic attacked them suddenly. Severus left Harry to Madam Pomfrey and focused on Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall.

“Melted…” the Transfiguration Professor was mumbling. “Albus, what does this mean?”

“It means that the Chamber of Secrets is indeed open again,” Dumbledore said.

“But Albus… surely… who?”

Dumbledore did not answer this time but did send an accusing glare to Draco who stepped back until the dark robe of his Head of House blocked his view.

“Draco, go to my quarters. We’ll talk later.” Severus whispered.

Draco eyed Harry. He could not leave him alone. He could not go pass Dumbledore. What if the Slytherin monster was waiting for him outside? What if it went for Harry?? What if Dobby’s warning was true? He became aware of just how much he was shivering when his uncle’s firm hand secured him on his feet.

“Headmaster, it is late and if what you say is true, we might have a petrifying monster running free inside this castle. With your permission, I would like to escort my student back to his dormitory where he belongs.”

“Of course, Severus.”

“You’ll have my report on Mister Malfoy’s presence here long, first thing tomorrow morning.”

“I’m expecting no less from you, Severus.”
“Good night, then.”

“Good night, Severus.”

With that, the Potion Professor led Draco’s out of the Hospital Wing and down the Dungeons. They did not go to the Slytherin Common Room but directly to Severus’s private quarters. As soon as the door closed behind them, Severus kneeled in front of his young student.

“Draco, I need you to tell me what you were doing there,” he ordered urgently.

“I…” Draco started but the word strangled in his throat. Could he be honest with his uncle? Last year, when he did, it lashed out and he had lost Harry’s friendship for months because of it. And Harry was so… off this year. He did not want that situation to happen again!

“Draco, you can talk to me,” Severus affirmed.

Draco focused back on the adult. Could he, really? He helped Harry just now. He had seemed concerned. Harry was so badly hurting… They talked about Draught of Living Death…

“I don’t want Harry to die…” Draco muttered feeling tears burning his eyes. “Why is life always so hard on him…? I just wanted to help…” He repressed a sob. He did not want to cry. He was not a child anymore. His friend needed him, and he was just a cry-baby as always…

Draco shuddered when his Head of House’s hands firmly grabbed his shoulders.

“I’m sorry, Draco,” the Potion Master said in his grave voice. “I’m sorry if I failed you by not believing you last year. Your father told me about his concerns after his encounter with Potter this summer and after tonight… Well, it changes things.”

“It changes what? What’s happening to Harry??”

“He… The potion, he took…”

“The Skele-gro.”

“Yes. It’s occasionally used to regrow bones entirely. That’s why Madam Pomfrey gave it to him but once the bones had been grown back, the potion went back to its primary and more usual purpose: strengthening weakened bones. The fact that Potter has so many of them is… Let’s just say it’s not normal for a healthy boy his age…”

“Is he sick?”

“It could be osteoporosis, but he really is too young to be affected unless…”

Draco hated the way Severus did not finish his sentence. It felt like his father who was not responding to his inquiries about Harry’s muggle/squib friend! “Unless what?!”

“Unless he did not receive all the require nutriment growing-up,” Severus snapped. “Listen, this alone is not enough a proof to guarantee that Potter…”

“His back!” Draco cut him. “I went to the Hospital Wing to check on his back! He said it’s from the Devil Snare last year, but I checked, and it doesn’t match! I just wanted to check again, I thought he would be sleeping.”

Severus looked at him gravely. “Draco, listen…”
“No! I’m sick of listening. You’re dancing around the subject just like Father! He said he would do something, but he does nothing! He’s not even helping me finding that girl anymore! He said he’s busy with something else, but I know it’s not true! Just like he said he had managed Dobby and now that stupid elf is trying to kill my best friend to protect him from Slytherin monster! You’re the grown-ups, you listen! Harry needs help! He really really needs help! So, do something!”

And with that, Draco stormed out of the room. He did not care if Theo Nott jolted awake when he slammed their dorm room. He did not care if Blaise mumbled something about what was going on when he launched himself into his bed. He did not care if his Slytherin friends heard him cry. He only cared about Harry and about what the grown-ups around him were not doing to help him.

Chapter End Notes

Hello!
I hope it hasn't been too long! I feel like the time between Halloween and Christmas is always the worst for Harry...

If you're interested in a lighter and more fast-moving story, check out my other fic Teddy and The-Boy-Who-Lived which follows the adventure of 11-year-old Teddy Lupin as he accidentally travels back in time to 1991! I'm working on both fics at the same time, so, of course, I won't abandon this one, but I needed a little less angst to keep going so... well, I guess a little self-advertisement doesn't hurt!
You can find the fic here:
https://archiveofourown.org/works/17286461/chapters/40655117
Severus Snape was not easily shaken. However, seeing his honorary nephew storming out of his office in the middle of the night rattled something in him.

Draco was right, would it be any other child, Severus would have been more than concern about Potter’s condition. But it was not every other child! It was Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, Dumbledore’s Golden Boy…

After a quick localization spell to ensure that Draco was now in his dormitory, Severus went back to the Hospital Wing with the Draught of Living Death for Madam Pomfrey. The matron was still fussing around Potter; a quill was filling a parchment next to her as her diagnostic went on.

“Have you checked his back?” he asked, and the woman jolted up before glaring at him.

“His spine is as damaged as the rest of his body,” she answered sternly. “It’s a wonder the boy could even walk at all…”

“Not his bones, his skin…”

Madam Pomfrey frowned and pulled up the boy’s pyjama top. She gasped and Severus would have done the same should he not be in permanent control of his emotions.

“The boy told his friends it was from the Devil Snare last year…” Severus began.

“And you think I would have let him leave my Hospital Wing in that state?! This couldn’t possibly be caused by a Devil Snare…”

“Obviously… Unless the plant was wearing a belt…” Snape snarled.

“That’s not funny Severus!”

“Can you treat it?”

The matron stopped glaring and examined the boy’s body in detail. “Maybe, the newest scars certainly… They are only a few months old… I can’t do anything about the scaring of the oldest ones, though…” She frowned. “He had stayed here for a week last year; how could I have not noticed it sooner?”

“Could you report to the Headmaster once you’re done? I have something to attend to,” Severus said. He put the Draught of Living Death on the boy’s nightstand. “Here what you’ve asked for, I think he’ll need it.”

Madam Pomfrey pensively nodded as he left the room. She had her own theories and reflexions to go over with.

Severus went straight to his quarters again and threw a handful of floo powder in the fireplace.

“Malfy Manor!” he called before putting his face into the fire.

A small House Elf appeared in Malfy’s floo vestibule.
“Is your Master home and awake?” Severus asked. “Ask him if I can come over.”

The House Elf nodded and disappeared in a pop before reappearing in a similar fashion a few seconds later. “Master agrees to meeting you, Master Potion Master Snape.”

Severus went through and the elf led him to Lucius’s study. The blond man was reading a long parchment which was sealed with the Wizengamot’s crest.

“Don’t you ever sleep, Severus?” he asked glancing at him.

“Rarely. Do you?”

“How could I? This country needs me.” Lucius chuckled before quickly sobering up. “What is it? Is something wrong with Draco?”

“No,” Severus said. “Well, not directly… He might be in Dumbledore’s firing line, though…”

“How come?”

“He was caught wandering around after curfew earlier this evening. A Gryffindor 1st-year student happened to be found petrified at the same moment and in the same area. Dumbledore blamed the petrification on the Chamber of Secrets, it wasn’t helping that one of my Slytherin students was there… and had insulted said Gryffindor 1st-year student in public at several occasions…”

“Who is the Gryffindor?”

“A muggle-born. No one you would have heard about. The boy is a Potter fanboy who follows Potter everywhere to take his picture; apparently, Potter kindly signs them for him. Draco is passably pissed by the boy.”

“And did Draco tell you what he was doing out his dormitory after curfew?”

“He was checking on Potter who had been admitted in the Hospital Wing after the Quidditch Match…”

“Oh, right! Draco’s first Quidditch match was today, wasn’t it? How did it go?”

“We lost. But that’s not the matter.” Severus snarled. “During the game, Potter broke his arm and this incompetent peacock Lockhart managed to vanish his bones. Potter was too spent the night in the Hospital Wing to regrow his bones… However, when Draco visited him, the boy had passed out because of the pain…”

“Allergy?”

“No. The Skele-gro had finished most of its work on his arm and was now targeting other brittle bones in his body… which were almost all his bones.”

Lucius stared at him blankly and stayed silent.

“You told me this summer that you feared the boy might be underweight?” Severus continued.

“Well, he certainly was a lot lighter than Draco who isn’t in the highest part of his age range…”

“Chronic malnutrition can cause brittle bones…” Severus explained but he knew his friend had understood where he was going. “He also has whipping scars… loads… old and new. Those are why Draco was checking on him in the middle of the night. Potter had told him they were Devil
Snare burns and your son didn’t take it.”

“This summer, the boy thought I was angry and told Draco he would ‘take the blow’ in his stead… Do you think that was what he was referring to?”

“Might be… The newest scars were a few months old.”

“Does Dumbledore know?”

“I asked Pomfrey to tell him when she’s done.”

“Do you think he knew?” Lucius rephrased.

Severus stared at him. “Dumbledore wouldn’t let Potter being abused…”

“Wouldn’t he? He didn’t strike me as the child defender type when we were at Hogwarts.”

Severus winced at the reminder. “I was a Slytherin. Potter is his Golden Boy. The situation is different.”

Lucius sighed and shook his head. “Have you decided that Draco’s concerns are founded, then?”

“I…” Severus started but he knew that deep down, there was still a small voice telling him that it was just a stupid long ride prank the Potter boy must be playing. Draco had been right on that part, he just cannot trust Potter’s son.

Lucius sighed heavily. “There is something I need to show you…” he started, rumbling inside his desk drawer and taking out what seemed to be a muggle paper file. “Draco asked me to look out for one of Potter’s old friend… The kids suspect the girl to be a squib…”

“I think Draco complained that you wouldn’t update him about it…” Severus nodded.

“Yeah… He can be quite impatient sometimes…” Lucius admitted. “The thing is… there’s something strange with that file…”

He stretched the open file to Severus who looked at the designated page. It was a police statement report. The child was accusing a family from her neighbourhood of abusing and killing their nephew. The police stated that there was no evidence anything the child said was true and it was classified as a false alarm. The ‘abused nephew’ was known to be a pathological liar.

“What’s wrong with it?” Severus asked, not understanding what was troubling his friend in that statement.

“Don’t you notice it? I must tell it’s subtle but not enough to fool my Lord ring,” Lucius said playing with the said ring.

Severus frowned and took his wand out. “Magicae Revelio,” he said, and the sheet of paper began to gleam lightly.

“Did you charm this file?” he asked Lucius.

“No,” he answered with a smile. “And it’s a Compulsion charm. It’s stronger on that piece but a few others had similar residue on them… Their common factor is the ‘abused friend’. I can’t confirm it, but I think it’s safe to assume that the child is Harry Potter. Any piece of the reports that talks about Potter had a Compulsion Charm leaning on it…”
Severus examined the muggle paper again. Indeed, there was a leaning impulsion to ignore the paragraph about the other kid. “It might come from a ward Dumbledore had put on the kid to protect him,” He rationalized. “Like a strong Disillusionment Charm. He did say he put the kid in a safe place 11 years ago.”

Lucius stared at him intensively. “I wasn’t able to determine the exact purpose of the compulsion so maybe it’s just that, a disillusionment to make sure no one notices the Boy-Who-Lived to be the Wizarding World’s child hero... But the consequences...” Lucius shook his head. “… The consequences are huge. Especially for someone who’s pretending to be the boy’s magical guardian.”

“What do you mean?”

“Augusta Longbottom contacted me at the end of August on her grandson’s exhortation. When she took Harry Potter to Gringotts, the boy appeared to not be in possession of neither his vaults’ keys nor his heir ring. The goblins told them that Sirius Black was still the boy’s magical guardian, despite Dumbledore’s claim. Apparently, they never received the transcript of Black’s trial, so they refused Dumbledore’s application. Yet, the Headmaster was in possession of Potter’s vault key last year when the Hogwarts’ gamekeeper introduced the boy to our world.”

“Hagrid introduced the boy?” Severus repeated disbelievingly.

“According to Draco, yes.” Lucius shook his head. “But that’s not the point. As his cousin, Narcissa asked for Black’s trial transcript at the DMLE but they are still taking their time to answer her request. An internal source told me that the file seems to have gone missing… somehow…”

“That’s…” the Potion Master began without really thinking what to say about that fact.

“We hired a private investigator. At this point, they presumed that it might not have been a trial at all…”

“Black’s guilt is indisputable!” Severus reacted immediately.

“We aren’t tackling that fact for now. However, as any member of our community, he did deserve at least a trial before being convicted for a lifetime in Azkaban. Especially as the heir of one of the Most Ancient and Noble Families seating in the Wizengamot.”

“I thought he had been disowned…”

“We thought that too... However, the death of the late Lord Black two years ago and then of my father-in-law last in June had put that theory to the ground... Draco should have been the heir apparent, but he’s not. We wouldn’t know for sure if it’s because of Sirius Black until we have him take an inheritance test, of course. But it’s either him, or either old Orion or Regulus had a child out of the wedlock before they died.” A playful glee was now dancing in his icing blue eyes.

“That’s not funny,” Severus snarled when he understood the innuendo.

“Come on, I would have totally rooted for you, had the rumour been confirmed…” Lucius smiled.

“Shut up.” Snape articulated before sending one last glance to the file in his hands. “Why this child hasn’t been affected by the Compulsion Charm over Potter?” He asked to refocus their discussion.

“No idea. Maybe it didn’t take on children? Hard to tell without knowing the details of the magic at work, really.”

“Are you still looking for the child?”
“Well, our investigation had been a little sidetracked by all this ‘compulsion’ mystery, but yes, I think we’ll resume our search soon. Draco insisted that it was important, and he doesn’t often ask for something like that.”

“I’ll need to go back. Dumbledore is waiting for my report on your son…”

“Can I ask you to keep into silence our discussion over Potter’s guardianship? We feel like Black would be easier to overrode than Dumbledore…”

Severus nodded at his friend. Dumbledore did not have to know about that plan anyway. He did not really care about the boy’s guardianship. And even if the abuse allegations were to be unmade, being in a family like the Malfoys could certainly at least teach the boy some respect and manners.

The sun wasn’t even up when Severus presented himself to the gargoyle guarding the Headmaster office.

“Lemon drop,” he snapped, despising Dumbledore for his choice of password.

He climbed up the stairs and entered the office without a word.


“Have you received Pomfrey’s report on Potter’s state?” Severus ignored him and asked in a neutral voice.

“I have, indeed. Not as alarming as it looked like, thankfully. You’re here to tell me about Mister Malfoy’s after curfew wandering, I think?” the old man reminded him.

Severus frowned. “Yes. He told me he was feeling concerned about his friend and just decided to check on him. He’ll get a week of detention with me and lost Slytherin 15 points.”

“Make it 20 points,” Dumbledore nodded pensively. “Did the boy see anything in the corridors while he was wandering?”

“I didn’t ask. Mister Malfoy was very distraught about his friend’s health. I’ll ask him later when he would have had some rest. May I inquire what you mean when you said that Potter’s state isn’t as alarming as it looked? Pomfrey told you about his back, right? And about the likely cause of the Skele-Gro’s incident? May I inform you that the boy is under the Draught of Living Death?”

Dumbledore eyed him quizzingly. “I thought you don’t really care for the boy. Do you forget who his father is already?” he almost giggled. “I’m afraid the boy has just failed to inform Poppy that he had been in a car accident this summer… It seemed his bones were more damaged than what the muggle medical staff had noticed. You know how backward the muggles are regarding healing…”

Not that much, Severus thought. An X-ray scan should have been enough to detect at least part of the problem… And it didn’t match with the boy’s other injuries.


“I’m afraid that you are letting your personal experience obscuring your judgement, my boy.” Dumbledore got up and lay his hands on Severus’s shoulders, forcing him to look in his watery blue eyes. “I’m sorry I haven’t been a greater help to you when you were his age, Severus. But Harry Potter’s injuries are all from the car crash and a bit of laziness from his part to follow his muggle...”
doctors’ recommendation regarding his healing. I don’t know why he didn’t tell Mister Malfoy, maybe he didn’t want to encourage his view on the danger of muggles… Or maybe unlike what Mister Malfoy think, the boy didn’t trust him as a friend just yet. Well, it could also be about pride and not looking weak, you know how the Potters are, especially at this age!” Dumbledore chuckled and let Severus’s shoulders go.

Severus nodded. It made sense. The boy was just like his father. He maybe chose to keep his scars just to make others pity him… He wondered how he could have fallen for it so quickly… he should not forget how the boy’s father had always been able to make elaborated jokes just like those and more than once just to avoid class and go flying around in his stupid broom!

“Oh, and Severus?” Dumbledore addressed him again. “There is no need to protect the whole ‘friend’ act between Mister Malfoy and Mister Potter. We both know Mister Malfoy’s interest on Mister Potter is merely networking and power play probably orchestrated by his father…” Dumbledore sighed. “I would like you to keep a close look on the boy. His distraught may not be caused by his so-called friend’s state but by other events occurring that night…”

Severus’s eyes flashed up and glared at the old man. “I doubt Mister Malfoy has anything to do with the petrification of Mister Creevey,” he hissed.

“Maybe…” Dumbledore admitted calmly. “We’ll see…”

Neville had a hard time getting up this morning. When he opened his eyes, he could not stop himself from looking at Harry’s empty bed. He hated the way his friend always managed to end up in the Hospital Wing. He couldn’t stop thinking about it the previous night and he had been unable to go to sleep for long hours. He hoped Harry would be better today…

When Neville made his way to the Great Hall alone and spotted Draco’s sulking mood and the way his fellow Slytherins were sending angry looked at him, he knew his friend had spent a bad night too.

Neville sat at the Gryffindor table and ate quickly. As soon as he finished, he got up and went to see Draco.

“Hello,” he said softly.

Draco looked up. He looked worst from up close. Did he even sleep last night?

“Morning,” Draco muttered and a few other Slytherins sent murdering glare at them.

“Are they still mad at you for the Quidditch match?” Neville whispered.

Draco grimaced. “No… I… I was caught after curfew last night and I lost a couple of points…” He explained evasively.

Neville wanted to ask what he was doing out after curfew but if Draco did not tell him just now, it was probably because he did not want to talk about it in front of the others.

“Want to go check on Harry?” Neville proposed and Draco’s mood seemed to turn even grimmer.

“Attention please,” Professor McGonagall called from the teacher table. “As you may have noticed, two of your fellow students are missing this morning. A terrible attack occurred yesterday, and Gryffindor first-year Colin Creevey had been found petrified by the Hospital Wing. We don’t know
yet what attacked him, but we would like you all to be careful and to respect the curfew by all means. Of course, young mister Creevey’s life is not in danger and he will be cured as soon as Madam Sprout’s mandrake will maturate.

On another note, Harry Potter suffers from complications following his accident during the Quidditch match yesterday. He’ll stay in the Hospital Wing for a week.

For security reasons, the visits to both students will be forbidden until further notice. Please do not bother Madam Pomfrey about it as she needs to stay focus on her patients’ needs.

Thank you.”

A dead silence befell on the Great Hall before it burst into frantic whispers. A few eyes turned to Draco and Neville decided to take him out the room so they could talk.

“You knew about Harry,” he accused him as soon as they arrived at their designated abandoned classroom and closed the door. “How?”

Draco looked away. “I… I was worried. After… well, you saw the scars too, right? I checked it up, it doesn’t match Devil Snare’s burns… and… well, I wanted to be sure, and I couldn’t sleep anyway, so I went to the Hospital Wing, but…”

He stopped and looked down. Neville felt restless. “But, what?!”

“But Harry wasn’t feeling well!” Draco yelled. “It… it was worse than what it was supposed to be and… He told me he hurt everywhere, and he passed out! Like not just falling back asleep, really passed out!! And then… well, then Dumbledore and McGonagall brought Creevey in and they called Snape and…”

“Do you know what happened?” Neville asked.

“To Creevey? No… they said it was the Chamber of Secrets, but…”

“No, not him. To Harry,” Neville specified.

“Oh… Uncle Sev’ didn’t know for sure…. He said that the Skele-gro was working on bones it wasn’t supposed to and… he said that… that nutrient deficiency growing up could cause generalized weak bones…”

“Do you mean…?” Neville started, eyes big with horror.

“Maybe Harry had been starved as a child… for a long period of time according to the book I found in Slytherin’s library…” Draco confirmed.

Neville felt sick. It can’t be possible, right? They all always said that Harry Potter was loved by his family and taking care of in the Prophet…

“What about his scars? You said it couldn’t be the Devil Snare…”

“I… I don’t know… I had kind of a fight with Uncle Sev’ and… I left,” Draco admitted looking ashamed. “I did tell him, though…”

“Draco…” Neville started remembering what happened the previous year when they tried to speak to Snape.

“I know! But… but it’s serious, Nev’… We’re just kids and…” Draco was freaking out so Neville
acted up, grabbing his wrist before the Slytherin could grab his blond hair out.

“We’re not alone, remember?” He told him. “Your dad is on our side. My Gran can’t do as much but I know they spoke together. My Gran! To Lord Malfoy! Imagine!” he smirked, and a weak amused smile appeared on Draco’s face.

“I think Uncle Sev’ might have listened this time,” Draco said a little more calmly. “It was different…”

Neville nodded. He was not as sure as his friend about that point. Snape hated Gryffindors and Harry especially. He was not even on the list of the professors Neville might want to confess to… But he was Draco’s family…

“We’ll get him out… We’ll manage to get him out of there,” Neville said, and Draco nodded.

“Do you think she knew?” Draco asked and Neville sent him a quizzing look. “His friend, ‘Ace’, do you think she knew what was going on with Harry?”

Neville took a few seconds to think about it. “Probably, with how close Harry makes her be… If he’s ever talked about it to someone, it would be her…”

“We need to find her,” Draco said.

Neville smiled sadly. “Still no news from your father?”

Draco shook his head. He was about to add something when someone knocked at the door. It was Nott.

“Malfoy, Snape is looking for you,” he said.

Draco grimaced so Neville answered for him. “He’s coming.”

Nott looked at him and nodded. “He’s in his office,” he said before leaving and closing the door behind him.

Neville and Draco stayed in silence for a few minutes.

“You need to go,” Neville told him eventually.

“I know…” Draco muttered. “I just don’t want to.”

“Maybe he had some news about Harry,” Neville encouraged him. “I’m coming with you.”

Draco seemed surprised by this statement. He knew how Neville disliked the Potion Master. “You sure?”

Neville nodded and took the lead. Draco was the one to knock to Snape’s office though – Neville’s determination had somehow flattened during their journey down the dungeons.

“Open,” Snape’s voice snarled from the inside.

Draco stepped in and Neville followed him. The potion professor’s eyes darkened when he noticed the Gryffindor.

“What can I do for you, Mister Longbottom?” he snapped.
“Whatever you have to tell me, you can tell me in front of him,” Draco stated.

Snape stared at them like a hawk to his preys. He seemed to accept Draco’s claim, however.

“You’ll serve one-week detention, with me, scrubbing cauldrons without magic, from 7:30 to curfew.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The Headmaster wants to know if you saw anything yesterday, during your midnight walk?” Snape continued.

“No. I took the shortcut from behind the kitchen to the Hospital Wing. There was no one there.”

Draco answered.

“I see,” the professor sighed. “I warn you to be careful, Mister Malfoy. You have caught unwanted attention, I fear.”

Neville was surprised by Snape’s tone. He hardly ever spoke so kindly during class. Was he genuinely warning Draco?

“I’ll do my best.”

Snape nodded and went back to his essay’s noting. They did not take the indication to leave.

“Did you need something else?” Snape sighed looking up again after a few seconds.

This time, Draco stayed stubbornly silent, glaring at the professor. Neville knew it was his time to speak.

“It’s about Harry…” he started, not looking at Snape directly. “We wanted to know if you have any news…”

Snape glared at them and clacked his tongue making Neville shudder slightly. “As Professor McGonagall announced during breakfast, he will stay in the Hospital Wing for another week.”

“Why are visit forbidden?” Draco quickly asked.

Snape frowned. “Because Potter is in no state to be visited. He would be asleep anyway.”

“So, you did give him the Draught of Living Death?!?”

Neville looked at Draco surprised. While would they do that?!

“Indeed,” Snape snarled. “Madam Pomfrey decided that it would be easier on your ‘friend’ if he doesn’t have to feel the pain of having most of his bones strengthened.”

Snape was speaking with a disgusted tone, as always when he talked to or about Harry. Draco seemed like he might explode with anger.

“Did you manage to determine the cause…” Neville asked, discretely taking Draco’s hand to calm him down.

Snape focused on him. “The Headmaster informed us that Potter had been in a muggle car accident this summer but failed to tell Madam Pomfrey about it when he came back in September.”
“Wh-what?!” Draco and Neville exclaimed in the same voice.

“If he did, she would have scanned him and helped him heal sooner and faster…” Snape continued. “I guess your friend is the kind who put his pride over his health and safety.”

“Harry didn’t…” Draco started shooting but Neville pulled his arm his way and made him stop. Snape seemed mildly impressed by that.

“What about the scars on his back?” The Gryffindor asked. “Draco told me he told you about it…”

“Another side injury from the accident…” Snape dismissed.

“And you really bought that?!!” Draco exploded. “I’ve read the book about the warning signs of abuse on the common room’s library after you talk about nutriment currency yesterday! They had a few chapters about physical punishments!”

“This book is reserved to the Prefects, Mister Malfoy! It’s not under the Second years’ range!” Snape snorted. “Don’t you think you lost Slytherin enough points yesterday?”

“You can’t take points over that! It’s not even a rule, just an indication! You told us yourself last year and that’s not the point! You know how Harry got those scars! You know because… because… you know because you have the exact same ones!!!” Draco yelled before storming out of the room, pulling a wide-eyed Neville with him.

They only stopped when they had put a few floors between the Potion Master and them.

“Draco?”

“Whipping…” Draco muttered. “Those fucking muggles whipped him…”

“Wh-what?”

“I swear… I SWEAR THAT I WILL KILL THEM! I WILL KILL THEM FOR WHAT THEY DID!!!! THOSE FUCKING MUGGLES MUST DIE!!!!” Draco yelled as loud as he could before bursting into tears.

Neville immediately stepped up to bury him into a hug. This was too much. Why did Harry hide something as big as that? Why was he protecting them? Why…

“… they have no rights…” Draco was muttering between his sobs. “They had no rights to do that to him… They should die…”

Neville tightened his hug and hide his face in Draco’s shoulder as the tears were winning him over too.

“… I hate them…” Draco kept on muttering.

“… I know… I want them dead too…” Neville admitted softly to his best friend.

Little did they know that this outburst somehow made his way to the ears of The Prophet and, on the very next Monday morning issue, the head title announced proudly:

‘THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAD BEEN OPENED AGAIN! ONE 11-YEAR-OLD MUGGLE-
The article included everything: Draco being the heir of one of the purest Sacred 28 families, Draco insulting Creevey publicly at several occasion using the m-word including on the day of the attack, Draco being caught wandering after curfew the very same night and on the very same area as the petrified body had been found, Draco yelling in a public area that he hated all muggles and wanted to kill them all…

And with that Draco’s life went from nightmare to hell…

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay! I'm still working on this fic, life just got crazy and my other fic is clearly easier to write! XD But no worry, winter is coming... or is it June?

Please tell me what you think!
When Harry woke up, he felt like he had the worst aches ever in every muscle of his body. He needed a few minutes to remember where he was and what happened. Has the Quidditch match against the rogue bludger been so bad for his body? He smiled at this thought and immediately grimaced. Why were his lips so dry and his throat so sour?!

“Oh, Mister Potter! I see you’re awake,” Pomfrey’s voice greeted him. “Here, some water.”

Harry forced himself to open his eyes. Everything was kind of blurry, but he quickly found his glasses on the nightstand before accepting the glass of water from the matron.

The Hospital Wing was almost empty apart from another bed whose curtains were firmly closed. Snape was there too.

“Are you still able to speak, Potter?” he snarled.

Harry frowned. What had he done, now? “Y-yes, sir. Wh-” and then his throat started burning and he coughed profusely. Madam Pomfrey immediately gave him another glass of water following by a sweet tasting potion.

“Here, it should help,” she smiled. “You caused us quite a fear here, Mister Potter. What were you thinking about not mentioning your lasting injuries at the beginning of the term? I could have improved the muggle treatment sooner!”

Harry frowned. What injuries? She didn’t see his back, right? No… she wouldn’t act so carelessly if she ever…

“Thankfully, Headmaster Dumbledore got in touch with your aunt and told us about your horrific muggle car accident last summer. It could have been very dangerous, Mister Potter. I hope that next time, you would get to me if you ever injure yourself during holidays and don’t get the chance to see another professional mediwizard before me!”

Harry stared doubtfully at the matron who was smiling with contempt. “Unfortunately, there is only so much magic can do so you’ll keep some scars on your back… But! I thankfully managed to fade most of them out of the way! Your vitals are good, now. I’d like to keep you a few more nights before letting you go back to your dorm though. Just in case.” She smiled again.

Did she really buy Aunt Petunia’s lie just like that? Did Dumbledore buy it? Hadn’t they ever seen what a car accident looked like? How could Aunt Petunia dismiss away the state of his back so easily? Were wizards even more naive than muggles on this matter??

The ring sounded distantly by the Hospital Wing door.

“...” Madam Pomfrey said. “I told them you’ll be off the potion today…”

Harry nodded because he did not know what else to do. Things sounded so weird as if he was missing something. He did not like this feeling.
And the matron was not lying… Not five minutes later, Neville, Ron and Hermione burst in, wearing their school robes… even it was, supposedly, Sunday…

“Harry! You’re awake!” Hermione beamed at him, ready to hug him tightly if it was not for Harry’s obvious shiver when he saw her coming closer. She stopped just in time with an apologizing smile on her face and sat just next to him. Too close for Harry’s liking but still better than having to hug her out of the blue… “Sorry… How are you feeling?”

“I…”

But before Harry could express himself, Ron jolted in. “You scared us the bloody hell out! Sleeping for a week like that!”

“Wh-what? A week?!” Did he sleep for a week?

“Yes…” Hermione confirmed. “Madam Pomfrey told us about your car accident this summer… You should have told us, Harry! It could have been really dangerous if the potion Madam Pomfrey gave you had messed with muggle medication!” she scolded him, taking his left hand in hostage.

Harry frowned. There was this story about a car crash again… How many people had taken this lie as it was already?

“Let him breathe, Hermione!” Ron sighed. “Probably not such a big deal! You know how they all are with him being the Boy-Who-Lived and all… It was probably just a few scratches! Harry didn’t even talk about it this summer and I would have noticed if my best friend was hurting!”

Ron and Hermione started arguing about the gravity of his condition. Harry decided there was no need to participate and looked at Neville. The Gryffindor seemed uncomfortable. Not meeting his eyes. Where was Draco?

“Have you seen Colin?” Ron asked Harry at some point.

“Creevey? No, why? Don’t tell me he was taking pictures of me in my sleep, please…” Harry grimaced.

And then Ron and Hermione told him about the petrification and the Chamber of Secrets. Neville seemed more and more uncomfortable as they talked. Harry did not share Ron and Hermione’s enthusiasm about finding the heir. He did notice the side look they sent Neville at some point. So, there was really something… Or it was just him being paranoid...

“It’s almost time for dinner!” Ron declared suddenly.

“Did Madam Pomfrey tell you when you can be discharged?” Hermione asked.

“Not really. She said she wants to keep me a few more nights, just in case.”

“Perfect! I think you’ll be back before Monday! I took notes for you, of course. Here you are!” She set a huge pile of parchments on his bed. “I’ll be back after dinner if you want me to go through it with you!”

“Err… Honestly, Hermione? I’m still a little tired. I don’t think I’ll do that tonight… Tomorrow, maybe?”

She frowned but Ron stopped her before she could argue. “Let’s go. I’m hungry! See you later, Harry!”
“Yes, later…” Harry said back, waiting for them to be out of the room to look at Neville.

“Okay, tell me. What happened? Where’s Draco?”

Neville sighed extensively and came closer to the bed. “How do you feel? Really?” He asked without answering Harry’s questions.

“Like I had the worse training session ever…” Harry admitted with a soft smile.

Harry was surprised. It was normally Draco’s line. “Okay, you’re scaring me now. What happened?”

“Everybody thinks that Draco is the Heir again, but it’s worse this time,” Neville explained. “He was out after curfew the night they found Creevey and… Harry, we know that you haven’t been in a ‘car accident’ this summer…” He admitted in a low voice. “We don’t know why everybody believes that but… we know Harry… we know that your relatives…”

“Don’t,” Harry stopped him. “I… it’s not… I…” Harry didn’t know if he should feel relieved or scared that his best friends figured it out.

“You don’t have to deny it,” Neville said. “We… we just want to help you Har’ and… Draco was right pissed at what happened to you and… well, people heard him… expressing his feelings toward your ‘muggle’ relatives and… with everything going on, it went directly to the Prophet.” Harry blanched. “Ah! Not the detailed about you, okay? Just that Draco supposedly hates Muggles and… well, all the Chamber of Secrets stuff and… It’s bad, Harry.”

“Where is he? Is he okay???”

“Yes… He’s probably in Slytherin Common Room. Snape ordered the whole House to look after him… His parents tried to shut the Prophet but… well… you know…”

“Oh… Neville, I’m sorry… I… He came to check on me the first night, right? I think I remembered him. Dobby…”

“Yeah, he told me,” Neville nodded. “We know it’s not your fault Harry but… we just wish you could be a little more honest with us. You don’t have to lie about your home life.”

Harry looked away. He didn’t know how to deal with all those pieces of information. “The school and the teachers just never seem to believe me… And… Ace got into troubles because she tried to tell them, and they don’t believe her either… I… I don’t want anything to happen to you two. I… I don’t know why they believe this ‘car crash’ excuse… It was from my Aunt apparently… And… I’m not a doctor but I’m pretty sure my injuries didn’t even match…”

“They don’t,” Neville confirmed. “Draco looked into it… It’s not normal that they let it go, Harry… Pomfrey, Dumbledore… Merlin, even Snape. Draco is right pissed at him too. They didn’t even investigate the Bludger incident! I mean, I know that Creevey’s petrification is more important but… I mean, it tried to kill you and broke your arm!! We don’t understand what they are doing… It makes no sense… We’re just kids and…”

Harry noticed that Neville had started shaking so he decided to indulge in the hug that his friend had asked for earlier. His muscles protested at the sudden solicitation, but he put the pain aside.

“I’m sorry Nev’. I didn’t want to worry you or Draco. It’s always been like that…”
“But it’s not normal! They should look after you!!”

“They just have more urgent matters to attend to... It’s okay. I’m okay.”

“But you’re not! You’ve just spent a week in a magically induced coma so they can treat your injuries and your scattered bones which are probably provoked by chronic malnutrition throughout your childhood!!!”

Harry grimaced. “It’s not that bad…”

“It is,” Neville argued. “We’ll get you out of there Harry. We promised.”

Harry was not sure that he had ever seen his friend so determined. He sighed softly. At least now the cat was out of the box.

“Just... don’t do anything that could put you in danger, okay?” he said.

“Don’t worry,” Neville smiled softly.

Harry left the Hospital Wing three days later. Hermione, Ron and Neville had come to visit him every day, but Draco didn’t come once, even during the weekend. Madam Pomfrey had given him an arm-long list of potions to take, some every day, other once a week... She ordered him to come back for check up every Saturday at noon. Then she started talking to herself about why she put him under so much nutrient potions at first and decided that it could do no wrong and to keep it this way for the first week.

Harry escaped before she decided to pour more potions on him.

Harry’s first task when he entered the Great Hall with Neville for lunch that day was to spot Draco at the Slytherin table. The blond was surrounded by 6th and 7th years but Harry didn’t care. He almost ran to his friend and launched himself on his back.

“Wh- H-Harry?!?” Draco choked on his pumpkin juice.

“I’m sorry for worrying you and for lying...” Harry mumbled against his ear. “Neville told me everything... I...”

At this point, Draco recovered from the shock and turned around to look at him properly.

“How do you feel?” He asked very seriously.

“Better?” Harry smiled shyly. “Can... can we talk somewhere else?” He asked under the impression that the entire Great Hall was now looking at them.

“Not alone,” a Slytherin upper year stated immediately.

Draco grimaced but still got up gesturing Harry and Neville to follow him. A Slytherin 5th year got up too and joined them. Harry thought he might be in the Slytherin Quidditch team.

“Hey, Bletchley! How much does his father pay you to change his diaper?” came a voice from the Gryffindor table, quickly followed by a succession of snickering comments.

Harry tried his best to ignore them as his friends seemed to be doing. Neville decided to talk to kill the awkward silence around them.
“Oh Harry, do you want to know a startling piece of information?”

“What is it?”

“Did you know that Draco, here, had seen dear Dungeon Bat Professor Snape in swimsuit once?”

Draco stumbled and almost fell. “Why are you telling him that?!!!” he jolted. “He didn’t need to know that!!!”

“Why, Draco?” Harry beamed with a soft smile. “It’s indeed a startling piece of information… What kind of swimsuit?”

“Swim briefs apparently… Slytherin colour, of course!”

“Too much information,” Harry winced. “Now, I have the image in mind… Thank you, Nev’.”

“You’re very welcomed, Harry,” Neville smirked.

“Stop that! Both of you!” Draco grumbled.

Then, Harry noticed something. “Draco… Am I taller than you?” he asked.

Draco stopped and looked at him before frowning. “No,” he snapped defensively.

Harry smirked. “I think I am… Pomfrey said I had a growth sprout during my Hospital stay…”

Draco looked away. “You’re not,” he said firmly.

Neville started chuckling. “Stop you two and stand still next to each other,” he ordered.

Harry placed himself in front of Draco and Neville grabbed his arm until their nosed almost touched. He looked up to see Neville’s hand making a bridge between their foreheads and smiled at Draco when their eyes met. Draco immediately scoffed and looked away, seemingly embarrassed.

“Harry wins!” Neville declared. “Not by far, little less than a centimetre…”

“It’s his hair,” Draco growled stepping away. “Look at his hair! It’s cheating! I’m still taller! If we shaved our head, you’ll see!”

“Oh, do you want me to shave your head Draco?” Harry asked.

“Don’t touch my hair!!!!!” Draco immediately squeaked.

Both Gryffindors started laughing more openly and Harry could swear, the Slytherin 5th year chuckled too a few meters away from them.

Harry smiled and went to hug Draco tightly.

“Don’t pout,” he said softly.

“You’re annoying,” the blond boy declared, looking away but without forcing him to let go.

“Sorry, Drake…”

Draco eyed him but kept on pouting when he saw his smile. “You’re lucky that I missed you because you don’t deserve my pardon.” He mumbled.
“We still love you even if you’re the smallest,” Neville chuckled next to them, joining the hug from Draco’s other side.

“Not you too!” Draco whined, pinching him.

Neville laughed harder and Harry tightened his hug. He had not noticed how much he had missed his friends until now. It was good to have them back to seemingly normal.

During the next few weeks, Harry understood how things had really deteriorated for his friends during the ten days he had spent in the infirmary. First, Draco could not go anywhere without a Slytherin upper year following him. He got remarks and insults at every corner from other Houses. Harry honestly admired his calm in those situations. Second, Neville’s relationship with the other Gryffindor first-year was now inexistent. In the dorm, neither Dean, Seamus or Ron ever addressed him. During class, a heavy silence answered his words if he ever dared to participate.

Harry was not really sure he wanted to open that debate with Ron and Hermione because it felt like his friends were walking on eggshells with him. They disappeared together most of the time and seemed to be bickering about potions of all things when Harry joined them occasionally.

Instead of digging into his friends’ secrets, Harry decided to focus on the Christmas present he was preparing for Ron. He got the idea after the boy almost killed himself and everyone in the room during Charms. His friend really needed a new wand and since he would not write to his parents, Harry decided to act upon it.

Harry could not physically go to a wand shop with Ron, but by asking around, he learnt that some shop offered owl order customized services. The principle was quite simple once explained: the shop sends a sample of wand woods and magical cores. The future owner of the wand just has to choose the wood and core that respond the best to his or her own magical burst.

Harry had decided to keep what he was doing a secret until Christmas so he did not really explain all that to Ron – or Hermione who would probably have too many questions to keep it quiet... No, he asked the Twins for assistance and in less than a week, they had got Ron doing the fitting without the boy really knowing what he was taking part in: willow and unicorn hair. The length and flexibility would depend on Ron’s age and height. He trusted all the information to the shop – Wolfe and Wanker Internationals – European branch, located in magical Dublin. They guaranteed delivery by December 20th. This way, Harry could send it to the Burrow in time for Christmas if Ron decided to go back to his parents’ for the holidays.

As they entered December, the teachers started to collect the names of students staying for the Christmas holidays. Draco was becoming restless. The Prophet seemed to write an article about him or his family every other day, exposing private pieces of information and confidential exhibits from the raids the ministry operated during the summer. Each article was giving plenty of ideas to the bullies of the day and the Slytherin upper years clearly seemed to be sick of playing bodyguards.

“My parents want to send me to Durmstrang...” Draco whispered to Harry and Neville during a Potion class.


“Five points from Gryffindor, Longbottom,” Snape snarled from the other side of the room.

Neville scoffed and tried his best to ignore the killing glares from his Housemates.
“They think I’ll be safer there…” Draco explained in a low voice. “Until the Prophet calms down… at least…”

“What is Durmstrang?” Harry asked discretely.

“Scandinavian Wizarding School,” Neville provided.

“I’m not going home for Christmas, I won’t give them the opportunity to…”

“Two points from Slytherin, Mister Malfoy,” Snape declared loudly. “Less chattering and more brewing!”

“Are you sure, it’s a good idea?” Harry whispered. “If your parents think it’s safer…”

“If Hogwarts is too dangerous for me, it would also be for you! I’m not living you behind!”

“Potter, ten points from Gryffindor. Switch place with Finnegan before he blows something. Now.”

Harry tried his best not to growl at Snape as he did as told. He really hated the guy more than everything in the world – well, maybe not more than Vernon and Petunia… let alone Dudley… but Snape might be a solid number four in his list… or number five if he included Aunt Marge, Vernon’s sister… When suddenly Goyle’s potion exploded, surprising Harry out of his reflexions and showering the whole class. People shrieked as splashes of the Swelling Solution hit them.

Luckily, Snape had some Deflating Draught ready to cure the victims rapidly. When the mayhem calmed down and everybody had been cured, Snape swept over to Goyle’s cauldron and scooped out a twisted black remains of firework. There was a sudden hush.

“If I ever find out who threw this,” Snape whispered, “I shall make sure that person is expelled.”

Harry, Neville and Draco shared a look. They had no idea who could have done something as stupid as that…

Eventually, Neville decided to stay for Christmas Holidays too. He said that his grandmother had other plans, but Harry suspected that he decided to stay for him and Draco. Not wanting to leave his friends behind if his grandmother ever had the same idea as the Malfoys. She was not the kind to tell him this kind of thing beforehand after all.

Ron and Hermione were staying too apparently. Harry forced himself to feel as happy about that as he had felt for Draco and Neville. He had to remind himself that they were his friends too… even when they spend most of their time working on a secret assignment or ghosting his two other friends… Well, at least, they were not fighting. He should be happy about that!

A week before the holidays, a Duelling Club was launched, hosted by none other than Gilderoy Lockhart. They did not know that before the session started, of course, otherwise, Harry, Neville and Draco would not have shown up.

“At least, Snape is here too. If we’re lucky they’ll finish each other off…” Draco whispered into Harry’s ears.

Harry chuckled. He did not really know the detailed about why Draco seemed to despise his
honorary uncle so much lately, but he would not be the one to defend the man in any circumstance!

Snape demonstrated the disarming charm on Lockhart and the second years started working on it between them. Harry and Draco got the spell quickly. It was quite easy, but Neville had more difficulties as often. At some point, Draco and Harry stopped watching the 4th years practising the shield charm and tried to help their friend.

“Are you sure your wand is well fit?” Draco asked after some desperate attempts from the Gryffindor. “The base seems too large for your hand…”

“… it’s my father’s…” Neville mumbled but he could not go further with his explanation because some Gryffindor 3rd year interjected.

“Hey, Malfoy! Do you know that spell, I think it’s just what you need to decorate your new little title! Serpensortia!”

The end of his wand exploded, and Harry reacted immediately pulling both his friends behind him. He watched, aghast, as a long black snake shot out the 3rd year wand, falling heavily onto the floor and raising itself, ready to strike. There were screams as the rest of the students backed swiftly away clearing the floor between them.

“McLaggen, what have you done?!?” said Snape dangerously. “Don’t move, Potter, I’ll get rid of it…”

“Allow me!” shouted Lockhart. He brandished his wand at the snake and there was a loud bang; the snake flew ten feet into the air and fell back to the floor with a loud smack. Enraged and hissing furiously, it slithered straight towards the nearest student – Hufflepuff Justin Finch-Fletchey – and raised itself again, fangs exposed.

“No! Stop,” Harry yelled at the animal. “Leave him!” And miraculously, the snake slumped to the floor and docilely turned his way. “Calm down,” Harry continued. “We won’t hurt you, it was an accident. Are you hurt? It looked like it hurt. I’m sure we can make it better if you let us…”. The snake seemed to nod, and Harry just knew it would not attack anyone now.

Snape stepped next to him and with a wave of his wand, the snake vanished.

Harry looked up at Justin, smiling reassuringly. He was not ready to see such horror in the other boy’s face.

“What do you think you’re playing at?” the Hufflepuff shouted before storming out of the Hall.

Harry suddenly noticed the deadly silence in the room. Then he felt a tugging on the back of his robes.

“Come on,” said Draco’s voice in his ear. “Move – come on…”

Neville steered him out of the room, Neville in tow. They did not stop or said a word until they entered an empty classroom which Draco immediately locked with a quick charm.

“What’s wrong? What have I done?”

“Harry… you’re a Parselmouth…” Neville breathed.

“A what?”
“A Parselmouth,” Draco repeated. “It means you can speak the snake language. Did you know?”

“That I can speak to snakes?” Harry asked. “Yes, I knew. Last time it was with a Boa in a zoo before I started Hogwarts or knew I was a wizard…”

“You never told us,” Draco pointed.

“Well, I didn’t know it was something worth mentioning. For me, it was just like when I turned my teacher’s wig blue or I teleported with Ace to the kitchen rooftop… Just an item of the long list of strange things that happened around me growing up.”

“It’s not just some random accidental magic Harry!” Draco lashed out.

“Why? What’s so wrong with it? I just asked the snake to calm down and not to attack anyone! What’s so wrong about that?”

Draco just shook his head and started walking back and forth in the room.

“Nobody knows what you said Harry,” Neville explained. “Nobody could understand. Parselmouthes doesn’t only speak to snakes, they speak the snake language. It’s called Parseltongue and… for us, it’s just undecipherable.”

Harry froze. “What do you mean, I just speak English!” But when his friends shook their head, Harry understood that it would not be that easy. “…I just told the snake to back out… really. If… if I tell them…” he stuttered but he knew it was a false hope. Nobody had ever believed him. They always thought the worst of him. He was a freak into everyone eyes again now.

“It’s worse than that…” Draco sighed. Then he told Harry about the connotation around this peculiar magical trait. It was supposedly Salazar Slytherin’s personal magical trait… They were so totally fucked.

After that, Draco and Neville tried their best to remember if the Potters had any link with known Slytherin descendants. They asked their parents and grandmother who urged them both to come back home for holidays. They refused and decided not to ask them again. In the end, Draco’s mother led them toward the Peverell family who married into the Potter line centuries ago. The Peverells were related to Slytherin. The odds were low, but Harry might be an Heir of Slytherin despise the fact that none of his more recent ancestors had ever known to be Parselmouth themselves…

Draco explained that it was still possible. Apparently, his cousin was a Metamorphmagus which had been a dormant trait in his mother family for generations. So, yeah, maybe Harry was an Heir and the trait had always been in the Potter line but just dormant until now… It was a complete coincidence if another Heir was also at the school at the same time… How would they know?

But the rest of the school decided for them anyway.

Now, the strangest rumours were going on. Voldemort had tried to kill Harry as a baby because he knew Harry was a Dark Wizard and did not want competition when Harry grows up… Harry managed to defeat Voldemort as a baby and the previous year because he was an even more powerful and darker wizard! Draco and Neville were purebloods and his followers, Harry was just another Dark Lord in the making. Harry began hunting muggleborns at Hogwarts because his muggle girlfriend dumped him over the summer…

Harry hated all that! He had not done anything! He had just tried and kept other students safe from
an enraged snake! Why did everyone seem to think he was a menace now?! Well, it was not really surprising when he thought about the ways they had treated Draco since Halloween and the way anyone had ever treated him his whole life, but still!!!

And it only got worse when Justin Finch-Fletchley was found petrified no more than a week later, along with the frozen body of Nearly Headless Nick. Luckily, Harry, Draco and Neville had been nowhere near the place of the attack, but they were still the primary suspects, especially since Harry had been heard asking around about Justin for the past few days – he just wanted to explain the situation to the boy, not attack him!!!!

Harry felt relieved when the holidays finally came and most of the student deserted the Castle. Fewer students meant fewer stupid rumours about him and his friends. He spent most of his time with Neville and Draco because Hermione and Ron seemed to avoid him even more since the Duelling Club incident.

The three students had somehow managed to convince the House elves to keep the fire alive in one of the smallest deserted classrooms. It might have been a teacher office once in the days. They had carpets and soft pillows and it became the perfect retreat place since Gryffindor and Slytherin common rooms were off limit.

Harry started drawing again. He felt like he had not drawn anything for ages… which might be true when he thought about it. He had barely drawn anything since his Christmas presents the previous year. Of course, he had helped the Twins with their design projects, but it did not feel the same…

He discovered he had really missed it and drew for hours, lazily leaning against Draco who was playing wizarding chest against Neville. Sometime, Draco would look down at him and, for some reasons, blushed until Neville made fun of him.

The House Elves liked them so, occasionally, three hot chocolates would appear next to them with a small plate of pastries. It was comfortable. It felt like home and reminded Harry of the long afternoon he had spent in the library with Ace when they were working on Sutton’s Entrance exam.

“Guys?” He asked, one evening. “If speaking to snakes is a thing… what about speaking to dogs?”

Neville looked up from their gobstones game. “Never heard of it… Why?”

“Ace could speak to dogs…” Harry said.

“What? Did she bark?” Draco asked.

“No. She just spoke English but the dogs… they would just always listen to her and do what she said.”

The two other boys took their time to think about it.

“I think my father told me about that…” Draco said after a minute or two.

“Really?” Harry encouraged him hopefully.

“Yeah… I think he said it’s called ‘Charisma’.”

Draco actually smirked until Harry understood his joke and jumped at him to make him pay with endless tickling. Neville laughed so hard at them that the completely messed with the on-going game.
They had several days like that and Harry really started hoping that the holidays would just never end so they could stay this way forever.

On Christmas Eve, they promised each other to meet there to exchange their presents hands to hands before going to breakfast. Harry and Neville felt bad about leaving Draco alone that night but the Slytherin assured them that they were having a party with the other snakes staying in the castle for the holidays so he would not feel lonely or anything.

However, the next morning did not go according to plan.

Harry frowned in his sleep when he heard soft voices around him, but he was not really ready to wake up so soon.

“Just a hair, Ron, you don’t need so much!” Hermione’s hush voice was saying.

“It’s just so disgusting… Essence of Neville Longbottom…” Ron whined.

“Shush… you’ll wake them up…” Hermione scolded him. “Harry is really small… his uniform feels too tight for me…”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have taken a second serving of treacle tart yesterd… ouch!”

“Watch your mouth! Now drink up! One… two… three…”

Ron started making sounds like he was being sick, and Harry wondered if he should force his eyes to open or keep on pretending to sleep not to have to clean after his friend on Christmas morning.

“Ron, are you okay?” A third voice asked suddenly.

And then, Harry frowned. He knew this voice… it felt so familiar, but he could not place it.

“Yeah… It… it works…” Neville’s voice answered.

Harry felt his heart pounding louder. He was used to Hermione and Ron having their little secrets by now but why would Neville worked with them?!!!

“I can’t see anything…” the familiar voice said.

“Take his glasses,” Neville suggested.

Harry stopped breathing when he felt a movement near his bed. What was going on? He should open his eyes, but he was too afraid of what he was going to discover. What if Neville had been friend with Ron and Hermione behind his back all year long? What if it was just some cruel prank to hurt him because he was a freak…

“You should take his stupid ring too, it’d be more realistic,” Neville said.

“Ugh… Are you sure? He’s sleeping with it…”

“Don’t worry. I heard him talk with the traitor until 2 am, he won’t wake up soon…” Neville urged the unknown character.
Harry pinched his inner cheeks. Neville sounded so disgusted with him right now. It must be a dream, a nightmare, Neville had no reason to be upset with him. Soon he would really wake up and everything would be okay.

But then the ring on Harry’s finger became burning cold and Harry jolted up.

“Ouch! It burnt me!” a boy with raven hair groaned stepping away from Harry’s bed.

“Wh-…” Harry started.

“Shit, Hermione, he woke up!” Neville said.

“What?!! Oh… shoot…” The boy was kind of blurry because Harry did not have his glasses on, but he could see the red of his robe and the striking emerald green of his eyes.

“H-Harry, listen, we can explain…” Neville started next to the unknown yet far too familiar boy.

“We don’t have time for that Ron. We have to find Malfoy and time is running out!” the boy stopped him. “I’m sorry Harry, I promise, we’ll explain later! _Petrificus totalus_!”

And with that Harry’s body fell back to his mattress, unable to move or to speak, barely breathing, just conscious enough to hear the two other students talking about taking his and Neville’s wands and spelling the dorm room to lock itself.

Chapter End Notes

... sorry? X)

Please, tell me your thoughts!!!

See you soon~
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

TW: passive institutionalized homophobia and misconception about AIDS
(just a reminder, we're in the early 1990's, triple therapy hasn't been found - or released -
yet, and as intelligent our characters might be, they're still just 12 and pretty stupid some
times)

Please, leave a comment if you think any other TW in needed at any time in my story...
(apart from those which already are on the tags, of course...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Christmas morning, Draco was on his way to their new ‘headquarter’ when he saw his two best
friends bickering in front of the Great Hall.

“Hey! Merry Christmas and Happy Yule,” he said joining them.

Harry and Neville jolted when they heard him and made strange faces.

“Oh, M-Draco! Merry Christmas,” Harry exclaimed a little too high pitch and everything but
naturally.

“Merry Christmas…” Neville repeated less than enthusiastically before getting elbowed by Harry.

Draco frowned. “Is something wrong? I thought we were supposed to join directly in the room…”

Harry and Neville shared a look. Something was definitely going on…

“Oh, yes,” Harry said. “But Neville was hungry so he thought we could just grab breakfast before
going… However! Neville was telling me that he can wait because he was not that hungry. We can
go to the room now.”

Draco looked intensely at Harry. He was not used to seeing him bossing Neville around like that. It
was not like him.

“Did you two fight or something?” he asked carefully.

“Of course not! Why?”

“You’re strange… We can have breakfast before going to the room, there’s no hurry after all…”
Draco said looking at Neville who seemed to be really uncomfortable with the whole situation.

“T-thanks mate…” Neville mumbled.
Draco raised an eyebrow at the unusual nickname. Something must have happened between him and Harry since the previous night. Draco shrugged and led the way to the Great Hall. If his friends did not want to tell him right now, he would ask later.

However, when Neville raved the French toasts as if it was his last meal on earth, Draco could not act as if nothing was going on.

“Err… Nev’? Did you not eat last night? You look like Weasley…” Draco compared, disgusted. “No offence, Har’,” he added looking at his other friend, knowing how much he disliked when Draco belittled his other friends.

“None taken,” Harry said. “It’s really disgusting, and Neville would never normally act so ill-manneredly…”

Draco frowned at that comment. It was not like Harry at all… It was strange.

“So… How was your night after I went back to my dorm?” The Slytherin asked, trying not to think too much at his friends’ strange behaviours.

“Oh… you know… as usual…” Harry answered dismissively.

“Just talk together until the sun rises…” Neville confirmed with a full mouth.

Harry grimaced looking at him. “Can we go to the Chamber now?” He asked Draco.

“What chamber?”

“You know, the ‘room’…” the Gryffindor answered pointedly.

“Oh… you want to call it a chamber now? I thought that you say it was a headquarter yesterday?” Draco smirked.

“Whatever, can we go?”

Draco eyed Neville who put a large slice of bread in his mouth before getting up. He sighed but nodded.

“If you want… it’s not as if your presents will disappear anytime soon though…”

“Presents?” Neville repeated.

“Well, I couldn’t possibly go around the castle carrying them myself!” Draco explained. “Yours is quite massive after all.” He smiled mysteriously and almost roll on the floor laughing when he saw Neville’s disbelieving face.

They started walking through the corridors and Draco noticed that the two Gryffindors were having a silence exchange behind his back. He tried to calm down his growing anxiety. He trusted his friends; it was probably nothing…

“What is it?” Draco asked as neutrally as possible.

They stopped and Harry and Neville shared a new guilty look.

“I… I want to know what is going on,” Harry declared suddenly.

“What do you mean? You’re the ones acting all strange this morning…”
Harry pinched his lips, looking down. Draco had to mentally kick himself not to coo. His friend was just so adorable when he was doing this kind of face. He thought that his friend was looking cute far too often lately…

“I… I want to know what you and Neville had been plotting while I was in the Hospital Wing during November!” Harry said and Draco froze.

The Slytherin looked at the other Gryffindor but Neville seemed as helpless as he was.

“He has the right to know, mate…” Neville mumbled. “Even though, I thought it could wait until we d… are in the headquarter.”

“Did you tell him?” Draco hissed.

Neville shrugged. How can he shrug in this situation?!!!

“I want to hear it from you, Draco,” Harry said, looking at him intensively.

Draco looked away. Why did Neville talk to Harry? They agreed to keep it a secret until they are more certain about the outcomes… They did not have all the answers just yet…

“We… First, you must promise not to get angry. We did it for you okay?” Draco said. He took Harry’s hand in his and then noticed something.

“Where’s your Heir ring?”

“It’s bothering me when I sleep… It’s in the dorm,” Harry explained immediately. “Please continue.” He finished in a small voice.

“Okay… Well, you see, we don’t want you to go back to your relatives…” Draco started.

“Because they’re muggles…” Neville completed.

“What?!! NO! It’s not… Harry, we don’t want you to go back because of the way they treat you! We wouldn’t act any differently if they were magical, I promise! My dad is working on your case and Neville’s gran is helping too and… we just want you safe during the summer! I promise it has nothing to do with them being muggles!!” Draco clarified immediately. Why would Neville say something like that?!!! Harry knew his father was not a real Death Eater, right? Draco knew that Harry said he did not care the previous year but what if he changed his mind because of all the things the Weasleys must have said about him during the summer.

Draco froze when something brushed against his cheek. “Hey, M-Draco, I believe you, okay?” Harry said softly, his emerald eyes shining lightly at him. Draco immediately felt his face catching fire. “I just don’t understand… My relatives are not so b…”

“Please Harry, stop,” Draco cut him and stepped back as naturally as possible. “You promised you wouldn’t lie about it anymore. We saw your back, remember?”

Harry looked like he did not understand what he was talking about. Draco decided not to push. Neville had him promised not to a few weeks back and he knew he should trust his friend in that kind of situation.

“Anyway, can we go to the Chamber now?” Neville groaned.

“What’s the rush?” Draco forced himself to laugh. He had never felt so uncomfortable with his
friends. “Are you that eager to get your presents? They are for you and won’t go anywhere, you know…”

Neville did not laugh with him and Draco frowned again. However, Harry spoke before he could say anything.

“Let’s go,” Harry smiled taking his hand. “I want to see too!”

Draco smiled back at him. At least Harry was less antagonizing than Neville today. Draco did not understand what was going on with the other Gryffindor. Yet, when he started moving on, Harry’s hand held him back. He looked back at his friend who was frowning deeply.

“I… I can’t move…” the raven-haired boy said. He was moving his hips, but his legs seemed anchored to the ground.

“What are you doing…?” Neville moaned a few meters ahead.

Draco was looking around them for someone who could have jinxed his friend. Then, he saw the small strand of mistletoe blooming above their heads.

“Urgh… it’s one of the Twins latest pranks…” Neville explained when he noticed too. “I’ve stayed stuck for hours yesterday until they agreed to release me… There is a counter spell I think but… Wait, they must be in the Great Hall, I’ll fetch someone!”

Draco was not really listening to Neville; his eyes were stuck on Harry. Enchanted mistletoes were quite common. There was an easy way around them but… But could he, really? He wanted to… he knew he wanted to…

“Sorry, Draco… It’s all my fault, I wasn’t careful…” Harry mumbled trying to get away again.

His hand was still in Draco’s. They were stuck together too. Draco looked at them before eyeing up Harry’s lips… and then he did something really really stupid.

It was just the corner of his lips and it lasted less than two seconds. Draco moved away as soon as he felt the charm dissolving around them. He was not ready to see the expression of utter shock in Harry’s face.

“Sorry…” Draco mumbled. “I just… it’s a common counter-jinx and…” Draco knew he was lying. He asked Harry not to lie to him just a few minutes ago. He could not do that to him.

Harry was blushing deeply, his free hand immediately touching the place where Draco’s lips had been a few seconds earlier.

“Honestly, it’s not just because of the mistletoe, I think I lo…”

“Malfoy! Stay away! He’s not who he pretends to be!!!!” A strong voice yelled through the corridor, startling the shit out of him.

One of the Weasley twins was hurrying their way, pulling a struggling Neville behind him. Did Neville have reddish hair?!

“Draco!!!!” came Harry’s voice from the other side of the corridor.

The Slytherin immediately jolted in this direction, it was indeed Harry, without his glasses and with another Neville whose eyes were so red that he was pretty sure the boy had been crying not long
before. The second Weasley twin was following them. Draco turned back to the other Harry who was just before him, still holding his hand and immediately let go as if he had burnt himself. The hair of the Harry before him was growing and becoming lighter... bushier too... and his teeth...

Draco paled drastically when he recognized Granger’s traits in his friend’s face. The last two minutes replayed in his head and he put his sleeve in front of his mouth. Oh fuck... His legs reacted before his head and he just ran away from this whole situation.

Harry saw the blurry figure of his friend running away and he felt like someone was tearing his heart apart. He had just spent the last hour hearing Neville yelling for him to move or react without being able to do anything as he was petrified. His friend had been terrified when he had found him stock-still in his bed.

He had been released by the twins when they had come to check on them and heard Neville from the other side of the locked door of their dorm. They had lifted the charm on him, and Harry immediately explained to them what happened while trying to calm Neville down. When the twins had shown them some kind of map and told them that Ron and Hermione were with Draco, his heart had skipped a few beats.

He knew it was his fault. Ron and Hermione would not have gone after Draco if he was not his friend. It was his responsibility to deal with them.

“Go with him,” he quickly told Neville. “I’ll catch you up.”

Neville did not argue. “We’ll be in our headquarter.” He told him as bravely as he could this morning, squeezing his hand in his.

Harry nodded at him and watched him run after Draco.

The other people in the corridor were deadly silent. The twins had cornered Ron and Hermione – who had turned back to their original appearance – against a wall. Harry stepped toward them, silent too. He knew his glare must seem murderous. He felt as if he could kill them right here for what they have done to his friends after all.

He stopped just a meter away from them, stretching his right hand.

“My glasses,” he said in a neutral voice.

Hermione did not react at first then Ron elbowed her, and she looked as if she was just discovering Harry in front of her. She quickly removed the glasses and gave them back to the other boy. Harry could finally see them more or less clearly.

“Can you leave us?” he asked the twins.

The two redheads shared a look.

“Are you sure?” Fred hesitated.

However, when Harry nodded, determination radiating from his eyes they did not argue further. As soon as they were alone, Harry focused back on the two Gryffindors in front of them.

“Why would you do something like that?” he asked.
He did not feel the need to yell. His voice was so calm and emotionless that he almost frightened himself. He felt as if cold ice had been poured in every ounce of his body.

“We just wanted him to admit he’s the Heir of Slytherin,” Ron exclaimed when he realized that Hermione was not about to say anything.

“Draco is NOT the Heir, how many times do I have to tell you that! We were together the whole night when we found Mrs Norris and I was still awake when he visited me in the Hospital Wing. He didn’t do anything to Creevey.”

“Well, sorry mate, but you weren’t really in your right mind in any of those moments so how can we believe you? You’ve been acting so strange since you went visit him this summer…”

“Are you saying that you think I’m crazy?”

“I’m just saying you’ve not been acting yourself,” Ron snarled. “We don’t think it’s your fault! We reckon he put some spells on you to control you! I mean, everybody knows about his father’s history with the Imperius Curse! It could also be your stupid ring. Longbottom gave it to you, right? Have you noticed that every time you spend some time with us, you would just play with it nonstop before ditching us away??! And… well, now you’re a Parselmouth! We don’t know yet what kind of Dark Magic they used on you, but we were just trying to expose him in order to save you!”

Harry just stared at his former friend. He quickly eyed at Hermione who seemed to have decided to stay silent. Maybe it was for the best.

“And then, did you discover anything incriminating?” he asked despitefully.

“Well, he was about to show us the Chamber of Secrets… before this stupid enchanted mistletoe stopped us…”

“Draco is not the Heir and he doesn’t know where the Chamber is,” Harry said.

“Well, we think he was. He said you were supposed to meet in ‘the room’. How far gone are you to call it a Headquarters?!” Ron accused.

Harry blinked. “It’s not the Chamber of Secrets. It’s just an old abandoned teacher’s office with a working fireplace. We spend our days there as we can’t go either to the Gryffindor Common Room nor the Slytherin one!”

Ron actually seemed disappointed with his answer. He did not stop at that, however. “Well, he did admit that his father was trying to take you away from your relatives! He just couldn’t bare having a friend raised by Muggles!!”

This last straw made Harry see red. His fist came into contact with Ron’s jaw before he could even think about what he was doing.

“Are you fucking daft?!?! Do you ever know how life with my relatives is like?!? Draco didn’t want to take me away because they’re muggles but because he’s worried about me and he has every fucking right to be!!!!” Harry yelled. “I’m fucking done with you!! Both of you! You’re the worst! I don’t want to see you ever again! And don’t you dare to go after my friends either because I won’t be so soft on you next time!!”

Harry stormed away, failing to calm down until he reached the door of their self-proclaimed headquarter. He just could not believe Ron could be so childish and stupid. When he saw his two friends crying softly in each other arms, he felt as if he needed to go back and kick the shit out of
Ron and maybe also Hermione for what they did. Because, honestly, Ron could never have come out with that plan! The twins had told them about the Polyjuice potion they used. It was a NEWT level potion in the 6th year curriculum, it had Hermione’s name written all over it.

“… and he wasn’t moving at all and barely breathing…” Neville was saying to Draco between his sobs. “I thought… first, I thought… I couldn’t even do the counter-curse… I’m so stupid…”

“… you’re not…” Draco corrected him. “I… I didn’t even notice… of course, I thought that you were acting strange but…” He stopped when he noticed Harry at the door.

“H-Harry?” Neville called him with a small voice.

“How can we be sure it’s really you?” Draco asked in a cold tone.

It hurt to be spoken to in this tone by one of his friends, but Harry thought it was well-deserved.

“I…” he started before thinking about something only him could have known about Draco and Neville. “It wasn’t a car accident… My Uncle wh… he did that to my back when I menaced to use magic on my cousin and then when… when Dobby used magic in front of his business partners… I… You can ask the twins to testify… they… they guessed it and wanted to tell your father last summer, but I stopped them… I… I’m sorry…” he spurted.

He was looking down at his feet, not brave enough to face his friends.

“Oh Harry…” he heard Neville say.

And before he knew it, he was in their arms and crying with them. It was just so unfair that his friends were always the ones to pay for the fact that he was a freak…

A few floors above them, in the Gryffindor tower, Ron and Hermione were back in the 2nd Year boy dorm room. Hermione had not said anything during their whole journey back. She was now seating on Seamus’s bed, completely apathetic.

Ron did not understand what was wrong with her. He had been the one getting punched and she had done nothing to defend him! It was her idea after all! Sick of speaking by himself, Ron decided to finally open his Christmas gifts that had been waiting for far too long if anyone ever asked him.

He got the usual jumper from her mother, a few other random gifts from his relatives, a new quill from Hermione, then he came across a 30-centimetre-long box. A small note was attached to it.

‘Hey mate!
I know I haven’t been the best of friends this year. I feel like too much is going on and I can’t get enough time with any of you…
Anyway, turned out, the incident in Kings Cross was partially my fault… Well, the rogue house-elf from this summer was trying to stop me from going to Hogwarts and, well… you got stuck with me and now, you don’t have a properly working wand anymore so… I hope this present will allow us to make amend and to have a fresh start next semester!
Sorry for being so distant and thank you for all the effort you put regarding Draco!
Merry Christmas!
Harry

PS: The twins helped me. Hurry and tell me if it fits!’
Ron quickly opened the box and discovered a wand – ‘willow and unicorn hair – 13’’ was written in golden letters under it. He took it up and small sparkles of magic immediately appeared at the top. His body responded to it and he gaped at the strange sensation.

‘Wingardium Leviosa!’ he cast on a book lying in the floor.

The book immediately raised up and started levitating.

“Bloody hell…” he muttered.

It felt so easy and natural. He never experienced it with his old wand even when it was not completely broken yet.

“You got a new wand? Did you finally tell your parents?” Hermione asked weakly from Seamus’s bed.

“No, it’s from Harry,” he said before trying a new spell, giggling when it worked smoothly again.

Far from rejoicing with him, Hermione grabbed the note from Harry and started crying of all thing… Ron was ready to call her sensitiveness, but he had to admit that he was feeling a bit guilty too.

With a low sigh, he got up and sat next to his crying friend. He put an indecisive arm around her shoulders.

“Don’t worry, Hermione. He’ll calm down and we’ll apologize, and everything is going to be okay. I promise I won’t make a fuss about the punch if he apologizes, ok? Harry is still our friend…”

But his words only made her cry louder. Ron hoped Harry would have calmed down before dinner… Last resort he knew he could always go to Dumbledore about it anyway!

However, Harry was not in the Great Hall for dinner, nor did he come back to their dorm that night. At 7 pm, the Twins came in and took his and Neville’s stuff, quickly telling Ron that Harry and Neville would stay in their dorm until the end of the holidays. Ron tried to argue, of course, but his brothers’ reaction scared the shit out of him.

“Don’t you dare!”

“If you so much as look in Harry’s, Neville’s or Malfoy’s direction, we’ll make you regret it!”

“You have done enough!”

“The only reason we didn’t tell the parents is that Harry asked us not to.”

“You don’t deserve him.”

“You should be ashamed.”

“We’re ashamed of being your brother!”

And with that, they just left him alone in his empty dorm. Who do they think they were?!! They put prank to people all the time!! It was so unfair! He just wanted to prove that Malfoy was the Heir of Slytherin and had cursed his best friend after all!! He just wanted to protect Harry and to prove that HE was his truth and only friend in this stupid school! Not like Longbottom and Malfoy who were corrupting him! It was so unfair!!!
He did try to corner Harry during the next weeks but every time he tried, his brothers stepped in, either the Twins or even Percy. Ron did not even understand why his brothers would not mind their own business. Harry was not even their friend…

Eventually, after dozens of unsuccessful attempts, Ron just gave up.

Hermione had her own hard time recovering from their disastrous plan. Of course, she was devastated that Harry decided to put an end to their friendship but after a full night of thinking, she was positively convinced that they could work on it over time.

No, what was stopping Hermione from sleeping at night was not the state of her relationship with Harry anymore… It was the fact that she kissed Malfoy… or rather Malfoy kissed her – her very first kiss! Draco Malfoy!!!! However, Malfoy was not trying to kiss HER, he had tried to kiss Harry… and that was… oh so very wrong.

Hermione observed Malfoy and Harry during the next few days – from afar, of course, as the three older Weasleys were making sure that Ron or she didn’t attempt to talk to the trio. Of course, their dynamics seemed a bit odd but from the way they were interacting with each other, she doubted Malfoy told Harry what happened with the mistletoe in that corridor… Once, Malfoy caught her staring and from the face he put, she was positively certain that he was afraid she might tell someone…

She looked into it to know how the Wizarding World saw homosexuality, but she did not find many books in the library. She could not ask Madam Pince because it would raise too many questions. What was even more unnerving was that she found very few articles about AIDS. Most of them barely tackle the subject stating that some random wizard died from it and always stressing the fact that said wizard was a Muggle-born or a half-blood living with muggles – as if this information had anything to do with the subject!

Hermione was once again in the library during the last day of the holidays when she spotted Malfoy at a recluse table. He was alone which did not happen often… There was no Weasley in sight. She decided that it might be her chance. She knew she would regret it if she did not do something.

“Hello, Malfoy…” she made herself known.

The blond boy visibly tensed when he heard her. His face was a perfect mix of disgust and hatred.

“What do you want, Granger?”

She sighed. She knew she had to be her better self even if the other boy was childish. “I wanted to talk to you about… about what happened…” she finished in a whisper.

The Slytherin paled slightly. “There’s nothing to talk about…” he answered, pretending to go back to his runes book.

She did not take the bet and simply sat next to him. She cast a small privacy charm that she had learned about the previous week and waited for him to look up again.

“I know you didn’t tell Harry,” she said. “Otherwise, he would have come back at me. I just wanted to tell you I won’t tell him either.”

Malfoy frowned, probably wondering why she did not use that piece of information against him. Well, Hermione had principles! She was a Gryffindor, not a Slytherin.
“Listen… I think we can agree on the fact that this was a mistake. You… well, we are still too young to understand love or anything, so you just probably wanted to… try something new and…”

“I wasn’t trying anything,” Malfoy sneered. “Don’t talk about something you don’t know.”

Hermione pinched her lips. She knew just fine. “Okay… if you want… But we can both tell that Harry doesn’t feel the same… I mean, you must have heard him talking about his childhood friend even more than I do… he has – at least – quite a big crush on her.”

Malfoy’s face darkened.

“Listen, Malfoy. It’s okay if you want to… like boys. But, don’t bring Harry into this, please? You said you’re his friend, right?”

“I fail to see where any of this is related or even your business.”

“Well, he’s my friend too! And yes, I know he doesn’t want to speak to me or Ron right now but… he’s still my friend and I don’t want to see him hurt!”

“And exactly why me loving him is hurting him?”

“Because if you keep on trying to kiss him like that you could give him AIDS and he would die!!!”

“W-what?!!!”

“It’s no surprise you don’t know about it… It’s a deadly disease that affects homosexual men, there is no cure so far and I checked, even wizards die from it. It’s a real epidemic in the muggle world, no one is safe, no matter how rich or famous you are. For example, Freddie Mercury one of the bestselling singers in the UK died last year of it. There really is no cure! And it’s so contagious that my parents wouldn’t take in infected patients… They are dentists, you see, so they could be in contact with infectious blood and since it’s said that even saliva could be contagious… well, you see why you shouldn’t expose Harry to that! I mean, even you, you should think about it twice but… you’re right, that part is none of my business. Just, if you really love Harry, don’t do that to him… please?”

Malfoy seemed completely in shock.

“Here, some articles from the Daily Prophet about it… I know you wouldn’t take it if I had only muggle sources,” Hermione continued taking her notes on the matter from her bag.

The blond boy did not react right away, and then, he pulled the notes his way. His hand started shattering slightly.

Hermione got up to leave him some privacy.

“For what it worth, I’m sorry for what we did with Ron,” she said. “I know you’re Harry’s friend too. It’s just that we don’t recognize him anymore and just like you, we’re worried… Anyway, please don’t do anything that could hurt him like we did, okay?”

Malfoy did not answer, of course. He was reading her notes. It was okay. She had done what needed to be done.

Or that was what she told herself while walking back to Gryffindor tower.
Draco did not even realize Granger was gone. His eyes were stuck on the words he was reading. ‘Muggle-born and Half-blood died’, ‘no pureblood casualty so far’, ‘MACUSA reminded its citizens that relationships between magicals and no-majs are forbidden regardless of their sexes’, ‘the Ministry declared that it is just some isolated cases,’ no need to panic or declare a sanitary emergency just yet’. 

Who were they kidding?!!!

Draco had never even heard of this disease. The articles from the Prophet had never made it to the front pages. His parents did not talk to him about that, even when they went over the news with him every morning at breakfast when he was home. He did not know…

The Slytherin was still thinking about his new discovery on his way back to his dorm. He did not even notice his Head of House in the dungeon corridor and ran directly into him. 

He stammered an apology, unable to look the adult in the eyes.

“It’s unlike you, Mister Malfoy. May I inquire what’s in your mind?” Severus sneered.

Draco hmphed and looked away. He was still mad at him for what happened after Harry was hit by that bludger after all.

“I see… Well, since you’re here, would you mind asking Mister Potter if he would be opened to meet some officials from the Childcare and Youth Welfare office? I had some news from your father, the testimony of the older Weasleys helped a lot but a direct statement would be far more effective, I’m afraid…”

At those words, Draco frowned and immediately looked up. Did Severus change his mind about Harry? Again??? How many times would he make a U-turn about his thoughts on Harry’s sincerity?!!

The Potion Master must have noticed his confusedness because he sighed slightly and before Draco knew it, he had cast a strong privacy charm around them. The man then kneeled to be at his height.

“Listen, Draco. I’m sorry,” he said, and it sounded genuine. “I can’t get into details about what happened to me, your father asked me not to… To keep it short, there are a lot of compulsion charms on any testimony about Potter’s living situation. Initially, we just thought that it was a side-effect of the protective charms that are most certainly put on the boy’s home to protect him from followers of the Dark Lord who could potentially want to avenge their master… However, after what happened in November, we discovered that the compulsion charm was far more selective than that and… I must admit, I fell for it and if it wasn’t for you and your father, I wouldn’t even have noticed it… So, would you please forgive me? I promise you that we, your parents and I, are actively trying to save your friend. The enemy is just far more powerful than we first thought…”

Draco looked at his honorary-uncle. As far as he remembered, the man had never been as opened with him as he had just been right now. “You’re talking about Dumbledore, aren’t you? If there were protective charms on Harry’s home, he would have been the one to put them there in the first place…”

Severus smirked without confirming his assumption. “That’s my little snake,” he only said. “Now, if you know that, you must understand why your parents try to keep you in the dark. The Headmaster is a renowned legilimens and we can’t have him trying to stop our rescue attempt before it’s strong enough to win in court… How was your occlumency practice going lately?”
Draco put a face and the Potion Master’s eyes shined jokingly. “Okay… how about we started them over together, would you like that?”

Draco thought about it for a few seconds before answering. “Could Harry and Neville come too? If I got to be in the secrets, so are they!”

If was Severus turned to put a face – as much as his stern features let him do it. “If it’s what I must to make amends with you…”

“We could put it during our Potion study group, so it’ll be less suspicious if you want!” Draco offered excitedly. “Well, I’ll have to ask them first, of course…”

“Of course…” Severus repeated seemingly exhausted.

“Brilliant!” Draco smiled. “And I’ll ask Harry for the testimony but… well, I’m not sure he’ll do it… he… it may be linked to the compulsion charm you were talking about but he’s convinced that nobody ever believes him when he talks about what is going on in that house…”

“Talk with him about it and… whatever he decides, we’ll find a solution to take him out of that house…”

Draco nodded approvingly. Thinking that their discussion was over, he was about to thank the man and wish him good night, but the professor stopped him.

“Draco, what about what was in your mind earlier? Do you want to talk about it?” he asked, serious again.

All the words and ideas about Granger’s articles immediately came back in his mind. Could he talk to the man about that? But he would ask questions… What if he talked about it to his father? What if they realized that he had feelings for Harry and that it was not just friendship?! He was not ready to have this talk with his parents! He knew that homosexuality was okay in the wizarding world, but he was an heir and his parents did not have a spare… he could not doom their family line just like that… he… What if his parents decide that they would not save Harry because he was a threat to the prosperity of the Malfoy line?! Oh no, he was not ready to have this conversation!!!

“You’re scaring me, Draco…” Severus whispered, taking one of his hand in his.

Draco forced himself to put his social face on. “Sorry, Uncle Sev… It’s nothing, really… I just thought that I made a mistake on my transfiguration essay and that I have to redo it completely before tomorrow morning.”

The lie flew easily out of his mouth. If the Potion Master had his doubts, he did not show them.

“Fine, I’ll not keep you any longer then,” he said, finally getting up. “Please inform me of your friends’ answers regarding… well, the different issues we just talked about.”

“Will do,” Draco nodded, forcing a smile on his face.

However, as soon as the adult disappeared in the corridors, his smile faltered. He needed to know more about that stupid disease, and he did not have the slightest clue of where to find it.
Chapter End Notes

Sorry, Draco!
Please, tell me what you think!!
Harry could not say he was happy that the new term started. He had not talked to Hermione or Ron since the Christmas incident and even if Neville and he had moved back to their dorm at the end of the holidays, Harry took it personally to not even look in Ron’s direction or react to any of his many words.

It was not that easy to completely ignore a person, Harry had to admit that. But he had practice. After all, ignoring Dudley’s teases had been a necessity during his childhood!

Neville and Draco had had a hard time going over what happened. Neville had thought him dead when he had found him petrified in his bed. Harry would never forget his best friend’s pleas while he was a prisoner of his own body.

As for Draco, Harry felt like the boy had put some distance between them since the incident. The Slytherin did not want to talk about what happened exactly with Ron and Hermione and the Gryffindors had decided that they would not push it. But still, it hurt to see his friend losing himself in clearly not pleasant thoughts… Harry knew he could not argue with him on that part… How many times Neville and Draco must have thought the exact same thing about him since they knew him???

The return of classes brought a new routine for the three friends. Harry and Draco still have their Quidditch practices, but they were far more regular on their potion study sessions. Draco had asked Neville and Harry if they would be okay if Snape – of all people – came and help them on a new subject called ‘occlumency’.

Of course, Harry did not know what it was but when his friends explained it to him, he felt sick. Wizards could read minds… Like in Dudley’s cartoons… And Snape was worried that Dumbledore would try and read Draco’s, Neville’s or Harry’s minds and he wanted to help them before it happened…

Harry did not really understand why Dumbledore would try and read their minds of all people in Hogwarts. They were just kids after all… And then he wondered what Dumbledore would do if he saw the Dursleys’ abuse on Harry’s mind… Won’t that be easier than telling everything to a Ministry official?? But what if Dumbledore had already known that and decided to do nothing about it? They did have that strange talk at the end of the previous year… Maybe he thought it was one of Harry’s many nightmares but it was not real so there was no need to act upon it… Thinking of all those possibilities gave Harry headaches and maybe even a fever because he felt like his heir ring was colder every time he started doubting the Headmaster…

Neither the less, Harry agreed to participate in Snape’s special occlumency lessons. Neville and Draco were very convincing about the opportunity it represented. And to be honest, Harry did not have the heart to say no to either of them lately… That was why he also agreed to see the Ministry’s employee from the Childcare and Youth Welfare office. He had decided to give it a try, especially because there was no way he would go back to the Dursleys’ after what happened the previous summer.

Neville and Draco had seemed so relieved when he reluctantly agreed that it almost scared him. He had thought about it all night long. He was not even sure he would manage to tell this person…
anything… How could he? It did not have any evidence to show them anyway and they would always believe his relatives rather than him… But for Neville and Draco, he had to try… He did not want them to end up like Ace…

Ace…

That was the subject that Harry had decided to bury deep down in his mind when Snape had first explained to them what other purposes occlumency had – other than stopping intruders from entering your mind. Occlumency was also a great way to organise one’s ideas and optimize concentration under pressure. It was a tool that allowed one individual to compartmentalize his thoughts and to turn off – temporarily – disturbing feelings.

Harry had been relieved when Snape told them that he had prepared a list of exercises for them and would not be able to physically stay with them during the whole duration of their study session. The professor and Draco seemed to have found a truce of some sort, but Harry was still wary of the man.

Neville did not express an opinion, but he would always stay near Harry when the Potion Master was present, ready to interfere if Snape ever spoke a word wrong about his friend. The first time it happened, Draco had later teased him about how the old bat was always the best to bring the lion out of the unsuspected Gryffindor. He then explained to Harry the other occurrences of this behaviour. Harry did not know how to react to the fact that his friends were so passionate about him when he was not around. But Neville did not seem to regret it and it felt great to see his friend so confident, so he decided he was okay with it.

The first exercises Snape gave them was about meditation and clearing one’s mind. Easier said than done, of course. But the three boys had plenty of thoughts to clear in their heads for practice. Snape told them that a medium could help. For Harry, it was drawing. Neville started helping Professor Sprout in the greenhouses. And they discovered that Draco was, in fact, playing the piano and that there was one in Slytherin Common Room.

The three friends were contemplating their fated separation when one afternoon of January, as they were gathering in the headquarter, they discovered a few new additions to the room: a bunch of indoor plants, an easel and an upright piano. There were also shortbread cookies and hot chocolate waiting for them with a book on locking charms – a sticky note was set on the page explaining how to put a password on a door.

The boys did not really know who they should thank but when Draco asked Snape, the Potion Master told them that they made a great impression on Hogwarts House Elves by bringing back their dishes to the kitchen every day during Christmas break… somehow…

Harry settled easily in these new routines. He felt lighter now that he didn’t need to part his time between two groups of friends that did not like each other.

And then there was the social services meeting… As to not draw unwanted attention, Snape kindly offered to give Harry detention on a Saturday afternoon… Well, to be accurate, he did not offer and just gave Harry detention out of the blue a day they crossed each other in a corridor. It was only after the seemingly blatant injustice that the Potion Master explained himself… for more realism apparently.

Harry grew more nervous as the day came nearer. He knew he was supposed to do it for himself but deep down he knew he was doing it for his friends. He could not stand the risk of losing them as he lost Ace because he did nothing sooner…

The day of the meeting, Neville went and watched Gryffindor Quidditch practice in the morning
even though it was freezing cold outside. Draco joined them for lunch and arranged it so they could eat in the headquarter rather than in the Great Hall. They both accompanied him to Snape’s office.

“We’ll stay nearby…” Neville promised.

“Slytherin Quidditch practice had been rescheduled to Tuesday evening because the 5th years have a mock-up OWL exam next week…” Draco said.

Harry smiled at his friends, failing miserably to hide his anxiety.

The meeting did not go at all as he had imagined it though. The woman, Mrs ‘call me Mary’ McKensy, did not start by asking him why he was accusing his relatives of abuse… Well, frankly speaking, he had not accused them personally just yet so maybe it was understandable… No, she only asked him about whether or not a magical person had ever come check on him when he was younger. When he said it did not happen and that he did not know he was a wizard until Hagrid gave him his Hogwarts acceptance letter on his 11th birthday, she asked more detailed on that day and how he had dealt with accidental magic growing up.

Their conversation went on that topic for almost an hour. The witch just wanted to know what contact with the magical world and culture he had before and even after he entered Hogwarts. She never ever commented with emotion to what he said, she was taking note and asking for more details, but never did she comment about how weird it was or anything.

As time went by it became easier for Harry to talk because he felt like, for once, he was not being judged. At some point, he felt comfortable enough to dare ask the question that had been on the back of his mind since the beginning of their session.

“Aren’t you going to ask about what was going on at my relatives’ house?”

The witch looked up to him. “Are you willing to share?” she simply asked.

“I…” Harry started but he realized he did not really know. He was so used to people probing on that subject that he always reacted defensively. Nobody ever believed him anyway so… “Did you get the Weasley twins’ testimony?”

“I had,” she confirmed.

“And you didn’t think it was strange? That they were overreacting?”

“Do you think they were overreacting?” she asked instead of answering.

Harry pinched his lips. He really did not know how to get about it to really know what the woman was thinking.

“Listen, Harry, I’ve been told that you didn’t want to talk about what was going on in that house… I don’t necessarily need to know at this point since I’ve already got plenty of information relevant enough to start building your case. Nonetheless, if you’re willing to share any information on what you’ve been through, I can take your testimony at any time…”

Harry was not looking at her, but he could feel her gaze on him.

“We don’t have to talk about it today,” she added after some time.

“I… I want to talk but…” Harry took a deep breath. “Could my friends be there? I… I want to tell them, but I don’t want to repeat this story several times… I’m not sure I can.”
“We can do whatever you want Harry. I have no problem with your friends being here.”

Harry nodded and the witch called a house elf. Harry recognized the elf as the one Draco called at Halloween, Snape’s personal house elf… He told her the name of his friends and less than five minutes later, Draco and Neville were protectively seating next to him.

And then he told them everything. Well, everything he thought about: the cupboard under the stairs, the starving, the chores, the beating… Then what happened the previous summer when he tried to use his cousin fear of magic and when Dobby crashed his uncle’s business dinner.

Draco and Neville looked so pale that Harry thought they might get sick. They did not say a word. On the other hand, Mrs McKensy stayed as calm as before, taking notes.

“Did you ever try to run away?” she finally asked when he finished.

“I did,” Harry confirmed. “A few times… The first I remember was when I was 4 or 5, it was before I entered Elementary School. They had locked me outside because I broke a plate or a glass or something. It was raining and… well, I left. I walked for what felt like hours to the nearest police station… well, now I know it wasn’t that far from the house but back then, I didn’t know where I was going so, I guess it felt longer… Anyway, I went there because it was what the ad during Dudley’s cartoons said you should do when you are lost. At first, I think they had been kind to me… they asked many questions and all… I didn’t even know my name back then, I remembered telling them my name was ‘Freak’… But then, I don’t know how but my Uncle was at the station and he convinced the policemen to bring me home. They just... agreed.”

Mrs McKensy frowned. It was the first real emotion that had gone through her face since Harry began speaking.

“Of course, I got punished for running to the police, but it didn’t stop me from trying again a few times… he always found me back after a few hours, even when I was trying to hide… I never got far.”

“He, you mean your uncle?” the woman asked.

Harry nodded. “Then, I started Elementary School, it’s mandatory in the muggle world from the age of 6,” he explained to his friends. “And there was that teacher that noticed that something was wrong. She called the muggle social services… but they didn’t believe me. The next thing I knew was that the teacher hated me, and everyone was calling me a pathological liar… she quitted her job before the end of that year.”

“So, nobody helped you in the muggle world either?”

“No, someone helped me,” Harry said softly. “Ace, my best friend… We met on my 7th birthday. She was 6 and she was in the foster system and she just… understood? She went through a lot herself and I think she had it even worse than me…”

“Why would you think that? Did she tell you about it?”

“No… not really. She didn’t really like to talk about her old life. She went out but her scars were…” he shook his head. “Anyway, she understood, and she did everything to help… At first, she shared her lunch with me, then when I was hurt, she helped me with the bandages – that’s when she used those runes,” he added to Draco and Neville.

“Y-you did get hurt often then?” Neville mumbled.
Harry nodded. “Yes… the first time she really healed me was during 3rd grade. My relatives had discovered that I lied and stayed with her during the summer instead of staying at Mrs Figg. My uncle was really mad and… well, I kind of miss one week of school but I don’t really remember much about it… it was just bad. And when I went back to school, Ace just knew. She made that marigold salves and put a healing rune on the bandage…”

“She’s a witch?” Mrs McKensy asked.

Harry felt like closing up, but he could not stop there. He reminded his occlumency training and put the feeling somewhere far away in his mind. “We… we’re not sure. She’s not here and she would have been 11 already… We lost contact when I started Hogwarts…”

The woman did not ask more questions about the matter. “You said ‘at first, she shared her lunch’, did she do more?” she went back to his story.

He nodded. “She often broke into my relatives’ house at night and gave me something to eat in my cupboard… She’s the only reason I didn’t die of starvation during the holidays…”

“You said she was in the muggle foster system. If she knew what was going on in that house, didn’t she try to tell one of her contacts about you?”

Harry shook his head. “No… I asked her not to,” he admitted bitterly. “I know she did after I left for Hogwarts but it… didn’t go well.”

“Do you want to elaborate on that?”

Harry shook his head. “We had an escape plan,” he said instead. “Things went sour in her foster home too and… well, we were good at school, so we decided to try and get full scholarship in the nearest boarding middle school. We had worked on it for almost two years and we did it… We got into a muggle middle school call Sutton’s Grammar School. It’s one of the best muggle school in the country. The idea was to get time far from home and an opportunity to be truly independent after we graduate…”

“You were thinking about the long run…”

“It was her idea…She’s smart like that…” Harry said but the guilt was too strong for him to put it away. He screwed everything up by leaving her behind… He closed down. He could not talk anymore. He was not ready, and it was too much. He should have said all that… Who would believe him anyway?

As all those negative feelings were winning him over, he felt his two friends moving closer to him. Neville side-hugged him and Draco seemed to hesitate to do the same as he had done for the past month. He was still there, and Harry decided that he would be the one who took his hands this time. He knew neither boys had experienced what he and Ace had. They did not know, and he had just said so much. He wanted to be naive for once and believe that it would not make a difference in their relationships…

“You did very good Harry,” Mrs McKensy said after a few minutes. “We’ll get you out of there, I promise.”

“When?” Draco asked.

“Well, I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure you won’t go back for the summer holidays, even if it’s a temporary precaution at first. However, I would like the three of you to keep this matter as private as possible. I’m only in charge of childcare today but your case will be called in a larger case by the
DMLE. With your authorization, I’ll give them part or totality of your testimony so they can take the appropriate legal action beyond your relocation in a safer environment.”

Harry hesitated but finally nodded.

“You have to stated it aloud, if possible, Harry.”

“…I…” Harry felt his friends tightening their grips on his shoulder and hand. He took a deep breath; he could do this. “I agree… you can give them everything…” he whispered.

“Everything will stay confidential, right?” Draco asked next to him.

“Yes, it will be. If you want us to, we could also ask that the trial, should it happen, stays strictly private…”

“With a confidentiality vow?” Draco added.

Mrs McKinsey paused before answering. “It could be asked, yes. I note it, but we’ll discuss this later. We’re nowhere near this yet.”

“… this summer, people at the Ministry knew about my warning for use of magic in front of muggles even if they didn’t work in that department…” Harry pointed in a small voice. “I… I don’t want anyone else to know…”

Once again, the woman paused. Harry did not dare look up at her. “Okay, I understand. I’ll spread the word amongst my service that the files we are dealing with are strictly confidential and that they should refrain from talking about it to any irrelevant counterpart.”

“Thank you…” Neville said for Harry.

The meeting ran short after that. Mrs McKensy explained quickly what would happen next, that they would meet again in one month and that if he ever needed, Harry could send her an owl directly.

“Last thing, Harry. I have a request… Could you please refrain from talking about this case to Professor McGonagall or Professor Dumbledore? I’m well aware that she’s your head of house, but she might be involved in the larger case that I talk about earlier and we didn’t want unnecessary information to come back to them just yet… If you ever need to talk to an adult in the Castle about everything, I would recommend Professor Snape or Madam Pomfrey. They both already helped in your case and had taken appropriate measures to ensure their… independence of action.”

“…okay…”

Harry was not really thinking about talking to an adult about all that anyway. Well, clearly Snape already knew but he would not willingly go to him in any occasion if he were not Draco’s honorary uncle… And Professor McGonagall had always seemed too busy to care about her students’ teenage dramas…

With that, the three friends were free to go, and they started slowly wandering aimlessly in the corridors. They did not talk much. Harry was focused on what would happen to him, while Neville and Draco were still processing everything, they just learnt about their best friend’s home life. When they suddenly heard an angry outburst from the floor above.

They paused and looked as Filch stormed pass them without seeing them and slammed a door down the hall.
“You don’t think someone else had been attacked?” Neville said tensely.

“We shouldn’t stay here…” Harry confirmed, better safe than sorry.

“We could just have a peek before they come back,” Draco – the unsuspected Gryffindor of the group – told them.

They poked their heads around the corner. Filch had clearly been manning his usual lookout post where Mrs Norris had been attacked. They saw at a glance what Filch had been shouting about. A great flood of water stretched over half the corridor, and it looked like it was still seeping from under the door of Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. They could hear her wails echoed off the walls.

The three friends shared a look.

“Let’s go and see,” Harry said.

They entered the girl bathroom. Moaning Myrtle was crying even louder and harder than before. All the taps of the room were running, and it was pretty dark as the water seemed to have extinguished all the candles.

The three friends quickly went around the bathroom to stop the water and Harry approached the moaning ghost.

“Hello, Myrtle, right? What’s wrong?” he asked kindly.

“Who’s that?” Myrtle glugged miserably. “You’re boys, you’re not supposed to be here… Come to throw something else at me?”

“We just heard you crying from outside… are you okay? Why would we throw something at you?”

“Don’t ask me,” Myrtle shouted, sending more waves of water from the cubicle she was hiding in. “Here I am, minding my own business – unlike you – and someone thinks it’s funny to throw a book at me…”

Harry wondered if a ghost could feel pain in this occasion as the book would probably just go through her… But saying so out loud would be insensitive… “Are you okay? Do you know who did it? We just arrived but we haven’t seen anyone leaving your bathroom…”

“I don’t know… I was just sitting in the U-bend, thinking about death, and it fell right through the top of my head…” she explained while sobbing. “It’s over there, it got washed out…”

Harry looked under the sink, where Myrtle was pointing. A small, thin book lay there. It had a shabby black cover and was as wet as everything else in the bathroom. Harry stepped forward to pick it up, but Draco suddenly flung out an arm to hold him back.

“What?” Harry asked.

“Are you mad?” Draco said. “It could be dangerous! Don’t you feel the compulsion coming from it??!!”

“What?” Harry repeated, looking at Neville for help but the boy was gripping his own hand.

“There is a strong compulsion charm coming from there,” he explained with a trembling voice.

“How do you know?”
“Most Heir rings had detectors of this kind of charm... Don’t yours feel colder since you saw the book?”

“Well... Yes, but it does that all the time so...”

“What?????” both Draco and Neville exclaimed.

“What?”

“Why do you mean by all the time?”

“My ring, it’s often cold like that so I don’t think it’s a big deal...” Harry elaborated.

“How often?” Draco asked suddenly very pale.

“A few times a day I would say...” Harry answered, starting to feel nervous under the looks his friends were sharing.

“We should tell Professor Snape...” Neville finally said.

“What?!!” Harry exclaimed.

“Yes... To take care of the book, at least... Linkle?” Draco called and a few seconds later the Slytherin elf popped in.

“Young Master Student had called Linkle? Linkle hopes Young Master Student had not called when he should not again. Linkle will not clean after Young Master Students if they had been the ones to do all that untidiness...”

“No, it’s important this time! It’s about that book, it might be cursed. Can you tell Professor Snape to come here and that it’s urgent?”

The elf looked at the black book on the ground and nodded.

“Young Master Students should stay away from the book. It is very dark magic. Linkle will bring Master Potion Master Snape very quick.”

And she popped out.

Chapter End Notes

Hello there! It's been so long... sorry about that. I have a writer's block on chapter 23...
So, I decided to wait before posting this chapter but the more I wait the less I feel like writing so, here we are! XD

What do you think? I feel like the pace is a bit off in this fic... do you agree?

Please tell me what you think! Hopefully, talking to you guys might help me overtake my writer's block...
Harry pointedly ignored Hermione and Ron who were looking at him from the Gryffindor table and focused on his plate. The ring froze slightly on his finger and he sighed, taking out a small notepad.

“Maybe it’s just broken…” he said boringly.

It had been almost three weeks since that incident in Myrtle’s bathroom and since then, Snape had asked him to note down every situation when his Heir ring was cold… meaning a few times every hour… He was supposed to notice if there was something in common between all those occurrences in order to determine what the compulsion might be about. But so far, Harry just felt like it was happening all the time!

“An Heir ring is an ancestral family artefact; it can’t be broken!” Draco commented.

“Snape told us he would arrange a journey to Gringotts during Spring Break to check it anyway,” Neville smiled sympathetically at his friend.

“You should have told us earlier…” Draco growled for the hundredth time since the end of January.

“I told you I didn’t even know it was a thing!” Harry snapped back. “Why are you so cranky today anyway?”

At this instant, a small dwarf dressed as a cupid appeared next to them and took out a long scroll.

“Oh, Harry! The rose’s red, the violet's blue; The honey's sweet, and so are you; Thou are my love and I am thine; Please notice me because the Boy-Who-Lived cannot forever stay alone… - Amanda Pals.”

The dwarf disappeared and Draco angrily forked the vegetables in his plate.

“How many so far?” Neville joked next to Harry.

“It’s the 9th… I just hope this day would stop already…” Harry mumbled putting his head in his hands.

“Come on, that one was fine. She wrote a poem and all…”

“It’s just a muggle poem rip-off, you know?” Harry sighed. “I mean, why are people so obsessed about me?! I’m only 12, it’s not like I want to date or anything… I’m not even old enough to go to Hogsmeade anyway!”

“What can I say? You’re the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’ and the last heir soon-to-be Lord of a rich ancient family… You’re definitely a good party!” Neville smirked at him.

“Well… I won’t marry anytime soon… Plus, there’s also that boy who wrote me a letter… You know, the one we received just after Charm?”

“Yes… That was strange…” Neville confirmed nodding, not noticing the way Draco froze suddenly. “Grant, right? He’s in Hufflepuff. I’ve asked Hannah and apparently, he’s in 5th year… A bit old for you…”
“And a boy! And he said I was pretty! I’m not pretty, I’m a boy!” Harry exclaimed. “I mean… anyway…” He sighed again.

At this point, Draco got up and mumbled something about going to Slytherin Common Room before fleeing the Great Hall. Harry and Neville did not even have time to react.

“What’s wrong with him?” Harry asked Neville.

“I… I don’t know…” Neville turned to another Slytherin boy sitting near them. “Nott? Did something happen to Draco during class today?”

“What do I know?!!”

“Maybe he’s just mad because he didn’t get any card, unlike you, Potter…” Pansy Parkinson smirked next to him.

“He didn’t?” Harry said. “Isn’t he the only Heir of a Most and Ancient Family too?”

“Yes… but it’s not the same…” Neville started.

“With the rumours about his family and him being the Heir of Slytherin and killing mudbloods all around…” Nott added without looking up from the book he was reading.

“He didn’t kill them!” Neville reacted defensively. “And he’s not the Heir…” he added after a second of thinking.

“Anyway, he’s not a promising bachelor as you are, Potter,” Parkinson informed them. “He’s betrothed to the Greengrasses after all!”

“Daphne Greengrass?!!” Harry exclaimed. He did not know about that.

“More likely her little sister,” Parkinson confirmed. “She’ll start Hogwarts next year if I remember correctly…”

Harry turned to Neville. “Did you know?”

Neville only shrugged. “It’s not that surprising… Lots of pureblood families still do this kind of things, and the Malfoys are one of the purest… But betrothals don’t mean much nowadays. The consent of both individuals after their coming of age is always considered anyway.”

“So, it’s not like a forced marriage?”

Everyone around him grimaced slightly at his question and no one answered him. Neville gave him a silent look to tell him that they will talk about it later – and alone!

Harry was not very patient on that matter because as soon as they exited the Great Hall, he grabbed Neville and took him to a quiet corridor.

“So? Is Draco into a forced marriage or what?”

“I don’t know… He never talked about it, so I don’t know how much pressure his family put into it…”

“Do you reckon that’s the reason he seems so depressed lately?”

“Why would it be?”
“Well, with this stupid rumour about him being the Heir and all the stupid things the Prophet says about his family? Could this jeopardize his parents’ arrangements? Is it a bad thing? Does he even like the girl???”

“Harry… I think you should talk to him if you really want to know, but I doubt that this stupid rumour might be strong enough to break an official betrothal contract between two Most Ancient and Noble families… The only thing that could affect the contract might be if he or one of his parents goes to Azkaban… or if he was to be disowned by the Lord of his House, meaning his father… but that’s not happening.”

“If you say so…” Harry looked away before thinking about something. “And you? Do you have any latent forced marriage contract I should know about?”

Neville started laughing. “Nothing of that sort, sorry. Being suspected of being a squib for so long did have its perks. And technically, it’s called an arranged marriage. Draco hasn’t been forced to do anything yet…”

“And is there any girl you would have liked a cupid message from today?” Harry continued with a smirk.

Neville blushed. “No…”

Harry smirked. “Come on, I see the way you look at Ginny Weasley sometimes…”

“I… It’s…” Neville stopped the embarrassing shuttering. “It’s not like that! It’s just that she doesn’t seem to have loads of friends and she might find it difficult to adjust… and she totally worships you anyway…”

“She… well, she does… a little. Apparently, she was close to Creevey… The twins are worried too but they’re afraid that they would make it worse if they tell their mother… Ginny had always hated being treated like the baby of the family…”

“I thought it would have been easier for girls like her… I mean, she’s not supposed to be that alone as all her brothers are here too…”

“I’m not sure… Ron wasn’t thrilled about having his brothers around last year either. It’s like, whatever you do at school, your parents will know… Frankly speaking, I hated it when Dudley snitched on me to my Aunt about something that happened in school… I mean, it was already bad at home, I would have like to have some quiet time when I was away… That’s probably why we spent so much time in the library with Ace now that I think about it… Dudley never goes there, and Ace must have noticed…”

Harry lost himself in his memories without noticing the long look Neville gave him.

“Sorry…” Harry mumbled after sometimes. “I…” he shook his head and shrugged forcing the memory in the back of his mind.

“It’s okay… you haven’t talked about her in a while…” Neville pointed out. “Feeling okay?”

“Yeah, I think so… It’s… Snape’s occlumency lessons are helping.”

“Good then,” Neville smiled at him.

“Yeah… Do you know if Draco’s dad made any progress?”
When Neville shook his head sadly, Harry decided that he didn’t have time to be sorry for himself. He just needed to focus on something else and be patient.

“What do you want to do? Headquarter or Common room?” he asked Neville.

“I still need to wrap up my Transfiguration essay soooo Common Room?”

The end of February was the time for Ravenclaw-Slytherin Quidditch match and despite the exacerbated animosity against the Slytherin House that year, Harry and Neville made a point upon supporting their best friend.

The match lasted more than three hours but, in the end, Draco caught the snitch. His broom had been faster than Chang’s, the Ravenclaw seeker. However, unlike any other match, the galleries did not burst into yelling and applause. They all just stayed deadly quiet until someone started booing and was quickly followed by merely three-quarters of the school.

Some people started throwing stuff and spells and the broom of one of Slytherin chasers caught fire. People started screaming. Even though Madam Hooch acted quickly and stopped the flame immediately, the damage was done, and everything turned into chaos.

The teachers present in the pitch took charged and tried to stop the riot while the Slytherin team quickly landed and disappeared into their changing room.

Harry and Neville hurried down their stand but stopped when they heard the yelling coming from the Slytherin changing room.

“I don’t care if you won, Malfoy! We can’t continue like that! So, either you put an end to that stupid Heir of Slytherin business right away, either there’s no need to give your Quidditch uniform to the elves for cleaning tonight because you won’t be wearing it again!! Your father’s influence has its limits and I’ll not endanger the team because of you!” Flint, Slytherin Quidditch Captain, was yelling.

“Whatever is he thinking, your father?” Someone else sneered. “Openly trying to get the Dark Lord’s followers out of prison! Isn’t he supposed to be a Slytherin and try to be subtle about it??”

“He isn’t trying to release him…” Draco’s weak voice protested. “Black didn’t have a trial and…”

“Come on, Malfoy! Do you think we’re as stupid as the Prophet?! Sirius Black is your mother’s cousin, isn’t he? What is your father after? The Black Lordship? Does he really think it’s the right time for that?! With everything going on out here?! What next, ask that your dear Aunt Bellatrix Lestrange is granted for special visitation on Yule????”

“You and your family disgust me, Malfoy…”

“You’re the reason why the world cannot move on…”

“You should just go rotting in Azkaban with the rest of your family…”

Harry was ready to intervene, but Neville held him back until they heard most people leaving. The two Gryffindors then peaked into the room. Draco was still there, in his Quidditch uniform, crouched figure on the bench. His head was down, and he was trembling, maybe out of cold… he was drenched.
“Drake…” Harry whispered as they made their way to their friend.

Draco did not look up to them nor did he reject them when they sat next to him. He was silently sobbing and even with a pair of friends hugging him, he would not stop.

“I’m sick of it… they all hate me… even when I catch the snitch, they hate me…”

“They don’t hate you…” Neville started.

But it was true though. They had both noticed that the other Slytherin 2nd year would avoid Draco now. During their class together, they could sit with their friend, but they knew that he was alone in every other class… And when he had free periods and they did not… and in the evening, when they had to go back to Gryffindor Common Room, and he stayed alone again. There was only so much they could do with them being in another House.

“They know you’re not really the Heir, right?” Harry asked.

“It doesn’t matter! They lost their friends and scholarships and they got bullied because of it! Everyone hates the Slytherins even more because of everything that has been happening! And they say it’s my fault because of everything the Prophet writes about my family…”

“But it’s not!” Harry argued.

“Who cares?! They hate me all the same! Everything I do hurt people around me!” Draco was definitely crying now. “I just want to go home…” he sobbed against Neville’s shoulder.

Harry let Neville take the lead with trying to comfort their friends. It was hard to hear him feeling so miserable. He wished they could help him more. He regretted not being sorted into Slytherin so much right now…

In the end, Draco managed to calm down just enough for them to go back to the Castle and to take him to Snape’s office. The Potion Master did not even let Harry and Neville time to explain what happened. He just took Draco in and slammed his door to the two Gryffindors.

Draco did not show up for dinner nor breakfast the next morning. The Easter Holidays were just a few days away and on Monday, Harry and Neville received an owl explaining that Draco had got home early because he did not feel well.

The two friends tried not to worry too much, but they knew that Draco might not come back even after the Holidays.

“We need to find the real Heir…” Harry told Neville one day. “This way, Draco’s name will be cleared, and he will be able to come back…”

“How do you want to do that?”

“Well… I thought you knew everyone family tree by heart…”

“No, that’s Draco…” Neville sighed. “And I’m sure that there are loads of people related to Slytherin in this school… I mean, the Wizarding community in the UK is not that big.”

“Maybe we could find the Chamber of Secrets and wait for the Heir there?”

“If it was that easy, he would have been caught already…”
“Don’t be so pessimistic. What do we know about the Chamber?” Harry asked, taking out a sheet of paper and a quill.

“Hum… well, since it’s supposedly accessible only to an Heir of Slytherin and Slytherin’s family ancestral ability is Parseltongue, I think it has some kind of Parseltongue password or something…”

“We also know that it had been opened before. Binns told us so in November…”

“I asked my Uncle Algie about it. He told me it was during his 2nd year at Hogwarts and that a girl died… Apparently, they caught the culprit and he was expelled from the school but the whole story had been kept quiet in the papers…”

“Why?”

“Probably so that they don’t close the school? I don’t know…”

“When was that?”

“Hum… Uncle Algie was born in 1930 so… 1942? Or 1943?”

“Ok,” Harry noted that information on the list. “A girl died you said?”

“Yes… I think she was a Ravenclaw… definitely a muggleborn. They wouldn’t have been able to keep it quiet otherwise.”

“…Do you think she might have turned into a ghost?”

“Well… I don’t know what the Monster is but being killed by it must definitely be gruesome…”

“What if she’s still in the school?”

“What?!!”

“Do you know how Moaning Myrtle died? I mean, her uniform definitely has some 40’s vibes…”

They shared a long look and got up immediately.

“Harry, it’s incredibly rude to ask a ghost how they died…” Neville said as they were almost running to the 2nd-floor girl's bathroom.

“Maybe, but we have to know!”

They stopped to knock before entering the bathroom – it was still a girl bathroom after all. Moaning Myrtle was sitting on the cistern of the end toilet.

“Oh, it’s you again?” she said when she saw Harry. “You do know you’re not a girl and you have nothing to do here, right?”

“I know, I’m sorry to bother you but we wanted to ask you something…” Harry explained with an apologetic tone.

“What is it?”

“We wanted to know how you died.”

Myrtle’s whole aspect changed at once. She looked as though she had never been asked such a
flattering question.

“Ooooh. It was dreadful,” she said with relish. She then explained the whole day of her death, step by step. “The door was locked, and I was crying, and then I heard somebody come in. They said something funny. A different language, I think it must have been. Anyway, what really got me was that it was a boy speaking. So, I unlocked the door, to tell him to go and use his own toilet, and then—“ Myrtle swelled importantly, her face shining. “I died.”

“How?” said Harry.

“No idea,” she said in hushed tones. “I just remember seeing a pair of great yellow eyes. My whole body sort of seized up, and then I was floating away…” She looked dreamily at Harry. “And then I came back again. I was determined to haunt Olive Hornby, you see. Oh, she was sorry she’d ever laughed at my glasses.”

Harry and Neville did not comment but shared a look.

“Where exactly did you see the eyes?” said Neville.

“Somewhere there,” said Myrtle, pointing vaguely towards the sink in front of her toilet.

Harry and Neville went over it and started looking around for a sign of secret passage.

“You know, you’re the first person to ever ask me what happened, Harry?” Myrle continued speaking. “After I came back, I thought people would ask but they were all avoiding me. Even Professor Dumbledore, my old Transfiguration Professor, never asked. There was just Tom… he was a Prefect you see, and oh soo charming… he never asked how I died but he was very concerned about whereas it hurt or not… But then he graduated, and I’ve never seen him again… Aaah… he was sooo gorgeous… I think we could have married if I haven’t died! I mean…”

“Here!” Neville exclaimed suddenly. On the side of the copper taps was a tiny snake.

“That tap’s never worked…” Myrtle informed them as he tried to turn it.

“Do you want to try something in Parseltongue?” Neville asked Harry.

Harry nodded. He focused and cleared his mind as Snape had told them. He had tried to speak Parseltongue a few times to Neville and Draco in their headquarter. He just had to pretend there was a snake in front of him.

“Open up,” he said.

A strange hissing escaped his mouth and Myrtle squealed, saying that that was exactly what the strange boy sounded liked when she died. At once, the tap glowed with a brilliant white light and began to spin. Next second, the sink began to move. The sink, in fact, sank, right out of sight, leaving a large pipe exposed. The pipe was wide enough for a man to slide into.

Harry heard Neville gasp next to him.

“We found it?!!”

“ Seems so…”

“What do we do know? We can’t go down, it’s too dangerous… What if the Heir is already down there? What about the monster of Slytherin???”
“Close” Harry hissed in parseltongue and the sink positioned itself to its original place, closing the pipe tightly.

“Myrtle, have you seen someone going down there recently?”

“Err… no… Who would want to go down a toilet pipe anyway? It’s disgusting…” She said. “There are not so many people coming here… just some sad girls who want to cry with me… and you and your friends, more often than not.”

“Right…” Harry said before looking up at Neville. “We should tell someone…”

“… Snape?” Neville proposed after a few seconds of thinking.

Harry grimaced but he knew they did not have any other option. Just knowing where the Chamber was would not be enough to prove Draco’s innocence. They just could not trust this information to anyone.

“Should we go get him?” Neville asked. “What if opening the door set off some kind of alarm and the Heir and the Monster run away?”

“We cannot leave…” Harry agreed. “We could call that elf, as Draco did? What was her name? Lincoln? Linky?”

“Jingle? Tinkle?” Neville offered.

But nothing happened. Maybe the elf only answered to Slytherin students?

“Slytherin House-elf, can you come, please?” Harry begged.

And a holly pop resonated into the bathroom. The House Elf gave them a disapproving look.

“You is not Slytherin and thus should not call Linkle! You is no girl either and thus should not be here, again!”

“Yes… we know… sorry… we just hope you could tell Sn- I mean, Professor Snape, that we need his help right away…” Harry said.

The elf eyed him critically.

“Please, it’s important,” Neville insisted.

The elf looked at him and did not respond before disappearing.

“Do you think she’ll do it?” Neville asked his friend.

“We’ll just have to wait and see… If he’s not here in 15 minutes, you will go, and I’ll stay here.”

“What?! No! I won’t leave you alone here!!” Neville argued.

“I can try and keep the passage closed if necessary. It makes more sense that I’m the one staying behind,” Harry explained. There was no way he let his friend here alone with a monster that could come out at any moment!

They kept on arguing on who would sacrifice himself if Snape did not come until the Potion Master actually showed up.
“Potter, Longbottom, I hope there is a good explanation on your presence in a girls’ lavatory and on why you think you could order my personal house elf around…” the man snarled.

“There is,” Harry said unconsciously positioning himself between the professor and Neville. “…sir. We think that we found the Chamber of Secrets!”

“That you do now…” Snape sighed. “In a girls’ lavatory?”

Harry pinched his lips not to snap back. His ring was burning cold on his finger. Rather than arguing further, he went to the marked tap and hissed it open again.

Snape stayed silent as he discovered the secret entrance.

“Did you tell anyone else?” he said after long seconds.

“No… We… we were hoping to get the culprit redhead to clear Draco’s name but…” Harry sighed. “Having his best friends finding the Chamber while he’s away isn’t really a proof of innocence…”

“You’re the only one we can trust… even McGonagall and Dumbledore think Draco’s the Heir…” Neville mumbled.

Snape eyed them. “I see… I’ll go down and look if I find anything incriminating. If I’m not back in an hour, please call another professor. Preferably Professor Flitwick or McGonagall… Professor Babbling, the Ancient Runes Professor, might come handy too…”

“Oh… We’ll wait here.”

“I assume you can close the door too?” Snape asked Harry.

“I promise it’s not a trap!” Harry exclaimed defensively. “Draco would never forgive me if I do that to you!”

Snape stared at him. “I wasn’t thinking about that, but thank you for reminding me that you are, indeed, your father’s son and thus very much capable of such… stupidity.” He shook his head and took out his wand before muttering a spell. “*Expecto Patronum.*”

The magic sprouted out the wand and took the shape of bright-silver, translucent doe. Harry and Neville watched it in awe. A strange feeling of comfort warmed up their bodies.

“If you see this, flying out of the passage, you are to close it immediately, by all means necessary, and evacuate this bathroom. I want you to then go straight to Dumbledore. Is that clear?”

Neville and Harry nodded, and the majestic doe disappeared. Snape looked at them one last time before sliding in the pipe. The two Gryffindors sat on the floor and waited.

“What if he’s no fit to the Heir and the Monster? Did we just kill Draco’s uncle?” Neville squeaked after long minutes of silence, expressing one of Harry’s biggest fear.

“We didn’t force him to go down… he could have said no,” Harry tried to resonate. “It’s not our fault… We’re kids, he’s the adult…”

“We are the ones to tell him to go down in the first place…”

“He probably won’t die… right?”
They kept on throwing hypothesis back and forth for what seemed like hours.

“How long?” Neville asked finally.

Harry casted a quick *Tempus*. “Twenty minutes…”

“Maybe we should get someone…”

“I think so too…” Harry nodded. “Go. I’m waiting for him.”

Neville seemed ready to argue but Harry refused to make eye contact with him. The taller Gryffindor got up with a sigh and left.

Harry kept on watching the dark pipe. Did he really just kill Draco’s favourite uncle? They had been in bad terms for most of the past two years because of him and now he just sent him to his inevitable death? The woman from the Ministry told them that Snape was one of the only adults in his side for the trial against the Dursleys… Did he give his testimony already or was he supposed to do so in person in court? Did he just sentence himself to stay at Privet Drive?!!!!

They should have sent Lockhart… His death would not be as important to his and his best friend’s future…

Harry jolted away when Snape’s dark form erupted from the pipe. He blinked a few times. The man was covered in dust but did not seem harmed in any way.

“Where’s Longbottom?” the Potion Master asked.

“He went for…”

But before Harry could finish his answer, the door opened again and Neville appeared, Professors Flitwick and Lockhart in tow.

“Severus! Here you are, Mister Longbottom just get us with the strangest story about how he and Mister Potter had just killed you!” Flitwick smiled.

“Really, I must say I wasn’t thinking you were so reckless, Professor Snape,” Lockhart added. “I can understand the thrill for the spotlight, but honestly I thought you were smart enough to know that it wasn’t worth putting your life in line if more competent hands were available in the Castle…”

Snape decided to ignore the DADA professor and looked directly at Flitwick. “I need you to contact the Goblins right away. It seems that we have a Basilisk infection in the basement…”

“Are you certain?!” the Charm professor squeaked as Lockhart blanched dramatically.

“Yes. According to the size of the moult I found, it must be a few centuries old… I’ll go alert the Headmaster right away. Potter, do you mind closing the passage?”

Harry nodded and hissed the pipe close. Lockhart shrieked at hearing him talking Parseltongue.

“You both should go back to your Common Room, I will seal this lavatory immediately,” Professor Flitwick told Harry and Neville. “Miss Warren, would you mind moving temporarily to another place in the Castle? Even ghosts are not immune to the basilisk gaze as poor Sir Nicholas proved us.”

“I think Professor Lockhart has definitely the most competent hands to keep guard of the entrance while you get the appropriate intervention team from Gringotts,” Snape smirked.
Flitwick stared at him for a second before smiling deeply. “You’re absolutely right, Severus. Gilderoy, I’m sure you know what to do with the beast while we alert Professor McGonagall and the Headmaster of what is going on?”

“What?! But but…”

“We leave it in your hands then. You two, to your Common Room, now,” Snape ordered, forcing Harry and Neville out of the room, leaving Lockhart alone and trembling behind them.

Harry and Neville were not really included in what happened next. They were only called in once by the intervention team which consisted in a pair of Aurors and an Unspeakable from the Department of Mysteries, three Curse-breakers from Gringotts and a goblin.

They asked Harry and Neville how they discovered the entrance and how they got it to open. When Harry had to admit that he was speaking Parseltongue, a few of the members frowned and others sighed something about English wizards being unnecessarily prejudiced. Neville explained to him later that the Parselmouthes were not as rejected in the rest of Europe as they were in the UK and that the intervention team was most likely international. Indeed, one of the Curse-breakers introduced herself to Harry in parseltongue and told him that he should not be ashamed of the gift Mother Magic gave him.

Harry and Neville had the longest day, waiting to know what happened in Gryffindor Common Room. The Weasley twins noticed their nervousness and they told them what was happening. A few hours later, it felt like the whole school knew. Ginny Weasley seemed on the verge of crying, so Harry nudged Neville to sit next to her and bring her some comfort. This all must be very scary for the younger girl.

They did not expect McGonagall to come into the Common Room around 5 pm and asked Ginny to follow her. She also fetched a few other girls in second and third year. They all have one characteristic in common: small stature and deep red hair.

The Common Room burst into chatters as soon as the Head of House left. What was going on?!!!

The dinner was served into the Common Room a few hours later. The students were still forbidden to wander around. Most of the girls came back around the same time but not Ginny. They were immediately assaulted with questions, but they could not answer them. They just said that they had been interrogated by a couple of Aurors and a woman who spoke Parseltongue. A few stares turned Harry’s way immediately. They had been questioned about the Chamber of Secrets and the Heir of Slytherin.

The twins sat next to Harry and Neville, but they did not ask many questions. The two younger boys already told them they did not know more than what they already told them. A small bird made of paper came flying in front of George who accepted it into his hands.

“It’s from Cedric,” he said. “The girls from Hufflepuff are all back.”

Two other paper birds came flying around them and Fred told them that the Slytherin and Ravenclaw girls were back too. Ginny was the only one that stayed there.

“Do you know what’s going on?” Ron asked loudly.

He was standing just in front of Harry who found it pretty oppressive. He knew Ginny was his sister too, but he really did not like his way of doing things. He did not want to be mean, but he still had to
forgive him for what happened at Christmas.

The twins took over to explain to him what they knew.

“Maybe it’s nothing… maybe she was just tired and needed to go to the Hospital Wing for a bit… I mean, she didn’t seem well earlier…” Neville offered.

“What do you know?!?” Ron yelled aggressively. “I’m sure it’s your fault! You and Malfoy must be pulling the strings! It’s your way of getting revenge because we tried to save Harry from you!”

“Ron, it’s enough!” Percy cut him immediately. “We don’t know what is going on and we’re all worried, but you have no rights to take it out on Longbottom or Harry! Go calm yourself in your dormitory!”

“Shut up! You’re not my father! You can’t order me around like that!”

“Ron, we’re not at home! I’m your Prefect! You must listen to me!”

“I do not! Longbottom stole my best friend and now he’s trying to frame my sister for Malfoy’s crimes!!!”

Ron was spelt silent by Fred and knocked over by George. Percy sighed dramatically before levitating his younger brother out of the Common Room to the dormitories.

Neville seemed to be in shock. “I… I promise, we don’t…” he started muttering to the twins.

“No need, Neville,” Fred smiled tiredly. “We know, don’t worry.”

“Sorry about him…” George muttered before sending a new paper bird away.

“How do you do that?” Harry asked to change the subject.

George smiled at him and explained how they diverted a spell used in the Ministry. The birds could go to any of the Four Houses in a few minutes. It was a great way to keep in touch with friends even during shutdowns like this one.

At 9 pm, the intervention team entered the Gryffindor Common Room with Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape and Professor Dumbledore.

“We are looking for a Diary belonging to one Tom Marvolo Riddle. It came from a Muggle shop called Winstanley's Bookstore & Stationers on Vauxhall Road in London and is dated of the year 1943. If anyone has any information about it or its whereabouts, please come forward. Otherwise, we will have to search your dorm rooms.”

The whispers spread among the students. Neville grabbed Harry’s sleeve, but the raven-haired boy was looking directly into Snape’s eyes. Neville followed his gaze and understood.

Snape knew and said nothing…

“Draco trust him…” Harry whispered.

“… and we trust Draco,” Neville confirmed.

And thus, they kept quiet.
Hello everyone!

Just so you know, as my story starts to draw a bit long, I decided to cut it into parts. The end of part one is at the end of the next chapter - and of Harry's 2nd year. I'm currently working on part 2, so don't worry, the story doesn't end just there! There's still plenty going on in the background!

Please, tell me what you think! Reviews are always welcomed!!
Hogwarts stayed on hold for a few days until the news finally broke through the Daily Prophet one morning.

‘CHAMBER OF SECRETS REVEALED – Possessed student and gossip-driven accusations. What is happening in Hogwarts and how can Albus Dumbledore have let it slide for so long? More information on page 3’

The article mainly explained the story of the Chamber of Secrets and recalled the different events of that year with the petrification of two muggle-born students, a cat and a ghost. It then went into details about what really was ‘Slytherin’s monster’: A Basilisk left in the school as a last mean of protection if the Castle ever went under attack. ‘Apparently, each founder left this kind of defence mechanism in the Castle but that is not the object of this article.’

The Parselmouth expert hired by Gringotts had acted as an interpreter with the giant serpent. Salazar Slytherin had not ordered it to kill any student regardless of their blood status. That order had been forced into its head almost a century prior and apparently a student had tried to reverse that curse around 50 years ago, unsuccessfully. This time, the ‘heir’ was a small girl with fire hair and blood coloured robes… Ginny Weasley hadn’t been named explicitly but everyone in Hogwarts quickly connected the dots.

Ginny had been admitted to St Mungos because she had shown sign of possession: extensive leech marks on her magical core and Dark Magic traces lingering around her soul. The ‘Dark Object’ responsible for that situation had not been found. The girl had told the aurors that she got rid of it during January and it vanished after that. Just to be sure, every student and staff of Hogwarts would need to be checked out for similar signs of possession during the next few weeks.

The first student – other than Ginny and the other girls fitting the description of the Basilisk – to have this check-up was Draco. Apparently, Dumbledore had led the aurors to think that he might have something to do with the situation. Of course, nothing was found. Draco was completely possession, leech and Dark Art’s trace free. However, his father was not happy at all with the situation.

After his son’s results had come back clear, he had accused the auror department to act prejudicially without any real proof or even lead pointing to his son’s direction. At that moment, the Prophet had explained that, as the auror department, they had been played by their sources inside Hogwarts to believe that Draco had been the primary suspect of the attacks. Lucius Malfoy had deplored that some of his political opponents were ready to go so far as to frame his son – causing him to be severely harassed and ostracized by his classmates – rather than directly faced his ideas in a debate on the Wizengamot.

Most of the blame was put on Dumbledore’s shoulders for his failure on protecting the students of his school from being possessed by Dark Magic – the death of Quirrell the previous year did not help him on that part – and his prejudices against Slytherin students, especially when they tried to befriend students outside their House.

The knowledge of what had petrified the students precisely accelerate the brewing of an antidote. Colin Creevey and Justin Finch-Fletchey would go back to class when the school would resume, after the end of the Easter Holidays.
No need to say, that article put the school in complete chaos. Some people even went so far as to come and talk to Harry and Neville, asking them if they had any news from Draco and if they knew if he was doing okay because he was not answering anyone else’s owls.

Those events delayed Harry’s custody trial by a few weeks. He still got to go to Gringotts with Snape – as McGonagall was too busy dealing with parents’ howlers to accompanied him herself – about his Heir ring. The Goblins had assured that the ring was not malfunctioning but that Harry seemed to be under several layers of compulsion charms. They had to call a Ministry Official to take the deposition of the goblin and a mediwizard before they could try and take away the charms. It was all added to Harry’s file.

Some charms had been to incline a certain type of behaviours toward him… Others had seemed to be aiming to bias his own actions… Those had been weakest and apparently designed to be triggered by external elements that the experts – wizard as goblin – couldn’t determine.

Harry didn’t really know what to think about all that… It all seemed so unreal. Thankfully, he didn’t feel any different after the compulsions were lifted away. But did that mean that they weren’t working, to begin with? Or that the experts failed to take them away? He would probably never know…

When Draco came back to the Castle, Neville and Harry spent a whole day telling him everything that happened while he was gone.

“You found the Chamber of Secrets to save me?” Draco repeated astonished.

“That’s what friends are for, aren’t they?” Harry smiled softly at him.

“But that could have been so dangerous! What if the Basilisk had gotten out when you opened it?!!! You could have gotten killed!!!”

“Yeah… I think we didn’t think about all that…” Harry admitted. “That was pretty stupid of us…”

“That’s why you’re the Slytherin and we really are Gryffindors, I guess…” Neville chuckled.

The mood became immediately lighter and they spent the best afternoon together in a long time.

The whole school seemed determined to act as if nothing happened and as if they hadn’t all joined to make Draco miserable during his last Quidditch Match. The Slytherins accepted him back and even if Draco had been hesitant at first, he eventually forgave them.

Everything seemed to have gone back to normal.

One Saturday of May, Harry got a new appointment with Mrs ‘call me Mary’ McKensy, she was accompanied by Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and aunt to 2nd-year Hufflepuff Susan Bones.

“Hello Harry,” Mrs McKensy greeted him. “I hope you’re doing well since your clearance at Gringotts. I’m here with some news about your file and Amelia is here to confirm some information with you.”

Harry only nodded a timid ‘nice to meet you’ to the women. To be honest, he had been anxious for
days that they would just send him back to the Dursleys… Maybe that’s why Mrs Bones was here… to persecute him for being a liar and committing perjury…

“Okay,” Mrs McKensy resumed. “First, you need to know that your custody trial is still in process…”

A heavy stone settled into Harry’s stomach at that announcement.

“But don’t worry, the part of your mother’s sister’s home not being suitable for you had already been unanimously endorsed by the Wizengamot. You won’t ever have to go back there.”

Then Harry forgot how to breathe. “Really?” he whispered and his voice was so small and young he wasn’t even sure it was his.

“Really,” Mrs McKensy confirmed with a smile. “With your and your friends' testimony and other reports that we found in the muggle aurors’ database, we were able to confirm that you had been under abuse reprehensible by the law. As your relatives are muggles, they would be facing a muggle judge but we built your case to make sure they won’t ask you to testify again in court. You won’t go back there or only if you need to retrieve personal effects from their house. Of course, you would then be accompanied by an auror and we will make sure that your relatives are not there during the time you decide to go… if you ever decide to go.”

Harry nodded to confirm he understood but frankly, he could think of nothing of importance there. Everything that mattered was already here in Hogwarts with him.

“If I don’t go back to the Dursleys… Does that mean I will stay at Hogwarts during the summer? I asked Dumb… I mean Professor Dumbledore last year and he said it wasn’t possible…”

“I’m afraid he is right,” Mrs McKensy confirmed.

“So, I’ll go to an orphanage or something?”

“There’s no orphanage in the wizarding world,” Mrs Bones informed him.

“You will be placed in a temporary foster family,” Mrs McKensy added immediately after her.

“Who? Do I get to choose?”

“Actually, yes…” the woman said.

“Can I go to the Malfoys or the Longbottoms?” Harry immediately asked. “I mean… Draco Malfoy and Neville Longbottom are my best friends… and… If their parents and grandmother are okay with…”

“That won’t be possible, Mr Potter,” Mrs Bones stopped him.

Disappointment immediately flew into Harry’s blood. He knew it, it had been stupid to believe it would be so easy…

“Actually, both Lord Lucius Malfoy and Mrs Narcissa Malfoy, as well as Mrs Augusta Longbottom, are currently applying to become your guardians and thus have asked for permanent custody, but as I stated earlier, the trial is still in process. As such, neither of the families involved can be your temporary home…” Mrs McKensy explained.

Harry blinked. Did she just say that Draco’s parents and Neville’s grandmother were trying to adopt
“I think I will take over from here,” Mrs Bones said. “You see, Mr Potter, your case is the most unusual. You currently have two sets of guardians. Your legal guardians, who were the Dursley family, had been stripped of their rights because of the way they treated you. As they were muggles, you also had a magical guardian in the name of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, your headmaster. Mr Dumbledore had been accused of neglect for not checking out on you during your childhood. He had also failed his obligation as a Magical Guardian by not introducing you properly to the Magical World before you started your Hogwarts education. Finally, he had been proven to be at the origin of the compulsion charm that prevented the muggle social services to take your claim seriously growing up.”

Harry felt sick. The Headmaster did what?!!

“His defence is that the charm’s main purpose was to protect you by staying hidden. The result that we know are only side-effects that had not been foreseen properly before this trial. Nevertheless, Mr Dumbledore’s authority as your magical guardian had been questioned, but needs to be investigated further before justice can be done… thus our need to take temporary measure for now.” Mrs Bones sighed slightly.

“There is another… inconsistency in your file, Mr Potter. As a matter of fact, according to Goblin Laws, your godfather, Sirius Orion Black is still your legal and magical guardian.”

“I… I don’t know this man…”

“As it is expected as he has been in Azkaban since the 1st of November 1981. He is suspected to be a Death Eater, of murdering 12 muggles and a wizard and of few other crimes including betraying your parents’ location to Lord Voldemort, resulting in their death on the 31st of October 1981…”

Now Harry felt really sick. They wouldn’t be sending him to that man, would they? Then he noticed something.

“Y-you said that he was suspected. Had he been found guilty since he had been in Azkaban ever since?”

“That’s the tricky part. It seemed that in its hurry to get over with the war after the unexpected disappearance of Lord Voldemort, the Ministry of Magic failed to provide the trial transcript to Gringotts in 1981. That’s why the Goblins are still considering him as your guardian. Despise our best efforts, we couldn’t find the trial transcript in our own books this year. Sirius Black would thus be re-trialed this summer…”

“Don’t you worry, this is just a formality.”

“A formality that would determine who has a claim in your guardianship,” Mrs Bones pointed out.

“You see, your parents have named Black as your guardian if something was to ever happen to them. Black had then set his own list of suitable guardians if something was to ever happen to him too. That list named, in this order, Andromeda Tonks née Black – First cousin of Sirius Black; Alice née Travers and Frank Longbottom and Lady Olivia Greengrass and her husband John née Rosier.”

“There’s a Daphne Greengrass in my year, Slytherin…” Harry said.

“It’s her parents. They have a second daughter Astoria that will start Hogwarts next year,” Mrs McKensy confirmed.

And who is in a forced marriage contract with Draco… Harry’s brain complemented and he surely
didn’t want to be Draco’s brother-in-law… ever!

“If that man is in prison for murder and causing my parents’ death… Is his own will relevant? I… I don’t know a Tonks, Neville’s parents are… in a hospital and can’t even take care of their own son… and I barely know Daphne Greengrass, let alone her parents…”

“That the question the Wizengamot will be answering this summer, Mr Potter. I can’t give you a definitive answer but for now, I doubt Sirius Black’s will would be applied. But you must know that some parties are considering it. In addition, as Mrs McKensy stated earlier, the Malfoys and Mrs Longbottom had also applied to be your guardians. As you must understand, because of your… status… this case is now highly political.”

Harry looked down. It shouldn’t be political; it was his life… he didn’t want to go live with people who were chosen by a mass murderer… Yet, Neville’s parents had been on that list… surely Neville’s parents wouldn’t have been friends with that man… but his parents were too and made his godfather… and he betrayed them… It made no sense…

“You said I get to choose…”

“Your voice will be taken into consideration,” Mrs McKensy confirmed. “I think Amelia noted your preference to either the Malfoy or the Longbottom families…”

The Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement confirmed that element by nodding.

“As for your current options, there are two families ready to accept you in their home until judgement had been made. First, a family appointed by my services. The lady of the house is what muggles called a psychiatrist, she’s a professional mind healer at St Mungos and had worked with us a few times. Her husband works in the Ministry in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures – since you had an issue with a rogue house-elf last summer, it might come handy. They have a son in his fourth year in Hogwarts, maybe you know him: Cedric Diggory?”

“I know him. He’s Hufflepuff’s seeker. We played Quidditch together last summer when I was staying at the Weasleys,” Harry informed her. It was okay. Cedric had always been nice and he was one of the twins’ best friends. His parents were probably okay too…

“And this leads us to the second family, the Weasleys. Arthur and Molly Weasleys spontaneously applied to take you in. I understood from their hearing that one of their children is your best friend and we know that three others of their sons testified for you in the case against your relatives…”

Harry froze. No way he would stay two and a half months in Ron’s room! He was still pretty mad at him for what he did to Draco at Christmas! He said he would never forgive him and he won’t come back on his words. But the twins and Percy helped him too… They were probably the reason why he managed to go so far… to talk! They had been there for him when he had been no more than a moping larva…

“Sh-shouldn’t they be focusing on Ginny?”

It was cowardice. He was trying to find an excuse not to say aloud that he didn’t want to go with them…

“It had been asked during their hearing but they answered that they already considered you as a part of their family…” Mrs McKensy answered but Harry could tell she was forcing herself to stay neutral.

“Do I have to choose now?”
“No, you still have until the end of the month. But not much longer, I’m afraid, as the family of your choice might need time to accommodate their home in order to welcome you in perfect condition…”

In the end, they gave him a small file on each family and said that he could go to Madam Pomfrey to floo call them if he wanted to know more. Honestly, it was too much information for him at the moment so he was glad he had time to think about it calmly.

Of course, the first thing he did once the meeting was over was running to their headquarter to tell everything to Neville and Draco.

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“Do you know more about that Sirius Black character?” Harry asked. “Your grandmother seemed pretty upset when his name had been brought out at Gringotts last summer, Neville…”

Neville made a strange face. “I… I think he was my father’s partner at the auror department just before…” He eyed Draco and stopped talking.

Draco sighed. “Just before my aunt, Bellatrix Lestrange, who is also Black’s cousin, attacked him and your mother… Black is actually also suspected to have set up that attack,” he explained to Harry. “According to the aurors’ files, he gave Longbottom a lead but was, surprisingly, unavailable to go with him on the mission that night so Longbottom went with his wife and… four Death Eaters were waiting for them… they didn’t stand a chance.”

“Oh… I’m sorry, Nev’… I didn’t know…” Harry muttered. But that was a sad excuse… Neville had been his friend for almost two years now… he should have known…

“It’s okay…” Neville mumbled. “I don’t know that much about it myself… I just overheard Uncle Archie rambling about it a few years back… I… Gran doesn’t like to talk about it that much…”

They stayed silent for long minutes before Harry thought about something else.

“But if Black really set Neville’s parents up, why would he name them as potential guardians for me if anything happened? Obviously, they aren’t on the same side of the war…”

Neville and Draco thought about it too.

“Gran never mentioned it… I’m not sure she knows about it…” Neville said.

“Maybe… maybe it was just a cover-up because he didn’t expect you to survive… Like a last defence on the court? If you have died alongside your parents and he had been arrested, he could have put out something like ‘See, I’m a good guy, I’d chosen good guys to look after my godson if something happened to me’?”

Neville and Harry both frowned. They doubted that defence would have worked in court.

“Do you know more about the other two families listed? Tonks and Greengrasses?” Harry asked.

“Well… Andromeda Tonk is my mother’s older sister… I don’t know her at all because she had been disowned long before I was born for marrying a mud-muggleborn,” Draco said. “She didn’t even come to my grandfather’s funeral last year… Well, I’m not sure she had been invited anyway… I think she has a daughter a few years older than us… She probably finished Hogwarts already because I don’t know any student with that name…”

Harry nodded.

“I think her husband – Ted Tonk? – had been friend with my father because I met him a few times in
St-Mungos…” Neville supplied. “He’s nice. He gave me candies when I was younger and always tried to make me laugh if he sees me crying… I’ve never met her personally though.”

“So… their family would have been considered as being part of the ‘good guys’ too?”

Draco grimaced at that. “They were on the Light side which won the war…”

“What about the Greengrasses?”

“They were pretty neutral… had always been…” Draco nodded. “They’re also on my parents’ will to be my guardians if anything was to happen to them, actually…”

“Really?!”

“Yes… they… have an arrangement. They made it when the war was still going on.”

“Like a forced marriage?” Harry supplied feeling sick. Could people accept to foster a child only so they would marry their daughter later in life?

Draco seemed surprised that Harry knew about it though.

“Nobody will force them to do anything…” Neville sighed. He had tried to convince Harry a few times since Harry learnt the truth.

“That’s the arrangement they have with your parents, right?” Harry continued feeling pretty pissed for his friend. “They would take care of you if their daughter could marry you and your title when she’s old enough!”

Draco looked at him with big eyes. He was clearly not expecting him to get angry over something like that.

“It’s a bit more complicated than that, but basically, yes…” he said carefully.

“It’s insane! I don’t want to go live with people like that!” Harry raged.

“… my parents made that deal too…” Draco muttered.

“To protect you! It’s not the same!”

“Why are you so pissed anyway?”

“Because you should be free to love and marry whoever you want!” Harry yelled.

Draco actually blushed at that and looked away, mumbling something intelligible.

Harry looked away too. He was upset. Nothing made sense. He didn’t want to go live with people that had been chosen by someone who betrayed not only his but Neville’s parents as well! He didn’t want for Draco to be sold off to marry someone he didn’t like because his parents had been worried about his safety during a bloody war.

“You don’t have to choose on that part right now anyway…” Neville sighed hugging Harry’s shoulders slightly. “What about focusing on your summer arrangement for now?”

Harry nodded. Yeah, it might be a more sensible thing to do.
In the end, Harry knew that his choice for the summer was already made. He wouldn’t have survived two more months locked into the same room as Ron…

Ron had actually tried to talk to him a bit since the Christmas fiasco, but Harry wouldn’t listen. He barely apologized, even after the true identity of the Heir had been revealed. When he had intruded a conversation between Harry and Neville about the compulsion charms found by the Goblins, he had brushed it off saying that the Malfoys were probably behind it as they were evil Slytherins. Harry even heard him blaming Ginny for being stupid enough to write in a journal which talked back…

Ron was just mean and Harry didn’t know how he could have been friend with the boy in the first place.

Harry did like the twins and Percy though. The three of them helped him a lot and he had got to know them a bit more along the year. Even if the twins seemed to be pranking Percy on a regular basis and Percy’s replies were often scolding, menaces of detention and loss of points, there were times when the three of them shared a secret code and started acting seriously upon some utter motives – which often was Harry’s condition… or Ginny’s wellbeing… or Ron’s misconduct.

Harry liked their dynamics. He thought that was what sibling relationships should be like… making fun on each other on a regular basis but knowing when to stop being childish to work seriously on things that really mattered.

He had asked to speak to the three of them and he was feeling a bit uncomfortable. When he finally managed to tell them, what was on his mind – that he couldn’t accept their parents’ offer to come on live with them for the summer – they only accepted his choice calmly.

“The Diggorys are good folks,” Fred said.

“And we won’t be that far away if you ever need us anyway!” George nodded.

“And Cedric is our best friend, you can go to him as you come to us! He’ll help you!” Fred added.

“The most important thing is that you feel safe, Harry,” Percy said kindly. “Our parents are great but honestly, they should start by focusing on their own children… What happened to Ginny this year was…” he shook his head. Harry knew he was feeling responsible.

“You couldn’t have known…” he muttered.

“We should have. We should have noticed. Ginny got that cursed diary back in the summer! If I had been more available for her at the beginning of the year…”

“We shouldn’t have pranked her either…” George muttered.

“We thought it would have cheered her up but…” Fred continued.

“It was the opposite…” they concluded together.

“It’s not your faults!” Harry exclaimed.

They didn’t answer that.

“It’s okay, we planned on making it better to her this summer!” Fred exclaimed suddenly.

“Do you mind if we take her with us when we come to visit and play Quidditch?” George asked.

“She loves flying and now that she had really official lessons at Hogwarts, mum wouldn’t be able to
“argue!”

“And we are so going to come to visit often!” Fred confirmed with a bright smile.

“Ok… ok…” Harry chuckled. “Just… could you not bring Ron?”

“Don’t worry about that…” Percy smirked. “If his grades are as bad as last semester, I convinced Dad that I could give him private lessons to catch up with his classmates during the summer… He won’t have so much free time!”

In the end, after a quick talk with Cedric Diggory on the Twins’ advice, Harry owled Mrs McKensy to tell her that he accepted to go live with the Diggorys for the summer. He just hoped he wouldn’t intrude too much but Cedric told him that it was his mother’s job and that it wasn’t the first time they had other children over. It helped. But he still wrote a thank you letter to Cedric’s parents… He hoped it would turn out nice.

During the beginning of June, despite the final exams were coming closer, Neville and Harry couldn’t focus at all because they had another grand plan in mind: Draco’s birthday.

Harry was still feeling bad about missing it the previous year because he was too busy running after the stupid Philosopher stone. He didn’t even know how he could have been stupid enough to think that it was his duty to look after it! A mere 11-year-old!!

However, he wouldn’t miss Draco’s birthday this year! It was going to be perfect because they had the perfect gift. The 5th of June was on a Saturday so they didn’t have classes. They agreed to meet at the Quidditch Pitch to a friendly seeker game. They had so much fun and Neville had borrowed Colin Creevey’s new camera to take some pictures – in exchange for a copy of one of his choice.

Then, for lunch, Harry had prepared sandwiches and a cake with the kitchen house-elves. He had asked one of them to bring it over. It was sunny and warm and they laughed so much. It was as if all Draco’s worries had disappeared, even though, sometimes, Draco’s eyes seemed just lost or focused on something that wasn’t there, and Harry and Neville knew that their friend’s trouble thoughts weren’t that far.

At the end of the afternoon, Neville and Harry finally revealed the true present they had been working on for a few weeks now. Neville proudly took a letter out of his pocket and gave it to Draco.

“What is it?” Draco asked.

“Open it!” Harry smiled. “It’s from both of us.”

Draco nodded and did as said.

“Dear Mr Malfoy,” he started reading aloud. “We are proud to accept you into our summer camp for one week of training with the Pride of Portree team…” he stopped speaking at this point, reading the end of the letter quietly with incredulous eyes.

“We got your parents’ permission,” Neville informed him. “They cleared that week so you won’t have any other engagement.”
“… how…?” Draco muttered. “They… it’s almost impossible to go to their summer camp if you’re not about to graduate and have won at least one House Cup!”

“One of the Weasleys’ older sons is friend with their new keeper… I may have had to abuse my Boy-Who-Lived’s status…” Harry smirked.

“Are you going too??” Draco asked excitedly.

Harry started grimacing but Neville spoke before he got a chance to explain. “He will, actually…”

“What?!!” Harry exclaimed. That wasn’t the plan. He didn’t have a guardian’s permission.

“I asked Cedric to write to his parents for you. They agreed,” Neville shrugged.

Harry stared at his friend disbelievingly. That wasn’t the plan! He couldn’t just go around and ask them to disappear for one week during the summer when he hadn’t even properly met them yet! It was so rude! And they would have to take him there every morning and to come to take him back every evening! It would be such a bother.

“He will be staying at your house that week to make it easier to everyone,” Neville continued to explain to Draco. “It had been sorted out. Mrs McKensy gave her permission too.”

Both Draco and Harry were now watching Neville as if he had grown a third head.

“What? The Quidditch stuff was Harry’s idea, please let me add something of my own to your gift…”

“So… something of your own is my person?” Harry joked.

“You’re definitely coming over that week too!” Draco said.

Neville grimaced. “I don’t play Quidditch…”

“But you can still sleep-over!”

“You will probably just fall asleep at the table from exhaustion…” Neville laughed.

“We won’t!” Harry exclaimed. He liked the idea too.

Neville chuckled at their optimism. “I guess we’ll see then…”

They kept talking excitedly about it for hours. Not once, Draco’s or Harry’s unpredictable thoughts managed to put down their mood. And they ended up that conversation in a long big hug.

They were still smiling and joking happily on their way back to the Castle when they heard Lockhart’s voice.

“Honestly, the Minister wanted to give me an Order of Merlin for my discovery of the Chamber of Secrets but I had to refuse. I was only doing my duty as a teacher of this school after all…”

The man was talking to a bunch of 6th or 7th-year girls. They seemed mesmerized by his story.

“You didn’t discover shit…” Draco snarled loudly. “Harry and Neville did! Because they’re the best friends ever! And what’s that smell anyway? Do you really mix your cologne with Amortentia as the Quibbler said?”
The three friends didn’t expect a long silence to respond Draco’s snarky remarks.

“W-what did you just say??” Lockhart choked.

But the damage was done already and the girls were suddenly frowning.

“Alyssa, what do you smell?” a blond one asked.

“Peppermint… broomstick polish… and grape…”

“Erica?”

“Strawberries, vanilla and old books… you?”

“Summer haze, apple and fresh rosemary…” the blond answered.

They shared a look and covered their nose before running away. Suddenly, the three 2nd-year boys found each other alone with their Defence Against the Dark Art teacher.

“What have you done???” the man almost yelled looking at them.

“I…” Draco started. He hadn’t planned to be right. The Quibbler always had the craziest conspiracy theories! None of them was supposed to be true!

“You will pay for it…”

“What…”

Harry promptly pulled Draco’s arm to him when the first spell left Lockhart’s wand.

“Y-you can’t do that! You’re a teacher… you can’t attack us…” Draco muttered trying to get his wand out.

A new spell and Harry forced his friend to dodge again. They tripped and ended up on the ground. Draco’s wand rolled over to Neville’s feet. The Gryffindor seemed tetanized and hesitating between helping his friends to get up and running to get help.

“All year, you have been uncooperative!” the teacher continued. “First, you Harry! Making a scene after leaving my office. Do you even know how it made me looks like?! I spent weeks trying to comfort the unnecessary witnesses… And then you Malfoy, with your whole Heir drama, taking the spotlight away from me… And for what??? Nothing! You should just have gone back to your parents and let me handle this thing from the beginning…”

“You didn’t handle anything…” Draco snapped. “Harry and Neville discovered the Chamber and Snape was the one to go down to see what was in there! You were just a frighten prick who almost pee himself when his colleagues ask him to look after an empty girl bathroom!”

“What did you just say??? You weren’t even on the school ground at the time! Nobody will believe a word you say”

“I was there, I can testify!” Harry yelled, defending his best friend.

“So, I guess I’ll just have to erase your memories then? So, no one would ever question my story ever again…”

“That’s what you always do, don’t you?!” Draco snarled back. “Stealing other people stories and
then put Memory Charm on them so they won’t remember doing it and denounce you!”

Lockhart smirked. “Ah, Slytherins… always too clever for their own good… Of course, it’s what I do. No one wants to read about some ugly old Armenian warlock, even if he did save a village from werewolves. He’d look dreadful on the front cover. No dress sense at all. And the witch who banished the Bandon Banshee had a hairy chin. I mean, come on…”

“So, you’ve just been taking credit for what a load of other people have done?” Harry said incredulously.

“Harry, Harry,” Lockhart said, shaking his head impatiently. “It’s not nearly as simple as that. There was work involved. I had to track these people down and then… make sure they would never talk. And sadly, you will have to join them, boys… Can’t have you blabbing my secrets all over the place. I’d never sell another book and the Amortentia story would already be annoying enough to cover up…”

Lockhart lifted his wand and just as the word ‘Obliviate’ left his lips, Neville’s voice covered his.

“Protego!” Neville yelled, jumping between his friends and their teacher.

And it worked. Even more than expected, as Lockhart’s spell seemed to rebound on Neville’s shield. The man’s body was ejected a few meters away and Neville let himself drop on the ground next to his friends. He was as surprised as them that it actually worked.

“Well done, Nev’!” Draco exclaimed.

“I… I…”

Draco got up and went to check on Lockhart. “Unconscious,” he informed them.

“When did you learn to use that spell? Did you practice?” Harry asked.

“Y-yes… but it never… it’s the first time that…”

“Wait… is that my wand?” Draco asked.

Neville looked down and blushed. “Oh!!! Sorry, Draco! I… I wasn’t thinking, I just…” he tried to give Draco his wand back but the Slytherin didn’t take it.

“Try another spell, like Lumos or something…”

Neville frowned, hesitating. “Are… are you sure? It is your wand and I… it’s so rude and I’m so sorry Draco…”

“Just try it,” Draco said, and Harry nodded an encouragement.

Neville did as ask and the light came brightly out of the tip of the wand. Neville looked at it with amazement.

“It’s… it’s so bright!” he said. “It’s not usually so… I mean… It’s usually so hard to just make it produce a dim light…”

“Try again with your own wand then?” Harry said.

And Neville did, and his usual timid light appeared at the tip of the wand.
“I… I don’t understand… why is it easier with Draco’s wand than with my own? It should be the opposite…”

Draco took back his wand and pocketed it.

“This wand isn’t really your wand… you said it belonged to your father?”

Neville nodded. “Gran insisted that I used it…”

“She didn’t make you check for compatibility first?”

The Gryffindor shook his head.

“I still have the testing set for mail ordering a wand in the dorm, we could try and see if it’s anywhere near your natural affinity?” Harry said.

“Let’s do that!” Draco exclaimed.

“Wait!” Neville stopped him. “What are we going to do with him?” He asked pointing at Lockhart’s unconscious body.

But a group of people were already coming their way. It was the group of girls from earlier with Snape and McGonagall.

“What happened?” the Transfiguration Professor asked when she noticed the man on the ground.

“He tried to attack us and was casting a memory charm but we blocked it with a protego,” Draco quickly explained looking at his Head of House.

Harry then quickly explained what the man had been telling them about stealing other people’s stories and taking the credit after wiping their memories.

Snape nodded. “We need to take the man to the infirmary and call the aurors. You three, go back to the Great Hall, it’s almost time for dinner. We’ll talk about it later…”

The three boys didn’t wait to be told twice and quickly got away before anyone else asked them to testify or something.

When the train left Hogsmeade station two weeks later, everyone was still talking about what happened between Lockhart and the boys… Draco had been claimed the new Hogwarts’ hero and the Twins had petitioned to get him a medal for Special Services to the School – of course, he didn’t get it for real but it did make him feel better to be received with applauds instead of jeering when he entered the Great Hall that night.

“Harry?” Draco asked as they settled down on a compartment and the train was leaving the station. “Can we talk a bit about Ace?”

Harry froze. He had used most of what he had learnt during their occlumency lessons to conceal that topic.

“Did you father get any news?” he asked as neutrally as possible. He refused to get his hopes up.

Draco grimaced and shook his head slowly. “No… With everything going on this year, he couldn’t use his full network… the press was already harsh on us and he was afraid of what the Prophet
would have done with the knowledge that he was actively researching a muggle girl…”

Harry breathed slowly. He took the disappointment to put it at the back of his mind. “It’s okay… I was kind of expecting it… I wouldn’t want your father to be into any trouble with the Justice for it.”

“It’s not…” Draco started. “It’s not like that! He… he said he would try again this summer! But…”

“It’s okay Draco, really. He had more important things to do this year, and I don’t blame him. You’re his son and she’s just… I mean… I don’t blame him or you okay? It was already nice enough to try…”

Draco looked down and Harry looked away by the window. He knew it. There was nothing he could do. He hoped he would meet her again some time but he had other people to worry about know. He felt like he almost lost Draco this year so of course he couldn’t blame his father to concentrate on his family! And Mr Malfoy was also busy with his custody trial… No, really, he couldn’t blame him.

“I still can’t believe my affinities are cherry and unicorn hair…” Neville whispered to his friends to lighten the mood a bit.

“Yes… it’s a wonder how you managed to get so far with a dragon string and holly wand…” Draco nodded trying to put the discomfort behind him.

“Did your grandmother agree to get you shopping then?” Harry asked, confirming that everything was okay on his part.

Neville nodded. “She said we are doing it first thing tomorrow… and she scolded me for not speaking up earlier…”

Harry smirked. He had heard the angry red envelop with his own ear that morning as it came directly screaming into their dorm. He was glad that his friend would finally get a wand that fits.

During the ride, they mainly talk about their upcoming sleep-over at the Malfoys. It had been all settled with their respective guardians. As they were entering Kings Cross, Cedric Diggory came knocking at their compartment door.

“Ready, Harry?” he asked kindly.

And Harry took some courage into his friends’ smiles before nodding.

Chapter End Notes

So, here's the end of the first part of that story. Well, I really decided to cut the story into parts recently because it was getting a bit too long honestly... I hope you liked it! Feel free to tell me if anything seems strange... there's a lot going on after all and I struggled a bit with that chapter.
I've already started working on Harry's 3rd year and the focus will probably switch to other parts of that world. You could already see some changes with how Sirius had been related to the Longbottoms' attack. To be honest, I wrote a prologue to this fic that follows Sirius's pov during the last week of October 1981 but decided not to publish it in the end because it was too far away from the story in that first part... I'm still trying to decide if I should post that prologue as an introduction to part 2 as the story will definitely catch up with the plot clues set in the prologue... but I felt like it's still giving away too much so maybe I'll save it up for later... We'll see...

Anyway! I hope you enjoyed that last chapter of part 1 and that you will keep on reading on part 2. I'll try to not take so long to release the next chapter, promise!
Hello to you all, just a small message to tell you that part 2 is up!!!
See you there!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!