Extraordinary Summer

by BrilliantLady

Summary

It’s the summer of Harry’s fourth year, and Harry's holiday isn't turning out to be particularly normal even by wizarding standards. Most young wizards don't include a promotional book tour in their holiday itinerary after all! During his tour Harry meets werewolves, a hag, and other interesting characters, and visits the fascinatingly unique magical districts of Paris, and Libreville in Gabon.

His snake Storm's company on his many outings are causing Harry's denials of being the Heir of Slytherin to wear thin in many people's eyes.

Well, at least Harry can hope that the Quidditch World Cup will be relatively uneventful.

Notes

Content Warning: This fic includes verbal/emotional abuse (no swearing) and gaslighting by the Dursleys in the early chapters. Also note that Sirius’ PTSD will be more highlighted in this fic, though it won’t necessarily be evident at first as he’s trying hard to hide it. The violence level of this story will increase compared to previous fics in the series to include serious injuries and background character deaths (but not of major characters), and as such the fic rating has gone up to a cautious T due to mild violence/gory content. It otherwise remains in my opinion suitable for my younger and more abstentious readers, with no swearing or romantic content (unless you count couples dancing together), and I would recommend it for ages ten and up.
Harry wondered dispiritedly why he’d hoped his summer would be any good. He guessed he’d dreamt that with Sirius Black no longer regarded as a threat, everything would somehow go back to normal. But between Mr. Weasley’s patronising attempts to be friendly, Lucius and Sirius’ aborted duel and sneering attitudes, and Professor McGonagall’s well-meant but ultimately very troublesome warning about Death Eaters, all the adults at the train station couldn’t have ruined his uncle’s mood and Harry’s hopes for a pleasant holiday better if they’d actively tried to. For so many adults who purportedly cared a lot about his wellbeing they all seemed rather oblivious to the troubles they’d inflicted on him with a few ill-chosen words and contemptuous looks.

Uncle Vernon hadn’t driven very far from King’s Cross station before he pulled the car over to park in the first vacant spot he found. He left the engine running with a quiet purr, so the air-conditioning would keep his sweaty, flabby face cool while he talked with Harry. It seemed likely to be less of an amiable chat, and more like an interrogation. Harry tensed up, eying his uncle’s face and hands warily as he twisted around in his seat to face Harry. Harry was glad his position in the back seat put some distance between them.

“Allright boy, start talking. These criminal freaks who’ve broken out of prison – start with explaining that.” The scowl on his face promised dire things if Harry wasn’t co-operative.

“They’re not, they’re… umm… they’ve broken out, someone broke them out of prison. About a dozen? But they’re not after me. I swear they’re not, Uncle Vernon! There hasn’t been a single problem with them all year. I mean, not me, not anyone. They’re on the run, just in hiding, and the Aur… their police are after them. They’re not a risk to us, I don’t think… I wouldn’t want to endanger anyone, you know that,” Harry babbled. “Professor McGonagall just thought you should know, just in case.”

Uncle Vernon grunted angrily. “Hmph! But you didn’t think to tell us did you, boy? That’s the problem with you – always thinking of yourself. Selfish, that’s what you are. You didn’t think to warn your family about it! No, you just left it to a teacher.”

Harry slunk down miserably in his seat. “I’m sorry, Uncle Vernon. Really very sorry. I guess I didn’t write about it because it didn’t seem like it’d be a real danger. Please let me come home - I promise if any strange wizards do show up, I’ll deal with them.” Harry thought about adding how the wards around Privet Drive would be recharged with a mere fortnight’s stay there but remembered in time how distasteful the Dursleys had found the idea last summer when Mr. Parkinson had raised the possibility of putting up magical wards. Best not to raise the topic.

“Too right you’ll deal with them! I won’t have my family endangered. Your kind, your problem, I
His uncle’s casual definition of “family” as something that excluded Harry gripped at his heart with a tight clench of pain. Nothing he ever did was good enough. And this problem wasn’t even his fault! So how was he supposed to fix it?

“Yes, Uncle Vernon,” he said meekly. It was all he could do, really.

“So,” continued his uncle, “what’s all this about a ‘second pet’? What have you got already, then?”

Harry lied, swift and certain. “I don’t have one. I was just thinking of getting one, maybe a cat. But I won’t if you don’t want me to.”

His uncle glared suspiciously at him. “If you have a pet hidden away and don’t tell me about it right now, I will find it and wring its scrawny neck.”

Harry’s face blanched with fear. “I… I guess…” he stammered anxiously.

“What is it?” boomed his uncle. “What have you got, boy??”

“A… a snake. I have a pet snake. But he’s no trouble, no trouble at all, he’s not venomous or anything. He’s just a baby really and you won’t even know he’s-”

“I won’t have a slimy snake in my house! That’s no decent, normal pet!” yelled his uncle, slamming both his hands hard on the steering wheel with a dull thump, then shaking them in an attempt to relieve the stinging pain on his flabby palms.

“I can send him away,” Harry babbled anxiously, hunching back into the car seat, “if you won’t let him stay at home. I’ll send him to a friend. You don’t need to hurt him, Storm is such a nice friendly snake, I promise. He’s not venomous, or at all slimy.”

“You’ll get rid of him, or I will,” threatened Uncle Vernon. “Permanently.”

“I will, I promise I will! He’ll be gone by bedtime!”

“And there’ll be no dinner for you tonight, you nasty liar. You thought you could get one past me, did you? Thought you’d make a fool out of me, you sneaky little freak? Well you’re the fool.”

Uncle Vernon started the car and began driving them home again after that, relieving his feelings by listing with relish the multitude of chores that Harry would be spending the summer doing in penance for the sins of bringing trouble to the family again, and trying to lie about his pet. He also praised his own generosity in allowing Harry to come home at all, which he demanded Harry’s grateful thanks for.

Harry obliged with a grateful smile on his face and rebellion in his heart. He hoped desperately that Storm would keep sleeping his way through the drive in Harry’s satchel and that his pet would remember his instructions not to poke his head curiously out of the bag to see what was going on – no matter what he heard.

Back at Privet Drive, Harry was sent immediately to his room, only getting to wave very briefly to his aunt and startled cousin on the way past.

He called for Dobby as soon as his bedroom door was closed, and the little manic house-elf was
delighted beyond measure to be summoned.

“Dobby is so glad Master Harry called for him! What can Dobby do? Dobby can clean Master’s room!” Dobby moved to tug at the sheets on Harry’s imperfectly made bed, before Harry called him over.

“No, please stop. Dobby, I have a very important task for you, so please be quiet and listen, alright?”

“Yes, Master Harry! Dobby would love to have some work to do! Dobby is enjoying being free of old Master’s family, but sometimes Dobby would be liking some more work.”

“Can you look after Storm? I’m afraid my uncle found out about him and says he can’t stay here in Surrey. Can you take him to Potter Cottage and look after him until I collect him? It might be a couple of weeks, or a month. I’m not sure. Can you do that?”

“Oh, yes, Dobby would love to look after snakey! Storm will have fun swimming in Master’s pond Dobby has built in the garden, with little fishies in it. Dobby has worked very hard for Master,” he promised earnestly. “He can curl up on his favourite rug in the nursery. Dobby will take great care of Master’s snakey.”

With great relief, Harry pulled Storm’s miniaturised tank from his trunk and retrieved Storm from his satchel.

“Wake up, Ssstorm! We’re home and sssafe. Well, sssort of,” he hissed.

“Finally,” grumbled his snake sleepily. “You were very noisy. I remembered to ssstay quiet like you sssaid, though. I’m cold. Warm me.”

Harry wound him around his bared arm, so Storm could soak up his body heat while they chatted.

“Dobby, could you please take Storm’s tank and things to Potter Cottage and then come back for Storm in a couple of minutes?” he asked politely.

“Right away!” Dobby said, grabbing the tank and popping away.

“Ssstorm, I’m afraid I have sssome bad news,” he hissed, and explained the situation, getting a mixed response.

“Well, your elderss here are foolss not to appreciate sssnakess. But… I don’t like it here anyway. It is cold and boring, and you don’t let me go hunting for mice. I will agree to go to the other den that has a pond with fish,” he said, granting his approval with an air of one doing a great favour, “but you must not forget about me. I shall have no-one to talk to there, and that is dull too.”

“I promise I’ll never forget you,” assured Harry. “I shall come for you as sssoon as I can, or Dobby will bring you to me in a few weekss if my planss have to change. Definitely before ssschool begins again, because I promised to ssspend at least a week visiting with Sssirius, and go to watch Quidditch with him, and you can rejoin me then for sure.”

“Ah, the Dog-man I hit with lightning. Yess, fetch me and I shall guard you while you are in his territory. We must watch him carefully and be sure he knowss his place.”

Dobby returned to transport Storm away, which he was allowed to do only after listening attentively to Harry’s last-minute fussy instructions about proper snake care (which Dobby already knew from last summer but listened to with obedient patience anyway). Harry also had a few extra
hissed instructions for Storm about behaving himself and not being mean to Dobby, before the duo popped away.

There was a quarter of a grapefruit on Harry’s breakfast plate. He poked at it disappointedly. It was a dispiriting start to the day, after suffering a weird nightmare the night before featuring Bellatrix Lestrange, that he barely remembered. He didn’t dare complain about his breakfast though, because everyone had the same sad offering. Though Harry thought his portion was perhaps a little smaller than everyone else’s.

Dudley was on a strict diet under orders from his school nurse, who had been completely unswayed by all the Dursleys’ arguments about “puppy fat” and “growing boys who need plenty of food”. The Dursleys were still willing to explain away Dudley’s bullying as boisterousness, and his below average grades as resulting from him being a gifted boy who struggled with a regimented and unaccommodating school system. However, it seemed that Aunt Petunia, faced with the harsh and formal report from the school nurse about her son’s weight and her own enabling of the problem, had finally conceded that Dudley might be just a little bit overweight. And if poor Ickle Dudleykins had to diet, everyone had to join him in solidarity.

Harry was rationing the food he had cached in his trunk, and thought it’d last through the second week that was the minimum he planned to stay at the Dursleys’. They might not care about blood wards or want them, but Harry wanted to protect his family even if they’d never know about or appreciate his efforts. Not that he was exactly sure what the wards did. But protective rune-based wards reinforced with blood must do something especially beneficial, surely? After that… well he could leave any time he wanted to. And with every day that passed in back-breaking labour and starvation rations he wanted to escape for good just a little bit more.

Uncle Vernon had been complaining occasionally about “rabbit food”, but there wasn’t as much grumbling from him as Harry had initially expected. He suspected Uncle Vernon was probably sneakily stopping off to buy a bacon butty every morning on the way to work, and an early dinner on the way home. There was a telling accumulation of greasy paper bags in the rubbish bins, and the car had smelt faintly of bacon and hamburgers the last time Harry had vacuumed the seats and floor rugs after washing the exterior – just one of the many chores he’d had to do over the past few days.

“Uncle Vernon?” Harry asked hesitantly. “I have exams to take tomorrow in London, at a National Examination Centre. Normal exams – like for Maths. I was wondering if you or Aunt Petunia could drive me, or if I could have money for the train?”

His uncle looked mulish. “Have you cleaned the driveway? Finished painting the fence?”

“Yes sir, the fence was finished yesterday, and I hosed down the driveway and weeded the edges the day before that. This morning I’ve weeded the flower beds and mowed the lawn, and I’ve made a bowl of salad for lunch.”

Repainting the fence had been a mammoth job, as the painful blisters on his hands could attest. It hadn’t been as simple as painting over the old coat of paint. He’d had to scrape the old paint off the fence, sand it, then repaint it with two coats. Then he’d had to clean up every tiny splatter of paint that had dared to encroach on the garden plants.

Harry thought that if Dudley really wanted to lose weight – like he actually seemed to – a little exercise outside helping paint the fence wouldn’t hurt him either. But no-one seemed to care about Harry’s opinion.
At least Dudley appreciated Harry’s more creative approach to meals. Aunt Petunia’s diet lunch yesterday had consisted of a single lettuce leaf filled with grated carrot. Given that, it was no surprise to Harry that Dudley’s face had lit up with happiness at the news that his cousin had prepared today’s lunch. Harry’s meals were consistently much tastier and more generously sized, and yet still managed to meet the nurse’s criteria for healthy eating.

“The boy may as well go,” said Aunt Petunia dismissively. “We don’t want to have to explain to his correspondence school why he never showed up for his exams. At least he’s still showing an interest in normal school subjects, after his years at that school.”

Uncle Vernon grunted his acquiescence, and Harry let out an imperceptibly quiet sigh of relief.

That decided, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon promptly seemed to forget Harry was there. They blithely ignored him while discussing whether Petunia should drive Harry to London or give him train money and save herself the trouble, all while acting as if Harry were not sitting right in front of them. The issue was decided in the end by a jealous interjection by Dudley.

“I don’t see why Harry should get to go to London and I don’t,” he whined with typical self-centredness. “It’s my birthday tomorrow and I should get to do whatever I want! I don’t want to go to the movies anymore. Piers and Gordon say they’ve already seen The Crow and don’t want to see it again. I want to go to London too!”

Dudley’s birthday plans were thus extremely swiftly rearranged, and he was promptly promised a birthday outing in London while Harry sat his exams. His mother’s suggested outing to a museum was turned down as being too “boring”, as were parks and the zoo.

“How about seeing the Tower of London and hearing the ghost stories?” suggested Harry, which made Aunt Petunia flinch uncomfortably.

“No ghost stories!” bellowed Uncle Vernon, which made Harry shrink back in his seat and murmur an apology. Harry kept his suggestions to himself after that.

In the end, Dudley decided that he wanted to see the “Changing the Guard” ceremony, and then tour Buckingham Palace with his two best friends. To everyone’s relief that outing was pronounced suitable by his parents, and was sufficiently unacademic to cater to Dudley’s preference of not having to learn anything he didn’t absolutely have to while on holidays (especially not on his birthday).

Harry’s morning was spent unexcitedly scrubbing the bathroom and wishing he could do magic because there was a spell to clean tiles, and then it would have been over in seconds. He’d used it down in the Chamber of Secrets and with a bit of repetition it’d worked great to clean up years of accumulated grime and dust.

After everyone had enjoyed (or suffered through) their lunch of a big bowl of salad – mixed leafy greens and some baked vegetable cubes with a dressing of balsamic vinegar and wholegrain mustard – Harry was given grudging permission to spend some rare free time revising for the next day’s exams. Time which Dudley promptly interrupted.

Harry and his cousin hadn’t spent a lot of time together yet these holidays, except for Dudley excitedly pouncing on him the night he’d come home to stridently demand answers about what had happened with Sirius Black. Dudley had reported that the knife he’d lent Harry had been posted back to him at Smeltings by the Ministry. Dudley thought it was “wicked” that Harry had actually stabbed someone with it, and that Harry was now good friends with an ex-con.
Dudley made himself comfortable sitting on Harry’s bed and the old bedsprings creaked alarmingly under his weight. But he didn’t seem in any hurry to get to the point, asking about what had happened to Harry’s pet snake, complaining about school, and boasting about his boxing matches. Every so often he’d pause hesitantly, looking like he wanted to say something but had thought better of it. Then he started chattering on about something else.

Eventually he got to the point, much to Harry’s relief. “I was wondering…” he said slowly and cautiously, “if there might be a… magic way to lose weight faster.”

**So that’s what he wants,** Harry thought in wonderment. Despite all his aunt and uncle’s rants against magic and freakishness, Dudley himself wasn’t averse to looking for a magical shortcut when faced with the prospect of months of lettuce leaf lunches. Harry didn’t blame him.

“Sorry Dud, I can’t think of any. If there was a potion to make you thinner I would expect Professor Slughorn would’ve made and taken it by now and he’s still pretty fat. He’s our Potions professor. There’s a Deflating Draught, but it’s really just an antidote to the Swelling Solution,” Harry mused thoughtfully. “I don’t think it can make you any smaller than how you started. Anyway, even if there is a good potion you couldn’t take it, because you’re not a wizard.”

Dudley scowled angrily, looking a lot like his father with his piggish expression. “That’s not fair! You should just give it to me anyway. I don’t care about your stupid rules. No-one would have to know – I wouldn’t snitch.”

“No, you see, it’s not that I wouldn’t want to give it to you, it’s that it wouldn’t be safe. Not because I’d get in trouble, but because it could be poisonous to you. Potions use magical ingredients like chopped Flobberworms or Bubotuber pus, or even poisons like aconite. And they’re safe for wizards because we have magic and it interacts with the potions. But you’re a Muggle, or more likely a Squib, and that means what’s safe for me might make you sick, or even kill you! And we don’t want that, obviously.”

“What’s a Squib?”

“Oh, do you remember your lessons in Science on genetics?”

“No.”

“Well, you know how two people with brown eyes can have a child with blue eyes?”

“Oh yes! That. Yeah, I remember now.”

“That’s because of recessive genes. And a Squib is someone from a magical family who doesn’t have enough magic to be a wizard or witch but might have a tiny bit of magic. And they might have kids who are magical. Because they have recessive genes for magical ability.”

Dudley’s jaw dropped open in shock, giving him a few extra folds on his neck. “I could have frea… magical kids?” Dudley asked in shock. “What would mum and dad say about that!!?”

“Nothing good, I expect,” Harry said matter-of-factly. “But you might have them, all the same. Especially if you accidentally married someone with magical ancestry herself. I personally don’t think there’s any such thing as ‘Muggle-borns’ – witches and wizards from non-magical families popping up out of nowhere. I think the recessive trait for magic use sometimes manifests when you’ve got a couple where both of them have Squib ancestry.”

Dudley’s brow furrowed in thought. “But that doesn’t mean I have magic relatives. Not counting you. I mean, it’s your mum who was magical. And your dad. My mum isn’t. So I’m safe. Those
gene thingies that make people magic aren’t in my family. We got the normal genes.”

“Except Aunt Petunia’s mum – Grandma Heather – was a Squib. And her parents – Orcus and Daisy Parkinson – were a wizard and a witch. So you could have magical genes - it could just be recessive. Just like it could be recessive for Aunt Petunia.

“I think my mum must’ve had magical genetic inheritance from both sides, to be a Muggle-born. Which is really interesting if it’s true! Anyway, Aunt Petunia probably only got recessive genes from one side – luck of the draw. Or she mightn’t have got it from either side and thus ended up perfectly normal – a Muggle. And maybe Uncle Vernon’s family doesn’t have any recessive genes at all, so you never had a chance of getting any magical genes from his side and could never have had a chance of being born a wizard.

“You might be alright, or you might not, when it comes to having kids of your own. Wizards haven’t studied it properly yet. It’s on my to-do list for things to research when I’m older.” Harry finished his long speech with a grin, but Dudley didn’t look amused.

“I don’t like it,” he scowled.

“Try not to worry about it,” Harry advised. “Though... I wouldn’t chat with your mum about it – she’s very touchy about the subject. Either way, you’re not a wizard. And odds are good your kids won’t be either, if you have any. If you’re a Squib, it just means you’d be more resistant to Muggle-Repelling Wards and able to sense some magical creatures, that sort of thing. And you might be able to use some potions.”

Dudley perked up. “Like a diet potion?”

“Sorry Dudley,” Harry apologised. “I’ll double-check my books, but I’m pretty sure there’s no such thing, or there wouldn’t be so many fat wizards. You’ll have to stick with dieting. Some more exercise would help too. You could practice your boxing more or go for runs in the morning.”

Dudley scowled in disappointment and stomped out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Hello again everyone! :D I missed you guys. <3 This fifth part in the “Perfectly Normal” series covers Harry’s summer before his fourth year at Hogwarts and will update every Tuesday morning (Australian time) with a new chapter until all twenty chapters are up. That’s right, this fic is already complete and is being posted episodically.

Thanks to all my loyal readers and reviewers, including my guest reviewers. Please leave a little review if you enjoyed this chapter or you’d like to chat about your hopes for what you’d enjoy seeing in the next fic in the series. I appreciate all reviews both long and short, and I welcome polite constructive criticism. If you see a typo or other error, please feel most welcome to point it out.
Extra thanks to my stable of spot checkers and beta readers who helped polish this fic, including Zu Wang (beta), and Jennybeth98 (Britpicking). Many other wonderful people have helped with spot checks for particular chapters or aspects of the story, and I will list them on the relevant chapter/s. Thank you all! Any lingering errors remain my own responsibility.
**Birthday Surprise**

Chapter Summary

Dudley celebrates his birthday with a lovely outing while Harry does exams, which seems about par for the course to Harry. On their return home, Harry spots an alarming visitor to Privet Drive.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**23 June 1994**

The morning of the twenty-third of June dawned bright and clear, and if Dudley was a little uninspired with his birthday breakfast of a big bowl of fruit salad and a single hastily gobbled thin pancake, he at least appreciated his towering pile of birthday gifts. The year’s haul included Harry’s gift of a poster of Muhammad Ali. It had a picture of the famous boxer training with a punching bag, and a quote which read, “I hated every minute of training, but I said, don’t quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion.” Dudley loved it, and the Dursleys looked on with approval at the obviously non-magical present and their son’s beaming face.

Harry helped Dudley carry his massive haul of gifts up to his room and got a few hand-me-downs from his cousin as an incidental reward for helping him transport and put everything away.

“Do you want my old skateboard?” Dudley offered. “I’ve got a better one now. The right-side wheels are going on this one.”

“Nah, it’s not really my thing,” Harry said with a shrug as he hung Dudley’s new leather jacket up on a padded coat hanger. “I wouldn’t say no to your old paint set, though. Since you just got a new one.”

“Sure. Help yourself. I think the black’s gone and I lost one of the brushes, but apart from that it’s still good.”

“What did you do with the black paint?” Harry asked curiously.

“Piers and I painted one of Mrs. Figg’s cats – the old white one - so it looked like a little snow tiger with stripes,” he said with a grin. “Then we went tiger hunting.”

Harry left Dudley’s room in the end with a paint set and pad of paper, a small pile of new novels that Dudley swore there was no chance he was ever going to read, and a brand-new chemistry set. Dudley had lost interest in his new chemistry activity kit the minute he learnt nothing in it was going to explode.

The day out in London went very smoothly for all of them. While Uncle Vernon went off to work, Aunt Petunia drove Dudley, Piers, Gordon, and Harry to London. Harry spent the day powering through his Maths, French, and Latin IGCSE exams. Meanwhile, Dudley wheedled his mum into caving and buying him and his friends a big lunch and some ice-cream while they were out. After all, it was his birthday and one treat wouldn’t ruin his whole diet and it was such a long day out.
After dropping off Dudley’s friends at their respective homes they returned to Privet Drive. It was as they were pulling into the driveway that Harry noticed something odd while admiring his work on the lawn. There were footprints on the thick grass. Two indentations like someone was standing on the lush cushion of grass – but there was no-one there to be seen. Harry wondered how long someone would have to stand in one place to squash the lawn down like that, and if might have been his generously-sized uncle. Then the footprints moved as Aunt Petunia was parking the car – like someone invisible had shifted to a new spot.

“Oh Merlin, it’s trouble,” hissed Harry urgently. He put his hand up to hide his mouth from a possible invisible observer. “Aunt Petunia, Dudley, I think there’s a wizard here, up to no good. Don’t get out of the car.”

“Vernon’s inside!” his aunt fretted, glancing at the shiny company car they’d parked next to in the driveway.

“I’ll go in and get him to come out,” whispered Harry, “and I’ll get my wand. You keep the car running. You drive off with Uncle Vernon to Wisteria Walk – go to Mrs. Figg’s and tell her there’s trouble and she should Floo the Aurors. Tell her there’s an invisible wizard hiding in front of our house.”

“Is there really?” Dudley asked, fascinated. He looked out the window curiously, face pressed up against the glass. “How can you tell?”

“Mrs. Figg?!” hissed Aunt Petunia angrily, her mouth pursed in disgusted suspicion. “Is she…”

“Yes,” Harry said grimly, “she’s secretly a witch. One of my teachers told me.”

Harry got out of the car, body tense and ready to dive for cover the instant any spells flew. It was a good thing the hidden wizard seemed disinclined to attack right away, as Harry wasn’t carrying his wand. Harry swore to himself that he wouldn’t make that mistake ever again. There was a faint smell of stale tobacco in the air that Harry suspected might be coming from the wizard, since none of the neighbours on either side of their home smoked.

Harry’s knock brought Uncle Vernon to the door. His uncle turned white, then an angry red, at hearing Harry’s whispered alert that there was one of them skulking about at the front of his house, and that he needed to get to safety with the others who were waiting in the car.

He grunted his approval at Harry’s plan. “Good luck, boy. It’s your fault they’re here, so it’s your job to fix it. Good to see you taking responsibility for a change.”

“Yes, Uncle Vernon. I know. I’m going to do my best,” Harry promised sincerely. It really was all his own fault, after all. Death Eaters wouldn’t care about random Muggles if he wasn’t here. He just wondered what they were waiting for before attacking. Maybe a lack of witnesses?

“Take him out if you can. Or get your people to deal with it. But mind you don’t get yourself killed, and don’t damage the house.” Uncle Vernon briefly ruffled Harry’s hair in a very rare show of affection. Then he waited in the hallway for Harry to run and fetch his wand, so that the boy could discreetly provide cover in case anyone tried to attack while he scurried nervously out to the car.

Harry let out a sigh of relief as Aunt Petunia pulled the car away from the house with a screech of tires while Uncle Vernon was still struggling to do up his seatbelt. His family was safe. Whatever happened next, they’d be alright. Harry locked the door and waited. Nothing happened, even though in theory he should now be a temptingly isolated target. He peeked cautiously out the front
window, keeping as much cover as he could by just peeping around the curtains and keeping his body below the windowsill. The footprints still looked like they were there. He wished he had an owl. He thought about attacking the invisible person, but… they’d be hard to target. And what if he was outmatched? Maybe the blood wards were restraining them from attacking? Or was it his tenuous truce with the Dark Lord? Would either of those things change if he attacked first – would he ruin things if he was the aggressor?

He really wished he had some backup. How was he to contact anyone? Hopefully the Dursleys would summon help at Mrs. Figg’s. Maybe she’d show up to help. It was still hard for Harry to comprehend how she’d been a witch all these years and had never said a word to him about magic being real. He hadn’t wanted to talk to her, he was still so angry about that news. He’d planned to ignore her, just like she’d ignored him for years. Sending people to Coventry was a popular serious snub in wizarding culture – a big social put-down. But, helping his family was more important than his own feelings about his tight-mouthed old babysitter.

While Harry was wondering what was taking the Aurors so long, and deciding that Muggle police wouldn’t be any help, he remembered there was someone he could ring for help.

Nervously leaving his post at the front window with his wand still clenched tightly in his hand, he tucked the receiver under his chin and dialled the number for the Grangers. Her parents fetched Hermione quickly enough, but it felt like it took forever.

She started chattering happily as soon as she was on the phone. “Harry, it’s so great to hear-”

“Hermione, I’ve got a big problem,” he interrupted. “There’s an invisible wizard or witch hiding out the front of my house, and I’m worried they’re a Death Eater. I’ve got my family out of the house and there might be a message going to the Aurors, but I’m not sure.” It was possible that his family hadn’t gone to Mrs. Figg’s at all, after all. The fact that it had been at least ten minutes – maybe more – and there was still no sign of Aurors arriving suggested it was a distinct possibility. Rescuers should be able to Apparate in within seconds, after all.

“Can you owl a message to the Aurors for me?” he pleaded.

“Oh no!” she cried. “I can, but I don’t know how fast Diana would get there. I know! There’s a phone line they’re advertising in the Prophet, as well as a Floo address. They used it for Sirius, but now you can ring them to report sightings of Azkaban escapees. Hang on, I’ll get it for you.”

There was a noisy clatter as she put the phone down while she dashed off, then an endless minute later she was back to breathlessly give him the number, and to extract a promise from him to be careful and ring her back when he could.

Harry rang the emergency line, and while the person on the other end was a little sceptical about the urgency of his report which they summarised dismissively as being “suspicious grass”, they changed their tune quickly when they heard who they were talking to.

“Did you say… Harry Potter?” they queried, clearly shocked. “Really?”

“Yes, really!” he said with impatient anger. “Will you send someone now, or do you want to explain to the Minister why Harry Potter got murdered in his home by Death Eaters because you refused to send the Aurors when he pleaded for help?! Do I have to go out there and fight them myself? Or do you want me to wait inside until they’ve finished whatever they’re up to – breaking through a ward I think – and they smash their way into my home?”

“No, no!” babbled the operator urgently. “I’ll send a team of Aurors to your location right away!
Stay inside and stay safe!"

Thankfully they were as good as their word, and a team arrived within minutes. After he’d hung up, Harry watched warily from his post at the window, wand clenched in his white-knuckled grip, as three brown-robed Aurors materialised out of nowhere and shot a barrage of Stunning spells all along the front fence line. It looked like they’d gotten whoever it was, for there was a large depression in the lush grass now, like the wizard or witch had fallen unconscious to the ground.

With the other two covering her, one female Auror moved forward to unmask the trespasser. As she pulled at nothingness, a silky silver cloak appeared in her hand, and a short man with long straggly ginger hair wearing a tattered brown greatcoat was revealed from beneath it, lying unconscious in the grass.

Harry craned his neck as he looked intently at the scene through the window, trying to see if he could recognise the man. Without being close enough to get a better look he could really only rule out Pettigrew and Bellatrix Lestrange. It probably also wasn’t Dolohov who had black hair, or Rookwood who had brown hair. He wished he could remember the pictures of the escaped Death Eaters from the *Daily Prophet* better. He should’ve memorised them all!

Suddenly, there was a sharp crack of noise right behind him, characteristic of someone Apparating straight into the house, and Harry whirled about in a panic.

“*Expelliarmus!*” he screeched instantly, before who his opponent was had even registered in his mind.

It was Dumbledore, who stood there resplendent in deep purple robes embroidered with scarlet phoenixes. He was looking down rather shocked at his wand, which had fallen from his hand to land with a quiet thump on the soft rose-patterned carpet.

“Oh,” said Harry, deeply embarrassed. “Sorry, sir. I thought… um… I thought you were a Death Eater. I panicked.”

“Quite alright, my boy. Mr. Potter, that is. Quite an understandable mistake, in the circumstances,” Dumbledore said soothingly, picking up his dark, carved wooden wand and staring down at it intently with a frown rather than making eye contact with Harry. Harry hoped that didn’t mean he was angry with him. Words meant nothing. People could say anything, and still be mad. Body language was the thing to watch, and even that could be unreliable. Right now Dumbledore looked like he was upset or cross and trying to hide it. Harry readied himself to cast a Shield Charm, just in case, with his wand held casually down at his side.

“I hope your wand didn’t get a crack in it or anything? I’m really sorry. Honestly, I am! It’s just, with the Death Eater outside, and you appearing behind me so suddenly… I’d be happy to pay for a new one if there’s any damage, and I’m very sorry for my mistake,” he babbled in nervous appeasement.

Dumbledore finished his examination of his wand, tucking it away. He looked up at Harry at last, with a twinkle in his eye and a reassuring smile on his face. “Not to fret, everything is well, and my wand is quite alright.”

There was a polite knock on the door, and Harry went to answer it. “Thanks for coming,” he said courteously over his shoulder to Dumbledore as he walked to the door. “Did Mrs. Figg Floo you? That’s great, I’m glad she contacted someone. It was taking a while and I started to worry, so I phoned for the Aurors via the Azkaban escapee hotline. I’m happy to say the Aurors caught whoever it was outside.”
“Ah,” said Dumbledore, with a grave sigh. “About that…"

Harry opened the door to reveal the female Auror who’d acted in charge of the small team outside – a square-jawed witch with close-cropped grey hair. “Mr. Potter? Auror Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” she said in a loud confident voice, giving him a short bow. “May I come in?”

“Oh, of course,” he said, with a bow of his own. “Thank you for coming to help. Please have a seat.”

“Dumbledore,” she said flatly, espying him in the living room as she gracefully took a seat. Harry sat down nearby.

“Madam Bones.”

“One of your people, was he?” she asked accusingly.

“For Mr. Potter’s protection,” Dumbledore said gravely, moving over to join them.

“Which I note you neglected to inform him of. Thank God that Mr. Potter didn’t panic and try to curse or stab Mundungus. You really should leave this to the professionals, Mr. Dumbledore.”

“Excuse me? Would someone mind explaining what’s going on?” interjected Harry impatiently. He felt like he was missing half of the conversation, despite it happening right in front of him.

“I shall take that advice under advisement,” Dumbledore said to the Auror, before turning to Harry. “The man under the cloak was a friend of mine – Mundungus Fletcher. He was assigned to protect you and to raise the alarm in the event that Death Eaters caused any trouble for you.”

“Not assigned by us,” Madam Bones clarified. “Mr. Dumbledore was acting as a private citizen in this matter.”

“Well why didn’t anyone tell me I had a guard? He scared me half to death! I thought he was a Death Eater!”

Dumbledore looked rather embarrassed as he said in simple apology, “We didn’t want to worry you. I rather wanted to allow you a holiday with your family free from stress, after a rather trying year.”

Harry turned to the Auror, and asked, “Why wouldn’t you assign me a guard if I really need one? Why did it get left up to my Headmaster? I don’t mean any disrespect, Auror Bones, but that’s not really his job, is it? Is someone after me, specifically? Can he assign Aurors to students in danger?”

“No,” she said firmly. “It is not his job by any stretch of the imagination, and no-one is after you, Mr. Potter.”

Dumbledore cleared his throat meaningfully, and she harrumphed in irritation before expanding on her answer.

“While Death Eaters on the loose represent a general threat to the public, we have no reason to believe the risk to you personally is greater than to any other wizard or witch. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement does not believe anyone is after you. Mr. Dumbledore, on the other hand, begs to differ,” she clarified, with a slight glare at the Headmaster. “He may explain the matter to you or not as he chooses, but he has no evidence to present beyond idle speculation and vague and unsubstantiated warnings, and neither do you for that matter, Mr. Potter.”
Harry shrunk back in his seat. “I’m sorry, ma’am.”

Her stern face softened slightly at his polite apology. “Now, Mr. Potter, as the trespasser you alerted us to is not known to be affiliated with the Death Eaters, and was in fact standing outside your property boundary, we cannot technically charge him with trespassing. Nor did he breach the Statute of Secrecy in his actions. We shall caution Mr. Fletcher over causing a public alarm and wasting Auror time, after which we are obliged to let him go.

“As you acted in good faith and with valid reason for concern in alerting the Aurors to a potential problem even though it was not in fact an Azkaban escapee, and showed commendable restraint in not casting any spells, you will of course not suffer any negative consequences, Mr. Potter. So, unless you wish to charge Mr. Dumbledore for trespassing…?” She looked expectantly to Harry as she trailed off.

Harry thought trying to press charges against his Headmaster obviously wouldn’t be a wise idea when the wizard had only been trying to help as requested. He shook his head. “No, ma’am.”

“Thank you. It is an inapplicable charge in any case, as I was invited to visit by Mr. Potter’s family,” Dumbledore said smoothly, “due to his reported distressing situation, which I had hoped to explain to his satisfaction.”

Madam Bones clucked her tongue in irritation. “Then I believe our business here is concluded. Mr. Potter I shall leave you to your visit with Mr. Dumbledore.”

“Um. If you don’t mind me asking, what about the neighbours? I think a few of them were watching people shoot spells about,” Harry asked cautiously. “Also, I cast a Disarming Charm on Professor Dumbledore when he Apparated in behind me without warning. I kind of panicked. So, if you could ensure I won’t be cautioned for that, I’d really appreciate it.”

“I understand your concern about the neighbours,” said Madam Bones, “but you need not distress yourself, for the Obliviators are already at work. We are professionals, after all.” The sidelong glance at Dumbledore suggested that Harry wasn’t the person that final remark was really meant for.

“Speaking of which… got the drop on you, did he?” she asked Dumbledore, with amusement leaking into her voice.

“Alas, youth and cunning triumphs again over age and experience. I was not expecting him to duel me the second I arrived!” Dumbledore said, sounding rather amused as he stroked his long, white beard. “I shall be ready for him next time.” He winked companionably at Harry, who gave him a cautious smile in return.

Madam Bones left not long after that, with a brief nod of farewell to Harry, and a promise she’d sort out his warning for underage magic use, given the circumstances.

“Harry,” Dumbledore began in a very serious tone of voice, “I do hope you are not upset at the measure I instigated for your safety. I apologise for not warning you about it. However, I think you know – as I do – that someone other than Mr. Lupin is behind the Azkaban breakout. Despite the lack of evidence that will meet Madam Bones’ standards.”

Harry nodded gravely. “Yes, sir. I do.”

“Then I think you can grasp why I was especially concerned about your wellbeing. Though again, I must tender my regrets for not considering that I should warn you about the guards who take turns
watching over you. I hope you will consent to allowing the arrangement to continue.”

Harry’s expression turned mutinous. “I did fine on my own. Like always. I don’t want anyone spying on me constantly.” Were they there to protect him… or to report on him? No doubt they’d report on him leaving Privet Drive in another couple of weeks. Would they track him everywhere? Would they try to stop him leaving?

Dumbledore sighed. “Yet the assistance of adult wizards is not to be so easily discounted – and you proved that in your admirable decision to send your family to summon the Aurors. Har… Mr. Potter, I beg you to reconsider. If not for your own sake, then for the safety of your family.”

Harry wavered uncertainly, and Dumbledore gazed at him intently, pressing his advantage. “You are old enough, I think, to hear the truth – Lord Voldemort is still alive. In spirit, if not in flesh. He is believed to have possessed Mr. Quirrell in the past, and information I have received suggests that he is now inhabiting another wizard willing to act as a vessel for his lord – someone new. He is stealthily – and openly with his attack on Azkaban – gathering his old followers around him again. I don’t wish to alarm you, yet I must bow to the necessity to do so. You are in grave danger, Mr. Potter. And you need to remain here, at home with your family. A guard would assist in instantly calling for help in the event of an attack, as well as being available to act in your defence.”

“How is it safer here though?” asked Harry, not even blinking at Dumbledore’s statement about Voldemort, which earnt him a little proud smile from his headmaster. “Why couldn’t I stay with a wizarding family who could help protect me if there was an attack?”

“There are wards on Privet Drive, Mr. Potter. Ancient ones based on your mother’s love. While you call this house home – here, where your family lives – no harm can befall you.”

Not very specific, Harry thought, and with no mention of the blood wards Professor Snape told me about. Besides, I’ve had “harm befall me” here plenty of times, between Vernon’s belt, Dudley’s fists, and that mangy dog Ripper.

“How exactly do the wards protect me?” Harry asked. “I’ve been hurt here before. Falls and the like.”

Dumbledore hesitated a moment before he explained, “No Death Eater can cross the boundary of the property. Even Lord Voldemort himself would be unable to reach you here. Outside of the protection of Hogwarts itself, there is no stronger fortress for you to shelter in. Even when you depart your home, some of that protection may linger with you for a time. Or even potentially with your relatives.”

Harry nodded slowly. That sounded impressive. Better than Hogwarts actually, given that Professor Quirrell had been quite able to enter the grounds there quite freely.

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate the warning.”

“I hope now you will bow to the regrettable necessity of guards being posted?” Dumbledore asked optimistically.

“I… I will think about it, yes. I do appreciate your concern. Thanks again for coming to help today. I’ll send you a message later about the guards, if that’s alright?”

Dumbledore smiled. “Your mature consideration of my request is all I ask for. I am confident you shall make the right decision for your family’s safety.”

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Dumbledore left with a promise to dispatch a school owl to loiter around Privet Drive so Harry could write to him. Soon enough Harry had the house all to himself again, after which the first thing he did was ring Hermione. He knew she would be worrying.

The phone barely had time to ring once before he heard her breathless greeting. “Hello?”

“Hermione, it’s me, I’m okay.”

“Oh, Harry! I’m so glad. I was so worried and of course there wasn’t a good way to check, and I didn’t want to ring in case I distracted you. Or in case you were talking to the Aurors. What if the phone rang in the middle of a battle, and you turned around, and then you got hit in the back by a curse!” she babbled, as if reliving all the anxious thoughts she’d turned over and over again in her mind while waiting for him to phone. He felt dreadful, like he should have called sooner. He’d been so *selfish* for not thinking of her earlier.

“I’m sorry I didn’t ring faster,” he apologised. “It’s just that I had to talk to an Auror, and then Dumbledore showed up and he wanted to talk. But it’s alright – it wasn’t a Death Eater after all, Hermione! It was just someone trying to guard me from the Azkaban escapees.”

“Tell me everything,” she demanded.

So he did, spilling out words freely with the joyful relief of unburdening himself to an understanding ear. He told her of the fear he’d felt as he spotted the invisible watcher outside his house, his relief as he saw his family drive away safely to Mrs. Figg’s, and his irritation with the Ministry worker on the phone as he’d thought that yet again he’d have to deal with everything himself. His terror that he might not be able to prevail against the Death Eater and would meet the same fate as his parents. The arrival of the Aurors who’d caught and unmasked the guard, and Dumbledore’s plea to let him continue to assign watchers. Then cautiously, nervously, Harry confided to her his twin feelings of betrayal and self-judgemental guilt about his old babysitter.

“I know it sounds… bad. But part of what makes me angriest is that she knew. Mrs. Figg, that is. She knew all along… about today’s guard as well. She’s part of his and Dumbledore’s group of friends. But it’s more than that – she’s been spying on me all along, for *years* Hermione, and she never said a word about magic. Not once! I’m so mad I didn’t want to talk to her – I was even going to pretend I couldn’t even *see* her if I ever ran into her. But shouldn’t I be grateful to her?” he asked guiltily. “That she’s given up her life to watch over me all these years?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No. I wouldn’t be grateful. It’s *creepy*,” said Hermione. As she sounded genuinely disgusted, Harry believed she must be telling the truth. “If I was you, I’d be angry she never told me. If some family friend knew about the weird things – accidental magic – that my parents took me to a psychologist over, because they thought I was… and all along they knew it was magic, and didn’t tell me? I’d be furious! Not grateful. You never asked her to do that – to watch over you. And neither did your parents, or your relatives. You have a *right* to be angry. She did a rubbish job of it anyway, didn’t she?”

Harry let out a shuddering sigh of relief. “You really think it’s alright to be mad at her?”

“Absolutely. And Harry…” she said hesitantly, “it’s… it’s alright to be mad that your family drove off without you.”
“I’m not angry! I was glad they left. So they were safe,” he insisted. “That was my plan.”

“But you weren’t safe – or they didn’t think you would be. I mean, it was brave of you but dangerous. And Harry, I could hear the resentment in your voice,” Hermione said softly, and Harry didn’t know whether to be terrified or glad that she knew him so well. His body seemed to be opting for terrified – his hands were shaking a bit. He didn’t want her to know. Anything. It wasn’t something he ever wanted to talk about.

Unaware of the turmoil she’d thrown his mind into, Hermione continued talking. “I know you were kind of mad at them for leaving. Even though you told them to. It’s okay to be mad at them too, not just at Mrs. Figg. My parents would never leave me alone if there was danger.”

“I’m not mad at them. They did the right thing,” he insisted. “They did exactly what I asked them to.”

“I wouldn’t have left you. Neither would Neville, or even Draco for that matter. Would you have run to safety and left us alone and in danger?” she asked rhetorically. Harry knew she already knew the answer. It was an answer he didn’t really want to think about, because it invited comparisons to the Dursleys’ own behaviour.

The rumbling purr of a car’s engine pulling into the driveway brought a welcome excuse to end what was becoming a very uncomfortable conversation. “I have to go, Hermione. The Dursleys are back, and they don’t like me using the phone.”

A pause from her. An unusual silence that he didn’t want to break. “That’s not normal either, Harry,” she said.

“I have to go,” he mumbled.

“You know it’s not, right?” she persisted, like an annoying mosquito. Or a worried friend.

“Yes,” he breathed quietly. A sigh of admission – he wasn’t sure if he meant it or if he just wanted her to stop talking. Dudley could use the phone as much as he wanted. He never needed to beg permission. But he was their son, while Harry was just a nephew. Hermione wanted a yes, so he’d give her a yes. “I know. But I still have to go.”

“Well, take care, Harry. I’ll send Diana with a letter, so you can write back to me. Ring if you can.” Harry appreciated her brisk and unemotional farewell. It made things easier.

“I will. Goodbye, Hermione. See you at the World Cup if you’re going, if not sooner.”

“I’ll try to make it if I can. I’ve been chatting with a few people about it and it sounds like fun! Bye, Harry. Take care.”

The click of the phone going back into its cradle ended the conversation, but not the thoughts swirling around in his brain that she’d stirred up with her words. He dazedly walked over to the sofa and slumped down into its cushioned embrace. The hollow in the cushions left by years of his cousin sitting in the same prime spot in front of the TV sucked him in – no doubt he would have a little trouble later struggling to his feet. Dudley always did.

Harry’s thoughts spun. She wouldn’t have run – Hermione had proven her courage. Her parents wouldn’t either – she sounded very sure they wouldn’t have left her alone. And they didn’t have any magical powers. Of course, she was their daughter, while he was just a nephew to the Dursleys. An unwanted burden.
He tried to think about something else, rather than that uncomfortable fact. Neville would have stayed too. No, not just stayed, he would’ve demanded to stay, like a proper Gryffindor. Draco had proved himself willing to stand at his side no matter what stupid and secretive things he might be up to. Pansy? She might have left – he remembered how she and the other girls had run for it down in the Chamber of Secrets when Millicent was attacked. Greg? Ron? Maybe. Probably. He didn’t really know. Sirius, he thought, might have stayed. He seemed desperate to prove himself to Harry. Harry thought he wouldn’t make the same mistake of running off twice. However, he had left them alone with Professor Lupin in the cave to face the approaching Dementors. Should Sirius have stayed then?

He didn’t like Dumbledore a great deal, but he felt certain the man would help out against a possible Death Eater attack, being a war hero. He’d shown up just now, after all. Snape wouldn’t have left Harry on his own to fight. He’d rushed into danger when Storm had sought help for Harry – he’d followed a snake into dark woods in the optimistic hope that Storm had fetched him for a reason, and he’d be in time to save Harry from Sirius Black. Or, as it turned out, from some Dementors. Lockhart wouldn’t have left right away. Oh no, first he would have happily shoved Harry right into the path of danger to buy himself some extra time to scarper away safely. Selfish prat.

There was a jangle of keys at the door while Harry still sat lost in thought.

Should the Dursleys have run? Was it fair to judge them for doing so when they didn’t have the powers he and his friends had? How real was the threat, anyway? Harry wondered if there was really the risk from Death Eaters attacking that Dumbledore feared. The Dark Lord secretly wanted a truce with Harry, after all. Friendship, even. It wouldn’t be that hard to take out a single guard – three Aurors had managed it quite nicely, and there were more Death Eaters on the loose than just three. Even assuming the blood wards protected guards on the footpath, there were other options open to attackers if they were ruthless enough. They could’ve attacked Aunt Petunia’s car during the family’s recent trip to London, if they’d been stalking him and really wanted him dead. One blown tire at the wrong time with a quick charm, and the Boy Who Lived would lose his title for good. In a car crash, just like the Dursleys always told him had happened to his parents.

The Dursleys had lied to him for ages, more than Mrs. Figg ever had. Years of thinking he was a freak. His relatives telling him he was a freak. He’d done his best not to be – to be normal. But they’d known all along it would end in failure. They should have told him.

“Harry! You’re alright!”

Startled from his bout of introspection, Harry flinched and raised his arms defensively as Dudley yelled and rushed towards him.

“Dudley?” he asked, lowering his arms as he realised what was going on – just a friendly approach. Nothing bad. Dudley clapped him on the shoulder. “When did you get home?” Harry looked around and saw his aunt and uncle were in the house too, and they were all staring at him.

“Just a minute ago. You alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. A little jumpy, maybe. Sorry.”

“The house looks untouched. Well done, Harry,” his uncle said approvingly. “Mrs. Figg told us it was all sorted out and it safe to come home again. She got a message. She doesn’t have… you know. Abilities. She’s not a witch at all, as it turns out. She just has relatives who are like that, but you can’t help family, can you dear?” He smiled at his wife, who didn’t look half as contented as he did.
“No, you can’t,” said Aunt Petunia, with a pinched expression. “The man’s been taken away then? What about the neighbours? Did they see anything… strange?”

Harry glanced away from her as he replied, “Uh, it’ll be fine. The Aurors – our police – they made sure everything’s fine and no-one noticed anything.” He was pretty sure Madam Bones had mentioned calling in the Obliviators. It was standard procedure whenever Muggles noticed magic that couldn’t be explained away, and she’d seemed a stickler for rules.

Uncle Vernon looked relieved to hear it, but if anything Aunt Petunia’s mouth was pursed tighter than ever, and her eyes were narrow with suspicion and anger. “Did they now. How kind of them to condescend to help in such a way.”

She looked like she knew exactly how wizards made sure “no-one noticed anything”. It made him wonder if they’d done it before. Wiped the memories of people she knew. Friends, neighbours. People who’d seen too much and were potential threats to the secrecy of the wizarding world. Harry remembered the day Dumbledore had first shown up at Privet Drive. He’d hinted – threatened – that they could wipe Petunia’s mind clean of all her decades of knowledge of magic. It they had to. If they wanted to. It must be terrifying. It was highly illegal to cast it on a wizard or witch – something Lockhart knew all too well thus his deceit and blackmailing – but perfectly legal to use on Muggles, though considered a job best left to the professionals.

“By the way, I appreciate that she helped us this evening,” Aunt Petunia said with a stiff and cursory attempt at courtesy, “but I don’t want anything more to do with Arabella any longer. We can find another sitter – Yvonne might help out if we need her.”

“Up to you, pet,” Uncle Vernon said amiably, making his wife relax slightly. She looked worriedly at Dudley as if in fear of a tantrum, but he seemed sanguine about her pronouncement too.

“I don’t care,” Dudley said with a shrug. “I’m too old for a sitter anyway, and she’s weird and her house smells like cat wee.”

“And boiled cabbage,” added Harry. “I won’t miss her either.” And he wouldn’t forget. Ever. If Hermione said it was normal to be angry, then he felt quite justified. Good riddance to her and her stinky house full of cats, crocheted doilies, and lies.

Aunt Petunia looked slightly amazed to be so decisively backed by everyone in her resolution, and it seemed to strengthen her. “Well, I might go put the kettle on, since that’s all sorted out,” she said with obvious relief. “I’m glad everything’s back to normal.”

“Oh, Professor Dumbledore said he’s happy to keep assigning a guard on the house. He’d prefer to, in fact. He asked me what I wanted to do but I told him that was a decision best left up to you, Uncle Vernon,” Harry reported with a flatteringly submissive note in his voice. “Because it’s your house and it’s up to you if you want that protection or not.”

“Got an opinion on the matter yourself, boy?” Uncle Vernon’s eyes had narrowed, and Harry shifted nervously. He couldn’t quite guess what the right answer should be – what his uncle wanted to hear that wouldn’t provoke him into anger.

“Not really, sir. They could certainly help if there really is a genuine attack, so that’s a good argument for it. But, I also don’t think it’s very likely there would be an attack, and it’s really… well it’s just really rude of them. Spying like that without asking. I honestly think it should be up to you. I’ll respect whatever you choose, and I hope they do too.”

He held his breath anxiously while his uncle considered his words then nodded approvingly. Harry
breathed out loudly with a relieved rush of air.

“Good. Petunia and I will talk it over and tell you our decision in the morning. You’re off to school at the start of September, right?”

“Yes, Uncle Vernon. But… I might go visiting a couple of friends before then. I promised I would, so if it’s alright with you I might leave early.” Harry didn’t expect his uncle would be anything but thrilled to hear he planned to go elsewhere for part of the holidays but thought he may as well be polite about it.

Aunt Petunia shrugged indifferently and wandered off towards the kitchen, when his uncle glanced at her to gauge her opinion on the matter. It hurt his heart more than Uncle Vernon’s approving nod at his planned departure. He hadn’t really thought they’d care, but it hurt all the same to have it confirmed. Even though he didn’t actually want them to stop him from leaving early.

“Any time you want is fine by me,” Uncle Vernon said. “When are you leaving then, boy?”

“I thought another week and a half? On the third of July?” That would make it two weeks at Privet Drive – like Professor Snape had recommended – plus an extra couple of days to make sure.

“But you can’t leave yet!” whined Dudley. “It’s too soon! You’re supposed to help me with my summer homework! And put my model aeroplane together! It keeps falling apart and it won’t fly! Muuum, tell him he can’t go yet. I don’t want him to go. He only just got here.”

Harry felt choked up, like there was a lump in his throat, and he tried not to cry as his lip quivered. It was a long way from where he and his cousin had started. He’d hoped… never mind what he’d hoped. His cousin wanted him around. Maybe only because he was useful. But he was useful to his uncle and aunt too, with all the chores he did. It didn’t help with them – not enough. It only made him tolerable. He clenched his fists in a sudden unconscious burst of anger.

“Duddykins, he can still help you! There’s plenty of time before he’ll leave,” his aunt cooed to her son, calling out from the kitchen.

“No there’s not! He’ll be busy in the garden and cooking and he won’t have any time for me!” Dudley complained loudly, with a stubborn set to his chubby jaw. Harry wondered if he was being deliberately manipulative on Harry’s behalf to get him out of chores, or if it was coincidental. Sometimes he underestimated his cousin. He forgot that Dudley was in fact masterfully experienced at manipulating his parents to get everything he wanted. And right now, he wanted Harry around – free to help him with schoolwork and entertain him.

“Well we’ll make sure he has more free time with you, how about that?”

“I guess,” Dudley said grudgingly.

“I’ll stay an extra week if you like, Big D,” offered Harry with a smile. “Until the tenth of July.” He might have to make a few trips out on the Knight Bus to meet his book promotion commitments, but that should be easy enough.

So it was settled – Harry would stay a little longer with his family. In the morning, Uncle Vernon told Harry that he’d decided the guards could stay, but only for as long as Harry did, and only if they stayed off his property, and the neighbours didn’t see or hear them at all. He wanted nothing to do with them. Harry praised his uncle’s wisdom, and obediently dispatched a note to Dumbledore via the school owl that was waiting patiently in the garden for his correspondence. Harry also added in that he’d appreciate a quick note every night telling him who the next day’s
guard was, and where they’d be located. He hoped it might yield some interesting information. Also, he could relax a bit more if he knew who they were and where they were stationed.

Harry lay in bed that night, restless with insomnia. The bed seemed too hot, the mattress lumpy, and the room stuffy. Throwing open the window for some fresh air didn’t help, however, because it was his thoughts more than the room temperature that was keeping him awake. He knew he should be happy. His belly was full (thanks to some extra cached snacks supplementing his meagre portion of dinner), his family was safe, his aunt and uncle hadn’t kicked him out for bringing trouble to the house, and Dudley genuinely wanted him around. No-one had yelled or sneered about his above-average Hogwarts grades. In fact, no-one had bothered to even ask about them, so there was no way to get in trouble about them one way or the other. His chores were even going to be relaxed for the next week. He had everything he guessed he wanted. So why wasn’t he happy? He wiped some stray tears away with an angry sniff. He was happy. Happy. Everything was fine. He was an idiot who should be happy!

He rolled over in bed with a sigh, gazing out this bedroom window to the dim orange street lights that lined the quiet empty road, edged with a few parked cars and boring identical normal houses. Nights could be hard at times. Harry had nothing to keep himself busy with – there was too much time to think at night.

He wished he had Storm with him to talk to. Eventually Harry gave up trying to sleep, turned on the battered old lime-green lamp, and got Spellman’s Syllabary out of his trunk to read through for an hour or two. Since he couldn’t sleep, he pragmatically decided he may as well get a head start on the coming year’s Ancient Runes theory – he’d only skimmed the textbook so far and that just wasn’t good enough.

Chapter End Notes

Mergirl007 – I pondered Harry’s most appropriate reaction to the news about Mrs. Figg and decided that what he’d really like to do is simply not talk to her at all. He’s too angry, and avoiding her is easy, since he has no social or familial obligations towards her.

Dudley’s poster – Dudley’s gift from Harry is available to purchase from “Canvas It Up” on the UK Amazon website.

BROMBROS & Kitty - Thanks for catching a couple of typos on this chapter.
An unwanted invitation is delivered to Privet Drive. Well, it’s unwanted by most of the family.

June 1994

Harry stared at his breakfast plate with dismay, for it was even worse than usual. With the stockpile of dry pumpkin pasties, oranges, and biscuits in his trunk all eaten up, he was getting increasingly frustrated with Dudley’s diet. There was nothing on his plate but a small pile of grated celery. Everyone else at least had a miniscule scoop of cottage cheese on theirs.

“Can’t I have some cottage cheese too?” he asked Aunt Petunia plaintively.

“You’re allergic to dairy, remember?” she said, starting to pick at her own breakfast unenthusiastically. “Cottage cheese is made from milk.” Dudley had already finished his food in a few gobbled mouthfuls and was now eying Harry’s pile of unwanted celery in hungry desperation.

“No, I’m not, I’ve outgrown it. If I was ever allergic in the first place,” he said. “I have dairy all the time at Hogwarts.” Also, it apparently really should’ve been called an intolerance, not an allergy. He considered discussing how he, like some other wizards, might be a little bit sensitive to iron, but didn’t think that conversation would go well. The word ‘freak’ began to echo in his mind even as he considered it.”

“We don’t discuss that place at the table,” his uncle rebuked. “And you certainly were allergic to it. You used to get stomach aches and throw up all the time when you were younger, remember?”

“No, not really. I think it was just the once.”

“There’s your shoddy memory again. You had stomach pain all the time and threw up at least half a dozen times before we fixed your diet. It was about that many, wasn’t it pet?” He turned to his wife for support, who gave it obediently.

“At least that many times,” she agreed.

“I don’t remember him throwing up that much,” said Dudley thoughtfully. “But you did complain about a sore tummy sometimes, Harry.”

“You usually threw up at night after dinner, when you were half asleep,” explained his uncle. “So that might be why you don’t remember it, boy. I won’t have you throwing out accusations like that. You apologise to me and your poor aunt who had to clean up after you.”

“Sorry Uncle Vernon. Sorry, Aunt Petunia.” Harry could only remember vomiting just the once, though he did recall stomach aches. He’d thought they were just from hunger, but maybe he’d been sick. He’d probably just forgotten. He nibbled unenthusiastically at his celery, since it didn’t look
like was going to get anything else this morning.

Uncle Vernon grunted his approval. Then his eyes narrowed in irritation as he spotted the rolled-up scroll of parchment Harry had brought to the table and left next to his rather pathetic breakfast plate. “What is that?!” he asked, puffing up like an angry red balloon as he pointed at the scroll. “You know you must keep your things in your room at all times!”

“I would usually, but this is a letter for you and Aunt Petunia,” explained Harry. “It arrived last night.”

“About the ah… guards?” his aunt asked. “You handle it. I don’t want to talk to him.” Her face pursed up disapprovingly.

“No, it’s not from the Headmaster, it’s an invitation to a garden party this Saturday, the second of July. My friends Ron and Percy Weasley want me to visit – they’ve gotten their parents to send a formal invitation to our whole family to come and visit for supper.” He picked up the parchment scroll and held it out expectantly. Eventually after a few meaningful looks were exchanged between her and her husband, Aunt Petunia reached out with a resigned sigh to read it over.

Petunia read little bits out loud, peppering her summary with critical commentary. “They say they’d be ‘delighted’ if we could visit, Vernon. ‘Informal garden party at our cottage’ – well at least they’re not boasting about living in a mansion. They say ‘Harry is welcome to bring his broomstick’ but there’s not a word about Dudders of course. Quidditch is a completely ridiculous sport in any case, if you ask me. ‘Muggle dress acceptable’ they say, as if it’s obviously the very definition of informality.

“Oh, this bit is just delightful Vernon, listen to this: ‘We are inviting my second cousin who’s a Squib and his Muggle wife, so you can rest assured there will be people like you there you can talk to.’ She’s worse than Mrs. Pearson telling me my dress is very pretty ‘for someone on a budget’. Well, I certainly don’t want to go – I don’t see any reason we have to.”

“Certainly not,” Uncle Vernon agreed, his attention more on the sports page of the newspaper than their conversation. Since breakfast didn’t demand a lot of his time these days, as it was over so fast, he spent most of his mornings leisurely reading the newspaper. “Terrible waste of time mixing with their sort. Dangerous too – I haven’t forgotten the horrible ‘jokes’ they played at the wedding. Best avoided, the lot of them.”

“I want to go.”

Uncle Vernon lowered the top of his paper to scowl over it at Harry, but it wasn’t he who’d spoken. “I want to go. Can we go, mum? I want to see a wizard house!” Dudley asked again demandingly. “And flying broomsticks!”

“No. Absolutely not!” his father said, deeply shocked. “I won’t have my son having anything to do with that rubbish.”

“Or those people,” sniffed Aunt Petunia.

“Quite right.”

“But muuum,” whined Dudley. “I said I want to go!” Despite his increasingly loud wails of protest his tantrum was to no avail, and after the direst of threats was trotted out – “No telly until tomorrow!” – he eventually gave up.
“Fine,” he grumbled. “Wizard stuff is pretty stupid anyway, I guess. I’ll go hang out with Piers on Saturday instead. We’ll go play Street Fighter at the arcade.”

Dudley got twenty pounds spending money for the weekend and a lot of praise for his wise choice. Meanwhile, Harry got grudging permission to go on his own to the Weasleys’ party (“if you must”), and five pounds for the bus, which he took gratefully even though the Knight Bus only accepted Sickles and Galleons. Five pounds should buy him a box or two of muesli bars and some beef jerky to help him endure his final week at Privet Drive without wasting away to nothing.

After Harry’s morning chores were done, including cooking up some pumpkin soup for lunch, the boys spent the afternoon going over Dudley’s science homework in the living room, trying to ignore the noise of Aunt Petunia watching a soap opera in the background.

“The soup tastes better than I remember,” Dudley said contentedly, after gulping it down. “I think I like pumpkin soup now. You cook better than the school cafeteria ladies do, Harry.”

“Everything tastes better when you’re hungry,” replied Harry, with the voice of experience.

Harry stayed up late as usual, with the window of his room wide open to let in the evening’s varied flock of post owls. Given the Dursley’s habit of waking him up early to start his chores, he wasn’t always keen on staying up late. Unfortunately, the sun didn’t set in late June until half-past-nine, which left him little choice. The professionally set wards cued to sunset just wouldn’t let the owls through any earlier. At least this way he knew the Dursleys wouldn’t be disturbed by them.

A letter from the Nott family arrived first, communicating their polite understanding that Harry was too busy to visit at the moment and hoping that situation might change soon. They weren’t the only family of a Slytherin student he barely knew who’d written to invite him to visit them, or otherwise tried to ingratiate themselves. Flint’s family had done the same and so had half a dozen others, including a stray Ravenclaw he thought might be in Potter Watch whose name he barely even recognised, and a couple more people from goodness knows where that he wasn’t sure he’d ever actually met. He was rather suspicious and wary of the growing surge of interest in him and wondered what their motivations were. Given a couple included some variation on “Heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Slytherin” under his name on the envelope (sometimes omitting the Potter family title like it wasn’t even worth mentioning), his cynical guess was that they were cosying up to him under the belief that he was powerful and Dark, or possibly allied to the Dark Lord. As neither of those things was the case, he’d consequently sent out a lot of carefully polite demurrals and refusals. Pansy’s invitation, on the other hand, elicited a happy acceptance to meet up with her in Diagon Alley later in July to shop together for school supplies.

A school owl brought the evening’s update on his guards – Dumbledore had refused to share the names of his guards for security reasons but was willing to compromise and report the preferred locations of assigned watchers. Tomorrow’s guard would be stationed on the footpath out the front under an invisibility cloak, as was a popular choice. He’d had one guard who preferred to hide on a neighbour’s roof. He guessed it might be a location Death Eaters wouldn’t expect trouble from and should give the guard a good view of the area – it seemed like a smart spot, especially for someone who could presumably easily Apparate down if they needed to.

Snape had written a response to Harry’s request for recommended books to learn Occlumency from, as his previous terse letter advising him to meditate each night and “clear your mind” didn’t have the depth of advice Harry had hoped for. Even Draco’s sparse instruction via correspondence on the topic last summer had been more useful than Snape’s advice, not that he’d dare tell his former professor that his teaching was substandard. Snape recommended Protection Charm Your Mind: A Practical Guide to Counter Legilimensy by Franciscus Fieldwake, and Guide to Advanced
Occlumency by Maxwell Barnett. He deemed them “adequate” texts, though not as good as being tutored in person, which Snape was clearly convinced was the best way. He also warned that Flourish and Blotts was unlikely to stock either book, and added that Moribund’s in Knockturn Alley – opposite Borgin and Burke’s – was more likely to be able to sell him a copy. He wrote that Harry should note that while not strictly illegal the mind arts were frowned upon and books on the topic were scarce. As an alternative, Snape suggested that if he was “reluctant to venture into a store of deservedly dubious reputation”, he was advised to “owl-order from a bookstore on the Continent”.

Harry was pretty sure he’d skimmed the first book in the Malfoy library last Yule, so hopefully Draco would lend it to him. He’d look for the second one locally, but if he was out of luck or Knockturn Alley was too creepy to bear, he’d order from Livraria Lello in Portugal – Tracey’s favourite bookstore.

Draco had sent another letter, complaining aggrievedly that it wasn’t fair that Harry was going to visit Longbottom Manor for a week, and not his manor as well, and weren’t they good friends too? Harry didn’t even know how Draco had heard he was visiting Neville for his own and Neville’s birthdays and for the first week of August. He was sure he hadn’t told him, but Draco seemed to know all about the plan anyway. He wondered momentarily if they were writing to each other, but decided it was unlikely as Harry knew Neville was quietly disinclined to establish any meaningful friendship with Draco. Someone else must have gossiped. Perhaps Hermione had told Greg, and Greg had told Draco.

Harry sighed and wrote a response promising to visit Malfoy Manor for at least a few days in the second week of August. Sirius Black had already laid claim to hosting him for the last two weeks of August, a visit which would include a trip to the Quidditch World Cup, but he guessed it might be fun to visit Draco too. Especially if they could have some duelling lessons again! He hoped it would be safe. He was still a bit nervous about Lucius Malfoy, but his last visit had gone perfectly fine. Harry added a quick postscript asking to borrow Fieldwake’s book on Occlumency, if Draco didn’t mind sending it. He promised he’d return it in August, or on the train if for some reason they didn’t see each other before then.

Tiberius Sayre of Rumihart Books had sent a package – the final approved-for-release version of Battles with the Basilisk, as well as a short schedule of promotional signings for the book over the next fortnight and a small pouch of Galleons to cover miscellaneous travelling expenses.

Harry was pleased to read that Colin Creevey’s attendance at the Diagon Alley signings had been approved by the book publisher. In addition to supplying Harry with a stack of wizarding photos to sign in advance of the book launches, the enterprising young Gryffindor had proposed a scheme of accompanying him on his two UK book signings. He had suggested a great plan where he’d offer to take photographs of people with Harry for a small fee, with the lion’s share of the profits going to Harry and a small commission for Colin.

Mr. Sayre also discussed how he’d have the first Portkey (the one to France) ready to collect at his second London book signing, free of charge of course.

The last piece of news in Mr. Sayre’s letter was more worrying.

All of Mr. Lockhart’s last-minute changes are included in this edition. Prior to your book signings this week, I would advise you to familiarise yourself with the major differences from the earlier print run, which has been pulped. I have taken the liberty of placing bookmarks to mark some key differences of note in the final version (enclosed).

How annoying. His erstwhile professor hadn’t written to him about any changes!
The old advance copy of *Battles with the Basilisk* was duly dug out of his trunk and dutifully compared to the new printing. Tom Riddle, the foolish young Slytherin Dark wizard who claimed to be Lord Voldemort, had been replaced by Tim Rydel, a foolish young half-blood Ravenclaw student who’d claimed to be the illegitimate son of Gellert Grindelwald.

Harry guessed someone had finally convinced Lockhart that Tom Riddle *was* the Dark Lord’s original name, and he’d decided to play it safe and avoid all mention of him. He wasn’t sure why Lockhart had changed Tom’s House, though. Perhaps he owed a prominent Slytherin a favour.

The core plot and the vast majority of the text remained the same. After the dramatically recounted rash of petrifications, Miss Weasley still handed in the diary to Lockhart, who was eventually possessed. Harry, Neville, Ron, and Alice Tolipan still ended up as hostages. Lockhart broke free due to immense willpower and destroyed the cursed book with an acid spell resulting in a poisonous cloud of green smoke. Before it dissipated with an angry screech, the ghost still managed to summon a Basilisk. Storm got Harry’s wand to him, so he could cast a smokescreen to protect the students from the Basilisk’s gaze. Lockhart’s epic battle with the Basilisk, blindfolded by his cape and armed with both wand and a transfigured sword, remained mostly intact. Harry still got to hiss to distract the giant snake at a critical point in the battle, and it still crumbled into dust when defeated.

All those things that they’d agreed on together remained in the story. But there were a decent handful of changes, and it wasn’t as simple as just a few corrections on the name throughout the book. There was less speculation about the “mysterious enchanted tome made by the foolish young Dark wizard” and more outright statements about the “ghost of the foolish young half-blood trapped forever in a cursed tome he should not have tampered with”. The Chamber of Secrets also sounded a bit cooler, and less dank and mouldy than it had been in real life (or at least, prior to Harry’s cleaning-up efforts over the past year). Lockhart had edited a few of his more egregiously boastful lines to something more reasonable, and Harry got to do a little bit more in the story.

One new fictitious passage had been added which Harry especially liked because he got to sound more heroic. It was a new section set just after the teenage ghost of Tim Rydel had been defeated, and the Basilisk slain. Harry and Lockhart were just beginning their trek out of the Chamber of Secrets, with unconscious students in tow. Suddenly, a writhing swarm of stone snake statues unexpectedly animated to attack everyone, except for Harry and Storm (who was wrapped around Harry’s neck). Lockhart bravely defended the unconscious students, blasting away at the statues who continued attacking despite the increasing damage to their stone bodies. For a moment, all seemed like it might be lost – until Harry ceased huddling with his fellow students and hissed commandingly at the statues in Parseltongue. Then the snakes subsided and returned to their positions on the pillars and the door, so their group could leave the Chamber in safety.

Nothing remotely like that had happened at all on that occasion, but Harry thought it sounded pretty cool, and it met his overall brief to Lockhart over a year ago that he wanted to get to use Parseltongue in the story in a way that sounded heroic.

Lockhart speculated unconvincingly in his book that the attacking serpents had initially left Harry alone because he was carrying a snake, which probably wouldn’t stop people thinking Harry might be the Heir of Slytherin, but at least it was a token effort in the right direction. Anyway, it was too late to change it now – the books were stockpiled in the stores already, awaiting their official release.

Harry was just up to reviewing Lockhart’s chapter about his “unprecedented levels of magical fatigue” after the battle, when a soft knock on the door interrupted his reading.
He quickly called out, “Just a minute!” and shooed the remaining owls out the window (all had been divested of their letters, but some were still hanging around in case he had replies for them to carry). He also quickly tossed a blanket over the scrolls on his bed. Glancing around, Harry determined that he’d made the room look as unmagical as he could on short notice, barring the ink and quill set out on his rickety desk. He cautiously opened the door, and somewhat to his surprise Dudley sidled into his bedroom.

“Dudley? Everything alright?” he asked worriedly.

“Yeah,” Dudley said softly, closing the door behind him. “I just wanted to tell you, I want to come to that garden party. The wizard one.”

“You told your parents it was stupid. I thought you were going to the arcade?”

“Nah, I just said that to get them off my back,” he said with a dismissive shrug. “So, can I come? I don’t know where it is or nothing.”

“Yeah…” Harry said slowly. “Yes, we can do that, we can take the Knight Bus – even Muggles can catch that, I think. It’s like a regular bus, but faster. It’s enchanted to weave through traffic rather strangely, so it might be a bit of an odd ride for you, but it’ll get us there. Are you sure, though? Aunt Petunia will go completely mental if she finds out.”

“Well then, we’ll make sure she doesn’t find out, right?”

“Deal,” Harry agreed excitedly.

Chapter End Notes

Protection Charm Your Mind: A Practical Guide to Counter Legilimensy – Please note that the title for this book is spelt like that in the canonical material (the Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them film). It is thus a deliberate typo to match the source material and won’t be corrected. It also helps indicate the age of the book – standardised spelling took a while to catch on in the English language.

Lacus – You were quite right that a certain someone was not impressed with Lockhart’s story about his defeat of the evil ghost in the diary belonging to the incompetent young wizard, Tom Riddle. Some ghost-written edits were required. ;)
Harry and Dudley take the Knight Bus to the Weasley family’s garden party.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday 2nd July

On Saturday after lunch Harry headed off, allegedly straight to the Weasleys’ garden party. First, however, he was actually on his way to rendezvous with Dudley at the local park. He carried a backpack stuffed with the cool, red dragonskin leather frock coat Sirius had given him, plus the matching red trousers and the frilly white shirt. He hadn’t had many chances to wear a fancy but officially “casual” wizarding ensemble, and he thought a garden party might be the perfect occasion. He’d also packed a pointed hat – a gentleman shouldn’t attend an outdoor event without a hat. Dudley waved excitedly from a park bench when he saw Harry arrive. He was wearing Muggle clothes of course, including the new black leather jacket that he’d gotten for his birthday and a Smeltings school sports cap, since Harry had insisted that hats were a necessity (Dudley hadn’t wanted to wear the official school straw boater with a leather jacket and jeans).

Harry changed into his wizarding outfit in the park’s loo, and then they were off to the kerb where Harry stuck out his wand and summoned the Knight Bus. It arrived almost instantly, with a loud bang and a grating screech of brakes.

“Let’s go, then! What do you think of the bus, hey? Pretty virulently purple, right?” asked Harry cheerfully. “Wizards love purple and green. They’re very traditional colours, apparently.”

“Well, where is it? Is it coming soon?” Dudley asked impatiently, staring at the road blankly as if there wasn’t a towering triple-decker bus right in front of him.

“Good mornin’ Mr. Potter!” the purple-uniformed young conductor said enthusiastically, his face perking up the instant he spotted Harry, like it had made his day to see Harry again. “Where are you off to t’day? Need any ‘elp shooing the Muggle away? Don’t worry about ‘im, the silly bugger. ‘E won’t see nuffin. They never do. Good ward on the bus, innit?!”

“It’s fine, he’s my cousin,” Harry explained. “He’s coming with me today. But… he can’t see the bus?”

“Who are you talking to?” Dudley asked suspiciously, looking around in bafflement. “Is there someone invisible here? Is there something on the road? Is the bus invisible?” Dudley squinted at the road, slowly turning his head back and forth as if he was seeing something out of the corner of his eye but couldn’t quite spot it clearly.

Stan Shunpike looked a little uncomfortable as realisation dawned that he’d just accidentally insulted the Boy Who Lived’s cousin. “Oh, right. Well ah… just grab your cousin’s ‘and then, and ‘elp the poor fella onto the bus. Just like you’d take ‘im into the Leaky Cauldron.”
Harry grabbed Dudley’s hand as instructed, and there was a sudden gasp from Dudley as from his point of view a massive bus suddenly blinked into existence, complete with a spotty conductor grinning amiably at him. Dudley swore colourfully in shock, and Harry winced at his language.

He gave an apologetic grimace to the conductor. “Sorry Stan, he’s just a bit surprised.”

“Quite alright, Mr. Potter. Pefec’ly understandable if you’re no’ used to it. Where to?”

“Ottery St. Catchpole, please. The Burrow, thanks, or as near to it as you can get us.” Harry counted out a Galleon and nine Sickles, and he and Dudley both settled down in the squashy armchairs that wizards considered good seats for a bus, with a cup of hot chocolate each to drink during the ride. As the bus bounced along the road like shock absorbers were too good for wizards to deign to use, he was certainly glad that there was some kind of anti-spill charm on the mugs to keep the beverages from sloshing all over their laps with every bump in the road.

Dudley thirstily gulped down his hot chocolate in seconds – that part of the trip he clearly liked – but the rest he found very nerve-wracking. The odd jumps the bus made, and the driver Ernie’s extremely creative interpretation of road rules, made for a terrifying view out the window. Harry was used to it now after repeated exposure, but Dudley was not.

“We’re going to crash! We’re going to-” Dudley yelled out in panic at one point as the bus screeched through an impossibly small gap. “How did we not crash?”

“Magic,” Harry said, with a cheeky grin.

“I want to get off,” whimpered Dudley. He’d closed his eyes so he didn’t have to look anymore at the horrifying view out the windows.

“I’ll see if I can hurry us up,” Harry said, sympathetically. He wandered off to tip the conductor – or to be more honest, to quietly bribe him – to get their stop bumped up in the queue. Five minutes later they were at the Burrow.

“I did not like that,” Dudley said crossly after the bus had screeched away.

“If you think that was bad, you should try getting money out at the bank!” Harry laughed. “It’s like a rollercoaster ride.”

“Yeah, right,” Dudley scoffed. “Pull the other one.”

Harry spotted a house that could only be ‘The Burrow’ the instant he and Dudley hopped off the Knight Bus. Tucked amidst ordinary cottages was a teetering construction several stories high, which was so crooked that only magic could explain how it defied all architectural and gravitational laws that should’ve seen it collapse into a pile of rubble and planks. It looked like it had once started out its life as an extremely plain cottage of rough grey stone, and subsequently been expanded on several times in a variety of styles with different materials. Five chimneys were perched on top of the predominantly red roof.

A few fat brown chickens were pecking their way around the yard, which was edged with a thick hedge. Percy, Ron, and Ginny were all waiting just inside the wooden gate to the property. The two youngest Weasleys, who were dressed in Muggle clothes except for their pointed hats, gave Harry an excited wave when they spotted him, while Percy, dressed in a more wizarding-casual outfit of trousers, a frilly white shirt, and a red waistcoat, nodded in their direction with more restrained courtesy.
“Can you see the house?” Harry asked Dudley curiously. “And the redheads waving to us?”

“Yeah,” Dudley said with a shrug. “Bit boring, isn’t it? Let’s just give them a wave and have a look around the village.” He looked absent-mindedly down the street as if planning to wander off, and Harry grabbed his hand.

“Have another look at the house now, Dud.”

Dudley gave a slack-jawed gasp as the house’s true appearance revealed itself. “Whoa! Look at that thing! How does it stay up?”

Harry grinned as he opened his mouth to answer, and Dudley rolled his eyes and said in unison with him, “Magic.”

Once they were inside the gate, Ron leapt in to do the introductions before anyone else could get a word in edgewise, to his brother’s obvious annoyance and his sister’s relief. “Welcome! You must be Dudley Dursley, right? I’m Ron Weasley, and this is my brother Percy, and that’s Ginny.”

As she was introduced Ginny spread out the green skirt of her slightly-too-small cotton dress, and gave a tiny curtsey, with her eyes fixed firmly on Harry.

“Percival Weasley, son of the Sacred House of Weasley,” Percy said rather pompously, holding out his hand for Dudley to shake. “Pleased to meet you, my good sir.”

Dudley let go of Harry’s hand and wiped his sweaty palm on his trousers before awkwardly reaching out to shake Percy’s hand. “Uh, Dudley Dursley, son of the Sacred House of Dursley?” he said tentatively.

Percy winced.

“Uh, not really,” Harry corrected. “Best leave out the ‘sacred’ part – that’s for pure-blood wizarding families.”

“Sorry,” mumbled Dudley.

“Dad will go mental if he hears you going on about that pure-blood rubbish,” Ron warned.

“Did I or did I not just welcome a Muggle to our house? Good manners aren’t the same thing as bigotry!” sniped Percy. He turned his back on Ron pointedly and smiled at Harry as he led them around the back of the house.

“There is more room outside so we’re eating in the garden. As well as yourselves and the Prewetts we have the Diggory and Lovegood families coming too,” Percy said loudly over the top of his brother’s quiet grumbles about so-called ‘sacred’ families and how Percy sounded like a stuck-up prat just like Malfoy. “Your godfather is coming as well, Harry. Did you know our branch of the Weasleys and the Blacks are related? I believe Mr. Black would be a third cousin to myself and Ron.”

Harry’s eyes rolled upwards in a distracted fashion as he tried to remember the Black family tree and where the Weasleys fit in off the top of his head. “That sounds about right,” he said slowly. “I know you and I and Ron are all third cousins, and so are Sirius and I, so that makes sense. It’s hard to keep track of without seeing it written down, though.”

“Septimus Weasley is our grandfather, and he married Cedrella Black,” explained Percy in an attempt to be helpful that didn’t actually assist as much as he probably hoped, since Harry couldn’t
remember in the slightest who Cedrella Black was.

“Apart from ‘magic’, how does the house stay up?” asked Dudley as they went past it. Mrs. Weasley gave them a friendly wave through the kitchen window as they passed but seemed too busy frantically cooking to join them.

“Sticking Charms, Featherlight Charms, a few others to strengthen the wood so it doesn’t break, that sort of thing,” Percy explained. “Anchored with runes. It has been added on to several times over the years, so it needs a bit of help to stay up, I’m afraid. Dad used to get someone in to check the enchantments yearly, but now Bill does it for free. William Weasley, that is, our eldest brother. He works for Gringotts as a curse-breaker and is highly proficient with runes and wards.”

“Right, magic it is,” muttered Dudley without any gratitude for the explanation.

“I guess you didn’t bring your broom?” Ron asked Harry without much hope, pessimistically eyeing his empty hands and Muggle backpack.

“No, sorry mate. I couldn’t shrink it without alerting the Ministry, and it was too big to stuff in my backpack,” Harry apologised.

“You don’t shrink a Nimbus 2000!” Ron said, aghast. “You can ruin the enchantments if you go using spells on a broomstick willy-nilly! Why didn’t you just carry it?”

“Down the street, in broad daylight? I thought about it, but I would’ve looked really weird carrying it!”

“But your dragonskin coat and hat didn’t look odd?” Ron objected.

“I had those in my backpack until we were about to catch the bus,” Harry explained.

“I think your coat looks nice,” Ginny said shyly, before blushing and looking away.

Harry pretended not to notice her pink-cheeked embarrassment as he thanked her politely, but Dudley nudged Harry in the ribs roughly and jerked his head in Ginny’s direction with a grin, to be sure his cousin hadn’t missed it. Harry moved subtly out of range of any more knowing elbow jabs.

Out in the back yard near a row of beautifully scented rose bushes in full bloom, two older Weasley boys were casting spells to conjure plain white tablecloths onto the tables and setting the table with swishes of their wands. From out of a wooden crate sitting on the grass mismatched plates and bowls went whizzing through the air to their assigned places. Dudley watched the display slack-jawed in astonishment.

“That’s amazing!” he gasped.

“Nah,” said Ron, “don’t be fooled – Charlie is muttering under his breath. Only Bill is casting silently, and anyway it’s just the Levitation Charm. We learnt that in first year.”

“Can you do that?” Dudley asked Harry demandingly.

Harry shrugged. “Yes, but not silently. I’d have to mutter too. Silent spellcasting is kind of like A-level stuff for wizards. Anyway, if I cast any spells right now at all I might get in trouble – underage wizards aren’t allowed to use magic out of school. Those two have graduated already.”

The two young men wandered over to introduce themselves. Bill was the taller of the two, with long hair tied back in a ponytail, and a dragon tooth earring in one ear. His clothes wouldn’t have
looked out of place at a rock concert – so long as no-one spotted that the leather was dragonskin rather than the more usual kind. Charlie was stocky and short – even shorter than his younger brother Ron, whom it must be admitted had sprouted like a weed over the past year. Charlie was heavily tanned with a multitude of freckles and had a shiny pink burn mark on one of his muscular arms. After their introductions they shook hands politely with Harry and Dudley, then went back to work setting up the table, folding cloth napkins into tidy decorative curls of fabric.

“Some of you should go and wait for the other guests,” Bill said distractedly to his siblings. “It must be almost time to start – we should have more people arriving any minute.”

Ron shrugged. “I was just waiting for Harry and his cousin. Someone has to be the host and chat to them, so I’m sticking with them.”

Ginny slipped off silently to wait for additional guests, and Percy followed her after a rebuking hissed aside of, “Manners, Ron.”

Ron ignored him with a roll of his eyes, and started talking with Harry and Dudley about Quidditch, enthusiastically explaining the rules to the latter.

“I should be starting as Gryffindor Keeper this year now Wood has graduated,” Ron boasted, chest all puffed out with pride. “I’ve been on the team as Reserve Keeper for the past two years so I’ll have a big advantage at tryouts. Harry was Seeker in first year, you know. And it’s a crying shame he quit because he was brilliant! Much better than Sloper or Dunbar, though she’s not as bad as I thought at first. If you got a bit of practice over the holidays, Harry, I reckon you could take the Seeker position back if you wanted. We could be on the team together! I wonder who’s going to be Quidditch Captain?”

“So there’s only one sport at your school, and Harry quit it? Figures,” snorted Dudley with a smirk at Harry. “Yeah, I think he told me about that ages ago, now you mention it.”

“I almost died when someone cursed my broom!” complained Harry. “People have died in Quidditch matches – they’re dangerous! And anyway, the practices were just too much, and too early. He made us jog, too, and you know I never loved P.E. back in school – adding broomsticks didn’t make it that much better. I wanted more time for Potions revision. I do like flying my broom for fun, but I’d rather watch Quidditch than play it, on the whole.”

“Wood worked us like house-elves,” conceded Ron. “There were a lot of practices. But you have to practise if you want to win!”

While the older Weasley siblings brought a floating procession of platters of food out to the table, Ginny escorted the Lovegood family out to the back garden.

Mr. Lovegood was wearing his best effort at normal Muggle attire – a pair of mustard-yellow slacks, a yellow Hawaiian shirt with orange and green flowers, a blue cap, and an orange-brown velvet jacket with gold embroidery. His shoulder-length platinum-blond hair reminded Harry a lot of Lucius Malfoy’s long pale locks, but in facial features there wasn’t any notable resemblance between the two men. Luna was dressed in a pink dress tie-dyed with purple rings, and wore brown leather sandals with thin long straps that criss-crossed halfway up her shins before being tied in a knot. Her straw hat was covered in fresh flowers and a small stuffed pigeon had been affixed to it somehow. Dudley was snickering as he looked at it, and Harry was relieved that at least he wasn’t pointing or saying anything rude.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you in person at last, Mr. Potter,” said Luna’s father, shaking Harry’s hand enthusiastically. “I did so enjoy collaborating with you to publish your article about Mr. Black.
That worked out very well for the poor chap, didn’t it? And I have heard a lot about you from Luna – all good of course. It is very nice of you to take her under your wing while you are both at school. Who knows what the future holds after that? Very nice coat, young man. Chinese Fireball, I believe?”

“Yes sir, so I was told.”

He shook hands with Dudley next, who choked off his snorts of laughter and tried to act more serious. “And you must be Mr. Dursley! Xenophilius Lovegood, at your service. I’ve met quite a few Muggles, you know! I used to travel abroad rather a lot. That’s how I know how to dress appropriately and blend in so well.” He gestured at his rather eclectic outfit as demonstrable proof of his claim.

Dudley eyed the long-haired hippy family warily. Luna’s hair had clover blossoms woven into her long pale plait. “Yeah… sure. Hi.”

It didn’t take long until Dudley found out Mr. Lovegood was interested in rare creatures, after which their discussion went much better. Dudley quizzed him all about dragons, and Charlie Weasley drifted over to eagerly join in the discussion. Which left Ron to be drafted by his eldest brother to take Charlie’s place and carry some bowls of food from the kitchen out to the table.

Harry chatted with Luna about her summer, the rare creatures her father had been researching, and her new earrings which looked like tiny orange radishes but were apparently preserved Dirigible plums.

At Mr. Lovegood and Luna’s prompting, after a little explanation as to where his pet snake was, Harry summoned Dobby briefly to deliver Storm to visit with him for the afternoon.

“Would you like to ssstay for a garden party? I thought you might enjoy a visit with me while I’m out with Clever-men. How are you, Ssstorm?”

“I have been very bored,” Storm complained immediately. “It has been forever sssince I sssaw you.”

“I missed you too,” Harry hissed at him affectionately. “There are sssome people here who want to admire you. Do you remember Luna? Her father wantss to look at you, he’s very excited to get to meet a Wonambi.”

“Well what do you know,” Charlie said wonderingly as he watched Storm wave his tail tip in a polite hello to Mr. Lovegood, and ‘kiss’ Luna’s hand with his snout, which made her giggle. “Do you think Parseltongue works on dragons too? They’re both magical reptiles – scaly egg-layers. Just think of the possibilities for communication and training!” His eyes gleamed with excitement at the thought.

“I’ve never tried talking with a dragon, so I really wouldn’t know,” Harry said, a little startled. “I saw one in Gringotts once, but it didn’t say anything. I’ve never heard anything from lizards… but then, I haven’t tried talking to them either.”

“We shall have to see if I can introduce you to a dragon some time so you can try chatting to it. You never know when such opportunities might arise,” he said with a broad grin and a sly look dancing in his eyes.

“I understand four feet is a decent length for a young rainbow serpent,” Mr. Lovegood said approvingly, watching the snake’s scales shimmer brightly with rainbows in the sun, and stroking
his smooth skin gently as Harry held Storm out for his admiration. “How old is Storm now?”

“Uh, I got him for Christmas in second year, and he was pretty newly hatched then. I’d say he’s a bit over a year and a half old?” Harry guessed, passing Storm over to Mr. Lovegood to hold.

“Oh, that’s an excellent rate of growth! Did you know that no-one knows their upper growth limit?”

Harry glanced at Storm a little worriedly, where he was draped over Mr. Lovegood.

“Everything I’ve read says that twenty-three feet is the maximum?”

Mr. Lovegood snorted dismissively. “Well, perhaps in modern times it is – though there still might be some giant serpents hidden away in the Outback. To get the truth, you have to look at the oral legends of the Aborigines – twenty-three feet is positively dwarven compared to some of the rainbow serpents in the tales, and I see no reason to doubt them.

“Their smaller growth now is a combination of poor environment, scarcity or extinction of the magical and mundane megafauna that used to form the prey of adult Wonambi, and of course the dreadful spectre of poaching that sees them fail to reach their true potential. There’s quite the flourishing black market in some countries for Wonambi leather – those beautiful rainbow scales are highly prized for decorative leather goods in the Far East.”

Harry and Mr. Lovegood had a good chat about rainbow serpent legends while Charlie, Dudley, and Luna listened in with rapt curiosity. Mr. Lovegood got very excited when Harry translated a fragment of a story that was as much as Storm was willing to share about his Grandmother Garranga’reli who made valleys and rivers as she passed across the land.

“The rest is secret,” Harry apologised on Storm’s behalf as he took his snake back off Mr. Lovegood to drape over his own shoulders, “because we’re not snakes, or of the right tribe. But his oral tradition – passed from mother to hatchling – says that Wonambi could certainly reach incredible size with enough time. He says he’s willing to give you an interview, however, just not about that particular story. He wants a live barramundi – not too big to swallow – as his interview fee for talking about rare Australian magical creatures or teaching more about his kind. If you’d like to pay me for doing the translating, whatever you think is fair is fine by me.”

Mr. Lovegood clapped his hands and rubbed them together gleefully, and then gave a polite bow.

“Certainly! I’m very much obliged to you both. What a marvellous article this will make! Shall we get started?” He whipped out his wand and with a muttered word a battered canvas shoulder bag covered in colourful beads flew through the air. Catching it deftly as it whizzed towards him, he fished out a blank scroll of parchment and a self-inking quill with a practiced air.

“Perhaps later, Mr. Lovegood? I think the last guests are arriving, so it will be time for supper soon,” Charlie said politely.

Mr. Weasley was indeed busy escorting the last guests in, as the Diggorys, Sirius Black, and Mrs. Weasley’s second cousin Mr. Prewett with his wife and daughter had arrived pretty much all at once. Harry noticed that Mr. Diggory and Mr. Prewett introduced themselves with bows, while Sirius (who’d dressed in Muggle-friendly jeans and a t-shirt), Mrs. Prewett, and Cedric introduced themselves with handshakes.

Percy and Ginny were chatting with the young girl from the Prewett family, who looked to be about ten or eleven years old, with a round face dotted with a light scattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks. She was dressed in a plain black casual wizarding robe and matching pointed hat,
despite the fact that her parents were wearing Muggle clothes so ordinary that even the Dursleys wouldn’t have given them a second glance. Mr. Prewett and his daughter both had auburn hair – his was cut in a short, normal style, while his daughter’s long plaited hair was a slightly duller shade. His unremarkably plain wife had shoulder-length brown hair with blond highlights that were growing out.

Mrs. Weasley and the twins joined the party last of all, as she chivvied Fred and George into circulating amongst the guests to offer glasses of homemade lemonade whilst everyone mingled. She tried to hug Harry, who was very startled by such an attempt – especially from someone he’d never properly met before that he recalled – and he swept his hat off and grabbed her hand to kiss it with a brief peck in polite greeting, ‘coincidentally’ keeping her at a safe distance in doing so and thus avoiding her attempted motherly embrace. Her soft brown eyes looked disappointed, but he felt quite able to weather that. He was doing the right thing, socially. Sending the occasional birthday or Christmas gift didn’t entitle her to hug him at will.

Sirius came over to greet Harry with a very eager grin, drawing him away from Mrs. Weasley and the others for a semi-private chat. “Harry, great to see you again! Wicked coat – I can see someone of great taste and distinction must have picked that out for you.”

Harry laughed. “Yeah, I like it. I don’t get a lot of chances to wear it, but I really do like it a lot. It was a great present.”

“I hope you’re still coming to visit in August? You know you can come earlier if you want to,” Sirius encouraged.

“I’ll keep that in mind, thanks,” Harry said noncommittally, “I’m a bit busy.” Sirius’ face fell for a brief instant, like a shadow passing across the sun, but he smiled again quickly enough.


“Is the Dog-man causing problems?” asked Storm. “Shall I bite him?”

“No, we’re just chatting about what gifts I might like;” explained Harry.

“I want a new tank. Mine is too sssmall. And ask for fresh leavess,” Storm hissed demandingly.

“A new tank for Storm?” Harry said aloud to Sirius. “If it’s not too much trouble? And some gum leaf mulch? But don’t worry about it if it’s too expensive or a bother.”

“Not at all! That’s a great start. What else?” Sirius asked. “Think bigger!”

“New dress robes?” Harry volunteered tentatively, still unused to people wanting to give him gifts beyond courteous tokens. “Percy hinted in a letter that it would be good to have new dress robes this year for school, though he wouldn’t say why. Maybe some with a little growing room. Is that too big a gift?”

“Bigger! I want mine to be the best gift!” Sirius said, as he waved his hands in the air a little too wildly. “Something no-one else will get you! Remember, I owe a year’s service to the Potter family. I have to do something to pay off that debt.”

“Hmm.” Harry thought about it, his brow furrowed in thought. What did he really need, that he couldn’t buy himself?

“A Time-Turner?” It was probably too expensive a gift, but it was worth a try. “I wouldn’t want to be any trouble, but it would be ever so useful, and I would be most appreciative of it. That would
definitely be the best gift ever that a godfather could give!” Harry used his best wheedling tone of voice, but it was all for naught, as Sirius’ face fell.

“Oh, I really wish I could get one for you. But those are very strictly controlled by the Ministry. Only Obliviators, Hit Wizards, and people working in the Department of Mysteries have access to them. It’s a wonder that Minnie got to keep hers, and that was only because it’s a family heirloom. I’ll keep my eye out for one and I’ll check the family vault, but to be honest I don’t think I’ll be able to get my hands on one. Sorry, Harry. It was a great idea, though!

“Are you having a bit of trouble with time management? Anything else I could do to help?”

Harry pondered it some more. What he really needed was more time for his studies, but that wasn’t the only issue he was going to have this year with his education. He had Muggle chemistry practicals he’d need to work on, and he didn’t have any of the necessary equipment yet. There were also other issues like needing access to electricity, and steel canisters of gas for Bunsen burners.

Harry ventured hesitantly, “What if I have an idea, but… it’s maybe against school rules? Just a little bit?”

Sirius grinned toothily at him. “I’m digging your idea already. Hit me with it.”

“‘Digging’?”

“It’s Muggle slang! It means I like it!”

“It’s not Muggle slang anyone still uses. It’s old-fashioned.”

Sirius scowled. “Not again. Tonks told me no-one says ‘groovy’ any more either. I got old when I wasn’t looking. And now what’s hip is all different. It’s not fair.” He crossed his arms sulkily.

Harry gingerly patted him on the shoulder in an attempt to comfort him. “I still think you’re cool. And leather jackets and motorbikes are still very cool and popular.” A little buttering-up never hurt when asking for favours.

Sirius perked up right away. “Aw, thanks Harry! Now, tell me your gift idea. The rule-breaking, possibly illegal one. I promise not to snitch on you even if I won’t go along with it – Marauder’s honour.” Sirius gave a crisp salute like he was in the navy.

“Um, so let’s say, hypothetically, that I was considering sneaking away from Hogsmeade on a weekend, to go somewhere else… Or, I wanted to smuggle things into Hogwarts. But nothing illegal! Just not… strictly school-approved. Do you think that would be a problem?” Harry whispered.

“Probably not. I wouldn’t recommend more than one bottle of Firewhisky a week, though. It’s strong stuff.”

“It’s not Firewhisky. It’s maybe kind of boring? Uh… you see, I need somewhere to do practical lessons for Chemistry this year. It’s a Muggle science speciality – I’m studying by correspondence. I guess… if you could help me get some equipment for that, or help me find somewhere I can do it at a Muggle town near Hogwarts I know of – Grantown-on-Spey – without getting in trouble, that would be really awesome? Or I could hide it at Hogwarts, if I can smuggle it in there in the first place – I know a room I can stash stuff in. That would certainly count as a proper service to the Noble House of Potter,” he urged.

“Some of the things I need to get are too big to smuggle into Hogwarts, and I’m not sure magically
shrinking a canister of flammable and possibly explosive liquid – for a Bunsen burner – would be a good idea due to pressure issues even if I could cast the spell outside of Hogwarts. Which I can’t since I’m underage.”

Sirius looked generally intrigued, but rather confused. “What’s being underage got to do with it?”

“You know – the Trace. I can’t cast spells outside of Hogwarts without the Trace on my wand reporting it to the Ministry.” Mostly. Not counting a few workarounds like using a different wand, or an official home tutor.

“Huh. Must be a new rule. We didn’t have that back in my day,” Sirius said. “Or if we did my family and the Potters all ignored it. What a downer. How do you get your summer homework done, then?”

“It’s just a few essays. Nothing practical like spellcasting or potions.”

Sirius snorted. “Boring,” he said. “Well, send me a list of everything you need, and how to contact your Muggle professors, and I shall look into it and see what I can figure out for you.”

With everyone else gathering for supper, Sirius led Harry over to sit down next to him at the table. Harry ended up with Sirius on one side of him, and Dudley on the other. The Prewett family were led to sit opposite Harry and Dudley, while Mr. Weasley and Mrs. Weasley sat at the ends of the very long tables that had been pushed together.

It was a casual help-yourself supper that reminded Harry of the Hogwarts feasts, and the spread looked simple but delicious. There was chicken-and-ham pie, a couple of roast chickens, steaming hot jacket potatoes, mushrooms cooked with fragrant herbs, and three different kinds of salad. Harry eagerly helped himself to a large plate of food, which Mrs. Weasley seemed pleased to see. But Dudley looked a little worriedly at the spread.

“What do you think I should eat, Harry? I don’t want to ruin my diet, and I already had hot chocolate today.”

Harry looked at his cousin’s anxious face with surprise. “I guess I thought you just wouldn’t worry about your diet today. You always complain about it.”

Dudley scowled piggishly at him. “Shut up! If I wanted to, I could buy all the chocolate bars I want whenever I leave the house. I don’t like dieting, but I don’t want to be… I want to get fitter. For boxing. So help me pick something good!” he demanded.

Harry obediently filled up Dudley’s plate for him with a chicken breast without the skin, a big pile of garden salad, some of the tomato salad, mushrooms, and a small jacket potato.

“That looks good,” Dudley said, contentedly tucking in.

“You should thank him,” Sirius said to Dudley, with narrowed eyes.

“Wha’?” said Dudley, mouth full of half-chewed lettuce and chicken as he spoke. “Harry likes cooking an’ all that stuff. It’s his job.”

“Is it really. Do tell,” Sirius snapped.

“It’s okay, Sirius. Let it go,” Harry said, not wanting a fight over something so unimportant. Sirius scowled, but didn’t persist in his rebuke. Instead he turned his back to Dudley and talked with Mr. Diggory on his other side.
Mr. Weasley was having the time of his life chatting about “eckeltricity” and how batteries worked with Mrs. Prewett – a real live Muggle whom it seemed was one of very few he’d ever met socially, apart from the Grangers (which hadn’t gone so well in the end). Whether the feeling was mutual was dubious, however. Dudley got drawn into their conversation and seemed to be having fun being treated as a highly knowledgeable expert, but Mrs. Prewett was looking increasingly grumpy and opted out of the discussion discreetly when her husband gave her the opening of being introduced to Harry.

“Magnus Prewett, at your service, young sir. May I introduce to you my wife Emily Prewett, and our daughter Mafalda Isa Prewett,” he said rather formally, with a nod of his head. Bowing or shaking hands across a table was rather difficult, after all.

“Harold James Potter, Heir of the Noble House of Potter,” Harry said politely, with a return nod, and a tip of his hat to the ladies. “And this is my cousin, Dudley Dursley.” Dudley gave a vague wave and returned to explaining the purpose of a rubber duck to the eagerly attentive Mr. Weasley.

“Our daughter will be starting at Hogwarts this year,” Mr. Prewett said.

“I’m really looking forward to it!” the young girl said eagerly. Her mother sighed, a little sadly.

“There’s still time to change your mind,” Mrs. Prewett said to her.

Mr. Prewett narrowed his lips. “I am afraid she has to go.”

Mrs. Prewett didn’t look completely convinced. “She’s only eleven. I still don’t like the idea of sending her to a boarding school, and that goes double for one without a phone.

“I’m going to miss you so much, sweetheart!” She hugged Mafalda around the shoulders, and her daughter leant into her.

“I have an owl, remember! I promise I’ll send lots of letters,” the young girl reassured her mother. “I’ll be back for Easter and Christmas, too.”

“I know you will be, but I’ll still miss you,” her mother said, picking at her food. “How did you find starting at Hogwarts, Harold? I was told you were raised in an ordinary environment by your aunt, and only found out about magic later? Did you struggle with homesickness or culture shock?”

Homesickness… missing his family? Not really. “Uh… more the culture shock, I think. I didn’t really want to be there at first, but they didn’t really give me a choice. I got used to it, and I love being there now. It was great once I’d made a few friends and settled in, and meeting Pansy helped too – she’s my second cousin. It’s nice to have family around and she helped explain a lot of wizarding culture to me. She still does, in fact – there’s more to learn than you might think at first.

“I understand you’re related to the Weasleys, Miss Prewett?” he continued.

She beamed at him as she replied, “Yes, my dad is Mrs. Weasley’s second cousin, so the Weasley kids and I are third cousins. Dad says he’s asked them to watch out for me.”

“Formally as patrons?” Harry asked.

Her father fielded that question, and replied, “Informally so. They are all rather young for that sort of thing, of course. Miss Weasley has kindly agreed to keep an eye out for Mafalda, and to help her out with any difficulties she may experience.”

“Are there any other Prewett cousins at Hogwarts at the moment?” Harry asked, but his question
seemed to unfortunately hit a sore spot for Mr. Prewett.

“No,” he said curtly. “That is, none I know of. I’ve kept my surname despite some disagreements on the matter, but the Prewett family doesn’t acknowledge us, and I don’t acknowledge them. They’re ashamed of having a Squib relative who works as an accountant and married a Muggle.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean any offence,” Harry apologised. “I just thought since you’re here…”

As Mr. Prewett looked disgruntled, Sirius joined in with an explanation. “Molly isn’t the Head of the Prewett family, and even if she was, a party invitation alone still wouldn’t count as formal familial recognition by a House.”

They chatted amicably over dinner about how Sirius had been disowned by his mother for “being a disgrace to the family in almost every possible way”, and how his mother’s attempt at cursing him with Damnatio Memoriae had failed.

“It is a powerful curse that removes your name,” explained Sirius, “and irrevocably casts you out of a House. It erases you from recorded history – so you won’t be remembered. You’re not entitled to keep your surname, and any paintings, photographs, or records of you are usually magically damaged or destroyed. It can affect your magic too – it makes it unstable until you claim a new name.

“It is supposed to be one of the worst punishments imaginable, worse even than execution. It was once reserved for the evillest Dark Lords and the worst emperors in Roman history – records of you are removed from anywhere they appear. Ancient Egyptian wizards loved that curse too. My family’s always been rather liberal with that curse, and when I refused to go along with a hmm… a family alliance… and ran away from home, my mother blasted me off the family tree. She managed to burn a hole in the family tapestry, but the curse didn’t take of course. I’ll show it to you when you visit, Harry,” he promised, noticing Harry’s interest.

“My mother was a bit… unbalanced, as she got older. She tried cursing quite a few of us – anyone in the family who crossed her. Uncle Alphard got in trouble for giving me some Galleons so I could pay for the last year of Hogwarts myself, without relying on the generosity of the Potters. Back then, Grandfather Arcturus was Head of the family, so the curses – against both me and Uncle Alphard – just fizzled. Mother just didn’t have the authority she thought she was entitled to have.”

“Were any Squib relatives cursed?” Mr. Prewett asked curiously. “I was disowned, but not cursed like that. Of course, the Prewetts have always prided themselves on being a Light family – very modern and proper witches and wizards who don’t dabble in curses or other Dark magic, a lot of them Christians to boot.”

“Oh, of course they were cast out. We’re a pure-blood family, so of course to keep that reputation somewhere along the line someone successfully disowned and cursed Great-Uncle Marius, who was a Squib. And a few generations back there was Iola B-,” Sirius made a brief choking noise, unable to finish the name. “Iola Hitchens, that is. She married a Muggle - Bob Hitchens. She was disowned for that of course – sulllying the family line. Before our time.”

“They cursed people just for that? You can’t even say her old name?” Miss Prewett asked, jaw agape.

Sirius shook his head. “No I can’t – they did the job properly. I think Phineas Nigellus Black was Head at that time, back in the late 1800’s. Former Headmaster at Hogwarts.”
“I’ve met his portrait,” Harry said. “He seemed nice…”

“I told you,” Mr. Prewett said waringly to his daughter. “Squibs, Muggle-borns, and even half-bloods are very poorly treated in magical society. You’ll have to make friends and allies at school and watch your step.”

His daughter nodded gravely. “I will.”

“Stop scaring her, Magnus!” his wife rebuked with a quiet hiss, mouth in a thin angry line.

Her husband’s brow furrowed stubbornly. “Better she be braced for troubles than blind to them.”

“It won’t be that bad. There’s prefects you can turn to if there’s any trouble, or you could talk to your Head of House. I’ll help too,” volunteered Harry. “If there’s any bullying or anything, just let me know. I’ve got friends in all the Houses, so if there’s trouble, no matter what House you end up in I’m sure I can let one of the older students know to have a word with someone. I promise it’s really not that bad at Hogwarts – my friend Hermione is Muggle-born and she loves it there. I expect it’s a lot better than it was back in your father’s day, Miss Prewett, when the war was on? Times change.”

“Perhaps,” Mr. Prewett said grudgingly.

Then he glanced at his wife and caught her wide-eyed meaningful look, and added, “I’m sure it is. Things will no doubt be greatly improved since my time, with You-Know-Who dead and gone, and his followers disgraced. And Dumbledore’s in charge – he’s a good man and firmly in the Light.”

“Thank you for your offer of help, Harold,” Miss Prewett said gratefully.

“Umm, keep in mind in wizarding culture you stick to using last names until you’re officially friends. Ah… Well, never mind,” backpedalled Harry, looking at her suddenly woebegone face, and noticing her mother’s quiet upset glare in his direction. “I suppose you can call me Harold if you like, Mafalda.”

She beamed happily, and it lit up her plain round face with a smile that was rather catching. Ginny glared at her from a few places down the table, angrily mushing the remnants of food on her own plate with a fork into an unrecognisable mess.

After a lovely dessert of home-made strawberry ice-cream and butterscotch pudding, the guests strolled to the unofficial Quidditch pitch at the back of the property, which was a grassy field with two low-set triple hoops partially hidden from the view of passers-by behind some tall pine trees. They had a small-scale game with a Keeper (Ron vs. Charlie), two Chasers (Harry and Cedric vs. Sirius and Ginny), and a Beater (Fred vs. George) for each side. There were no Seekers as they were short on both brooms and players, so the first team to a hundred points would win the game. Harry and Diggory dubbed their team the “Loyal Lions”, while Sirius, George, and Charlie were the ones on the opposing team who came up with their team name of the “Black Dragons”. Sirius had insisted he was “young at heart” and should get to join in too, and no-one had any objections.

Harry found being a Chaser was much harder than being a Seeker – he was better at catching the Quaffle than at accurately throwing it, and was adequate but not fantastic at either job.

Dudley was disappointed to find that he couldn’t so much as make any of the old enchanted broomsticks quiver, let alone leap up into his hand on command like the other kids could. After a few fruitless attempts to get a broomstick to work for him, he retreated from the pitch with a grumpy scowl. Harry consider going after him but noticed Mr. Prewett drawing Dudley aside for a
Harry looked around for Dudley and Mr. Prewett but couldn’t see them nearby. He spotted Luna chatting with Cedric, Mafalda, and Ginny about the game. Meanwhile Sirius seemed to have done something to impress the Weasley twins, who were bowing deeply to him as if they were acknowledging a life debt (according to the standards for bowing Pansy had drilled him in). Sirius just looked amused at their antics, so he guessed they were just joking around.

“Hello Harry,” Percy said politely, wandering over and drawing his attention. “Mr. Lovegood said to let you know he has taken your snake to go hunting for fairy eggs in the garden, which he seemed sure Storm would find a great delicacy. They should be back shortly. Excellent game, by the way.”

“Thanks Percy. Being a Chaser was tougher than I thought. How’s work at the moment?” he askedcourteously.

“I find myself buried in paperwork discussing the impacts of cauldron thickness on cauldron leaks and brewing. I have been asked to research the topic before writing a report proposing an international standard on the matter.” Percy’s face was a mixture of pride and nervousness as he spoke, and he fidgeted anxiously with his glasses as he spoke, cleaning them with a handkerchief.

“Huh,” said Harry thoughtfully, “does cauldron thickness have much of an impact on the quality of the potion itself?”

Percy looked a little more relaxed after Harry’s response, and put his glasses back on. “No, not that I have come across in my research, unless there has been some problem with fraud going on – such as gold plating over pewter instead of a solid gold cauldron, for instance. That can ruin expensive potion ingredients, as well as being a major issue of financial fraud. The primary issue is that some potions are corrosive when misbrewed, or during some particular stages of brewing for rare potions, and that can have catastrophic effects if a cauldron cracks so that potion leaks over the brewer or an open flame. Cheap imports have been a problem in England lately.”

Harry nodded. “Interesting. And how are you finding working for Mr. Crouch in general?”

“Marvellous! He is so well organised and professional, it’s fantastic,” Percy gushed. “I did have a little bit of a problem with him calling me ‘Weatherby’ for a while. Interestingly enough, it was your card that did the trick there – he read it out of curiosity one day and realised my surname’s actually Weasley. So thank you again for that.”

Harry’s face screwed up in confusion. “Well I’m glad it helped, but how on earth could he make a
mistake like that when your family is one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight? And doesn’t he know your
dad? I thought he introduced you to Mr. Crouch. He works at the Ministry too, right? In Muggle
relations?"

Percy sighed and shook his head sadly. “Apparently Mr. Crouch has said father’s name wrong for
years. The issue just hasn’t come up often because he mostly calls him ‘Arthur’. Father said he
finds it funny. Also, at first when he was new to the Ministry father didn’t want to offend by
correcting a senior Ministry member in front of everyone in a meeting. He said it also became just
too awkward to correct him after it had gone on for a while. I didn’t know how to mention it
politely either. It was all very embarrassing when the truth came out.”

Harry murmured his sympathy.

“On the whole though, cauldron bottoms and name issues aside, it’s been a very exciting
department to work in. There’s a very interesting international project I’ve been helping organise,
but it is classified information until such time as the Ministry sees fit to release it.”

“Nothing problematic I hope?” asked Harry with a worried frown, thinking of the Dark Lord, and
possible international wars.

“Quite the contrary, it should be something rather marvellous,” Percy reassured.

Harry decided his duty of courteous chat was done – not that it had been a hardship – and was free
to move along. “Well, it has been nice to catch up, but if you’ll excuse me I was looking for my
cousin – I saw him last with Mr. Prewett?”

“I think they went inside the house with mum,” Percy volunteered. “She was giving them a tour.
I’ll let Mr. Lovegood know where you are, if I see him before you do.”

Harry nodded his thanks and headed off in search of them. He found Dudley on the front lawn
lumbering around trying to catch garden gnomes so he could fling them over a hedge. Dudley gave
him a bit of a wave when he saw him but then disregarded his appearance, quite gleefully occupied
in swinging gnomes around by their feet.

Harry wandered over to where Mr. Prewett was watching Dudley with an indulgent smile.
“Everything alright?” Harry asked.

“Yes. Your cousin just found it a difficult moment. He hadn’t realised most enchanted objects
wouldn’t work for him. I wonder that you didn’t warn him,” he said rebukingly.

“Thank you for talking with him. I didn’t know that about broomsticks myself, you know,”
explained Harry. “I was raised in the Muggle world, not knowing about magic until I turned eleven.
I don’t know a lot about Squibs and how things are different for you, except well… the obvious
stuff. And that most potions won’t work and can be dangerous to ingest – I know a fair bit about
that.”

Mr. Prewett nodded, looking less cross. “Your cousin isn’t a Squib – he’s a Muggle.”

“What’s the difference – how can you tell? Is that something you’ve researched?”

“I suppose it’s just semantics, really. In either case his citizenship classification would be Peregrini,
so really the difference is moot. A Squib has at least one magical parent, while a Muggle has two
non-magical parents. Neither have any magical ability – though some claim that Squibs have some
tiny amount of magical power that we simply do not have the capability to access properly.”
His brow furrowed deeply as he frowned. “I can’t tell you how many times I was encouraged as a child to just try harder, as if I could stop being a Squib by simply not being so lazy.”

“Was it hard? Growing up different to everyone around you? Was there a lot of prejudice?” Harry asked, thinking of how his aunt and uncle had always known he was different, even though they’d never said anything to him.

“Yes, it was hard. It still is, now I’m back. I have been extremely happy in the Muggle world – I turned my back on the wizarding world in my late teens, and never looked back. I have returned for my daughter’s sake. I want to ease Mafalda’s way as much as I can, and I can’t do that without re-establishing connections. I can’t even take her to buy her school supplies without help for God’s sake!”

“Why not?”

“I don’t have a wand. Even should I manage to push past the Muggle-Repelling Charms on the Leaky Cauldron I can’t even open the entrance to Diagon Alley without a wand. I have to beg someone to help me, like a child would. If you are a Squib you are reliant on the kindness of others for so many things in life. Everything from hailing the Knight Bus, to household tasks like cleaning clothes, or needing someone to fill a bathtub for you - for many tubs are unconnected to any Muggle-style plumbing. There’s no need for proper plumbing when you can use magic to produce water. Even something so simple as walking around the Ministry becomes nigh impossible, thus blocking off a multitude of daily tasks and further hampering your chances of employment.”

Seeing Harry’s puzzled look, Mr. Prewett added, “Have you never visited there? You need to have your wand checked and registered on entry, to be authorised to move around the building. To do otherwise is to be suspected of planning some wrongdoing or being a criminal trying to escape identification, like a Muggle refusing to show their driver’s licence to a police officer.”

“You can’t just explain you’re a Squib and don’t have a wand?”

Mr. Prewett sighed. “Yes, you can. And after some suspicious and lengthy questioning, you then receive the pity or scorn that is a Squib’s lot. Either sneers, or the condescending wonder that you ‘look so normal’ and they wouldn’t have guessed.”

His face screwed up in an ugly scowl as he continued, transforming his generally mild face into something unpleasant. “You can’t understand what it was like, being a literal second-class citizen, knowing your rights are less than those of everyone around you – not allowed to vote, marry freely, or work for the Ministry. But it was the daily prejudice that ground me down the most, even when people were trying to be nice. The unwanted advice never ended – from Ministry staff, or shopkeeps, and an endless stream of family friends. Advice about Kwikspell courses, or how someone’s Healer recommended scrupulously avoiding iron and strict avoidance of Muggles and their world. Someone else’s advice that their cousin swore by eating Flobberworms or dragon liver to improve magical skill. But none of it helped, of course! And oh, the surprised observations that I was ‘still’ wearing robes and wasn’t it so brave of me to try to be part of the wizarding world. Every slur and every thoughtless compliment saying that I didn’t really belong – that I would always be an outsider. A Squib who’d never spark with magic. A Peregrinus – a foreigner in my own land that I was born into.”

Harry took a wary step backwards as he watched the man glower and saw how his hands clenched in anger brought on by his reminiscences. “I’m sorry,” he said apologetically, “I’ll try to never act like that, I promise. I’m sorry I upset you.” He’d kind of felt like that in reverse, trying to be normal and fit into the Muggle world. He didn’t know if he should say that or not, however. He didn’t want to make Mr. Prewett any angrier than he already was. So he fell back on his default strategy –
take the blame and apologise.

“Oh, it’s alright, I’m not mad at you, honestly. Sorry I got carried away there,” Mr. Prewett said, plastering on a smile. “I’m just… upset at having to come back to it all, after I swore to all my family I’d never return. But I will, for Mafalda’s sake. My daughter matters more to me than clinging to a bitter old vow.”

“It’s fine, it’s not a problem. It was very interesting and enlightening to hear,” Harry said politely. “Well since Dudley looks fine here I might go looking for my snake if that’s alright with you. Storm said he was happy to go off with Mr. Lovegood while I was flying, but I’m getting a little worried and I’d like to check up on him.”

“I saw them pass by earlier, headed for the duck pond,” Mr. Prewett said, pointing off into a clump of trees. “I’ll help you look for them.”

Harry called out to his pet in a combination of English and hisses in Parseltongue as he headed off into the small patch of woods. “Ssstorm! Where are you? Storm! Mr. Lovegood!” Mr. Prewett trailed along with him.

In the distance through some trees he heard a voice call, “Mr. Potter? We’re at the pond!”

“Harold? Over here! I caught two fairies – did you know they are very tasty?”

Harry found the two of them by the lily-filled pond. Mr. Lovegood looked relieved to see him arrive, and a little frazzled with messy hair and a few small new tears in his shirt.

“Your snake keeps trying to eat the fairies, and they’re trying to bite him of course, and some have grabbed thorns to attack him with,” Mr. Lovegood explained, pausing to cast another Shield Charm. “I don’t think he quite realises that the only reason they’re not stabbing and biting him is because I keep shielding him and disarming them. And he won’t let me pick him up!”

Harry felt a bit sick. Eggs were bad enough. Fairies were smart. They might be a little bit more like chirping insects than the sentient butterfly-winged people of fairy tales, but they were still semi-intelligent, early tool-using creatures. But he knew that Storm wouldn’t really care about that. Storm’s commitment to not eating humans (when he would be big enough to do so) stemmed more from his repeated promises to Harry and a liking for a few specific “favourite” people, than from any moral objections to the concept in general.

“Ssstorm, ssstop trying to eat the fairies. You’ve had enough and they’re getting angry at you – look, they’ve armed themselvess with thornss. You don’t want to get hurt, do you?”

“Thiss man is protecting me with magic,” Storm explained. “So that I can eat them sssafely. Don’t worry, Harold. He is a very sssmart Clever-man. I like him. He ssaid nice thingss about me and found me a tasty sssnack. He is one of my favouritess now.”

“He ssays you should ssstop now,” Harry said sternly. “He has other thingss to do. And I want you to come back with me – it’s almost time to go.”

Storm assented with a grumpy hiss and slithered up Harry’s leg to drape himself around Harry’s neck like a thick scaly scarf - his current preferred location to be carried.

“Well, that was a bracing experience,” Mr. Lovegood said cheerfully, as they all retreated from the angrily buzzing fairies. “I still want that interview, so long as you can keep him from lunging at me next time we meet.”
“Sorry about that.” Harry cocked his head to look down at his pet. “Ssstorm, did you try and bite Mr. Lovegood?” he chided.

“No.”

Harry hesitated as he considered Storm’s reply for a moment. Storm didn’t usually lie to him. “Did you... hisss at him or otherwise make him think you might bite him?”

“Oh. Yess, just a dry ssstrike. He tried to pick me up, and I wasn’t full yet. But of course I didn’t actually bite him. You told me not to, remember?”

“Ah. He just meant it as a warning, because he hadn’t finished eating. He says he wouldn’t really have bitten you. I’m very sorry. Anyway, we’re still happy to do that interview where I translate stories for him – I think it will be good for people to see how useful it can be to be a Parselmouth.”

“I’d advise against it,” Mr. Prewett warned. “You might not be aware – being Muggle-raised – but it’s a talent with a very poor reputation. You’ll damage your societal standing if you advertise it, possibly irretrievably with the Lighter families. Snakes have long been associated with the devil, and of course with Salazar Slytherin and some other Dark wizards. Herpo the Foul of Ancient Greece was a Parselmouth, if I recall correctly.”

“I can’t help the powers I was born with,” Harry said stiffly, “any more than you can change your own nature. I don’t think I need to be ashamed of being a Parselmouth. I like being able to talk with Storm. Besides, people already gossip about it – it’s public knowledge, and there’s even a book coming out by Gilderoy Lockhart that mentions me being a Parselmouth quite a bit. This is more like... additional damage control.”

Mr. Prewett looked startled at that, and then nodded apologetically. “I see, quite right. I wasn’t aware you knew about the talent’s reputation, and I hadn’t realised you’d thought your plan through properly. A wise decision then, young man. My apologies for making assumptions – I meant my advice for the best.”

“I understand. Thank you, sir.”

With the party generally wrapping up, Harry collected Dudley and made a round of polite farewells to everyone, starting with his hosts, and then the other adults. He wasn’t really sure of everyone’s precedence – he knew the Prewetts were part of the Sacred Twenty-Eight like the Weasleys, but if Mr. Prewett had been disowned, maybe that didn’t count? The Diggorys and Lovegoods weren’t, but for all he knew they might be Noble or Ancient families. So he just farewelled Sirius first, then all the others as he came across them.

“I’m sorry we didn’t get to chat more,” Sirius apologised embarrassedly. “Fred and George had these great products they wanted to show me – prank potions they’ve been working on, mostly. They’ve been trying to convince me to invest in their business, and I think I might. Very promising youngsters, I must say.”

“That’s alright,” Harry said. “We had a nice chat while we were eating, and a game of Quidditch, too.”

“Don’t forget about your visit, and the Quidditch World Cup! It’s going to be incredible! I’ve gotten Top Box tickets. If you change your mind and want to visit early, that will be fine too.”

“I want to see a Quidditch World Cup!” Dudley demanded.

Sirius looked uncomfortable as he apologised with dubious sincerity, “I’m sorry, the wards won’t
allow it. The arena will be heavily warded against Muggles, and Obliviators and Hit Wizards will be on patrol around the perimeter as per ICW standards. We just can’t risk Muggles seeing a hundred thousand wizards and witches assembling to watch people flying around on broomsticks.”

Dudley scowled and folded his arms. “That’s dumb, and unfair. Whatever. I don’t care.”

It wasn’t very eloquently put, but Harry thought Dudley rather had a point. What about Squibs? What about families where one partner was a Muggle, or Muggle-born families?

“Sorry, I don’t make the rules,” Sirius said, with a shrug.

After their many farewells, Harry and Dudley caught the Knight Bus with the Prewett family. Dudley lightened out of his grumpy mood as he revelled in the opportunity to teach Harry something magical.

“Squibs and Muggles who get involved with a witch or wizard can apply at your government to get a bus token,” he explained. “And you can get a magical pet like a Kneazle or Storm to touch the token for you if you don’t have magical relatives to help you, and the token calls the bus like a magic wand does. The Knight Bus was made up a hundred years ago to be nice to Squibs and old people who can’t teleport or fly, but then a bunch of people messed it up. Because they wanted it to be purple – because wizards love purple – and have comfier chairs in it better than normal bus seats, and beds for night-time, and then it stood out. So then people had to enchant it, so no normal people wouldn’t notice the bus looking weird, and that made it hard for Squibs to catch the bus, even though it was designed for them in the first place.”

“Design by committee,” Mrs. Prewett said amusedly. “It’s a curse.”

“Do you like purple, Harold? Is it instinctual? I rather like purple,” Mafalda said shyly. She flicked at the end of one of her plaits, which were tied with violet ribbons.

Harry shrugged. “Not especially more than any other colour. I guess I like red?”

Mrs. Prewett looked Harry up and down, eying his scarlet trousers and long red coat. “I never would have guessed,” she laughed.

Harry grinned. “It was a gift, and red is one of my Hogwarts House colours. That can be a popular choice for many – lots of Slytherins wear green, for instance. Generally speaking, black, purple, and green are the most traditional colours for clothing in wizarding society. I believe purple used to be an easy way to lord it over Muggles, when purple dye was super expensive, but the Colour Change Charm was easy. And there’s a Roman influence coming in there, too – purple was a high-status colour. I don’t know about why green is traditional.”

After they parted from the Prewetts in Surrey, Harry was about to head straight home before Dudley reminded him of something.

“Don’t forget to change out of your weird wizard clothes, or mum and dad will go spare,” Dudley warned.

Harry blanched in panic at his narrow escape. “Thank Merlin you reminded me, I totally forgot! I owe you one, Big D.”

He scurried into the park’s loo to change out of his wizarding clothes and back into something more ordinary.
“You’re different around them. Wizards, that is,” Dudley observed, as they walked home together.

“I guess.”

“You talk more. And you seem kind of… popular.” The amazement in his voice wasn’t very flattering, but Harry guessed it was fair. He’d never been popular at St. Grogory’s.

“I have to be different – people expect different things of me there. I’m… kind of famous. For how my parents died, as martyrs who fought this evil wizard – a Dark Lord,” Harry said, not wanting to go into detail. “Just about everyone wants me to be social, and do well in school, and dress properly.”

“Huh.”

They walked in silence for a moment, pausing in their discussion of magic-related things as a mother passed by pushing a pram, with a toddler trotting alongside her babbling in a happy lisp to her mother and baby brother about penguins.

After they’d gone past Harry asked, “Did you have fun today, Dudley?”

“I guess. The food was good, and some of them were nice – I liked Mr. Weasley, and Cedric, and Mr. Prewett. He was really nice. I liked Charlie, too – how cool is that, working with dragons? And your giiirrlfriend Ginny was funny,” he said with a teasing grin and a friendly shove that made Harry stumble and make a face. “Those gnomes were wicked fun to throw around, too.

“I can see why mum doesn’t like any of them though. Cedric’s dad talked to me extra slowly and explained everything like I was thick. And Mr. Black kept sneering at me. I didn’t like how I couldn’t make anything work, either. Like the brooms.”

“It doesn’t sound like it’d be fun to be a Squib in the wizarding world,” agreed Harry. It had sounded even more difficult a job than trying to be a Muggle in the normal world when you were actually a wizard. In both cases you were doomed to hardship and failure no matter how hard you tried. It wasn’t fair, but there you had it. That was life.

Chapter End Notes

Malfalda is an interesting almost-canonical character who was cut from JKR’s early draft of GoF during one of her rewrites. She is the magically talented daughter of the Squib accountant who is a second cousin of Molly’s. The Squib relative whom the Weasleys “don’t talk about”, that Ron mentioned on the train ride in the first book.

SirLordLonKirk – Thanks for your encouragement to feature the Squib second cousin in my fic, and your name pick.

Pom_Rania - New tank requested for Storm, thanks for your reminder that he needs one. He’s a growing snakey!

Accuracy in Fiction (Facebook group) – Thanks to all the group members who helped me refine Mr. Prewett’s attitude and conversation by sharing their personal experiences of prejudice.

Has Uncle Vernon’s behaviour been sounding painfully familiar to you? "Gaslighting is an extremely effective form of emotional abuse that causes a victim to question their own feelings, instincts and sanity, which gives the abusive partner a lot of power (and
we know that abuse is about power and control). Once an abusive partner has broken down the victim's ability to trust their own perceptions, the victim is more likely to stay in the abusive relationship.” It is an emotionally abusive technique and can be very frightening, especially as its practice causes those who are abused to doubt their own perceptions and feelings.

This second part is a message to everyone who might be in a troubled situation like this one. It is probably worth finding someone IRL to talk to about this feeling, either to confirm or deny, as one of the best ways to deal with it is to get external support and perspective.

If you need to reach out to someone and you're in the US, it might be worth calling the national domestic violence hotline at 1-800-799-7233, or the crisis text line (Text HOME to 741741 from anywhere in the United States) as they can help you reflect on the experience and connect with local resources.

If you're in Australia and this relates to your parents, eHeadspace is a support line for kids and young adults – call them on 1800 650 890 and they can direct you to support. Or for family counselling or help dealing with domestic violence, call 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732).

For other countries, if you leave a comment with the country name, I'll try to post phone numbers or text numbers where you can find resources. If you log out from this site, you can leave a comment/review anonymously, if you wish.
The Price of Fame

Chapter Summary

Harry keeps his contractual agreement with Lockhart – despite the man’s continuing absence – and attends book signings in Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley. Think of the money, Harry! People start to notice he’s left Privet Drive for Potter Cottage and aren’t impressed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’m a brave Gryffindor,” Harry whispered determinedly to himself. He was hiding out in a storeroom out the back of Flourish and Blotts, searching for a moment of calm before the book launch and premiere signing session of Battles with the Basilisk. His hands were clenched so tightly at his sides that his knuckles were turning white, and his nails were digging painfully into his palms.

“I’m comfortable talking to strangers in public, people like me, and I’m not scared of the limelight. I can do this. People aren’t going to turn on me for being a fraud and a liar. No-one’s going to yell at me or attack me. I’m not going to end up in Azkaban.” He tried to take a few deep calming breaths, but they were more like shuddering gasps. He tried to use his Occlumency, visualising his calm blue sky mental image, or the soothing routine of chopping vegetables for dinner. But his placid visualisations kept getting swept away by panicky mental scenarios where everyone at the book signing yelled at him for being a fake and a nasty lying conman, as he cowered before them. They screeched that he was a freakish evil Parselmouth, and then he was hauled off to Azkaban. He should never have gotten tangled up in that puffed-up peacock’s mess of lies. Now it was too late to find a way out.

“Think of the money, Harry,” he told himself in a stern whisper, “and your promises. It’s no worse than Lockhart’s other books, and he didn’t get in trouble for those, now did he? No-one else knows what happened down in the Chamber, anyway. You swore you’d do this, and you’re getting paid well for it. It doesn’t matter what you want, what matters is that people are lining up out there and waiting to meet you. People are relying on you.”

He cursed softly as he failed yet again to completely convince himself to calm down. He dug into his satchel and pulled out a Calming Draught, which he unstoppered and chugged down. This was ten times worse than Potter Watch, which was a breeze in comparison. He wished Lockhart was here to do this instead of him, damn the man.

“Are you finished cowering like prey yet?” hissed Storm impatiently. “I want to meet my fansss.”

“Alright, fine. I guessss I’m ready as I’m ever going to be.” Harry put on a relaxed, charming smile (aided greatly by the soothing influence of the potion) and went out to meet the public.

It wasn’t the terrifying ordeal he’d first feared, and Harry relaxed as the day went on. No-one accused him of faking anything or asked awkward questions about why the evil wizard’s name had changed slightly from Lockhart’s original retelling.
Most people were happy to meet Storm, and those who knew about Harry’s ability seemed accepting of him being a Parselmouth. A handful weren’t but remained relatively courteous in manner as they shared their dire warnings of how it was a Dark talent that he should repress. They urged him to watch out for an inherent tendency to favour the Dark Arts, and he promised them earnestly that he would. A couple of people recommended that he should get rid of his pet snake, and he just promised vaguely with a smile that he appreciated their advice and he’d give it serious thought. It seemed to satisfy them. However, most of those whom he suspected were disapproving of his talent generally just watched his snake warily from a cautious distance and kept their opinions to themselves. Or maybe those people were just scared of snakes – it was hard to tell.

Perhaps, he thought, it won’t be so bad today. After all, no-one’s had a chance to actually read the book yet.

Instead of realising his anxious fears that people would denounce him as a fraud, the most vexing issue he had to persistently deal with was the very large number of disappointed customers who’d been hoping to meet the charming Gilderoy Lockhart himself and had to settle for a lanky bespectacled teenager instead. He used Lockhart’s own recommended fan management technique of using their name early in a conversation and asking about the customers’ own lives and interests to guide the conversation away from anything difficult, and that worked out consistently well for him. Asking about which of Lockhart’s books was their favourite was a good distraction, too.

The photos were harder to endure. When Harry had talked with Creevey about splitting the proceeds for authorised signed photos, he hadn’t realised that people would want to hug him for those photos. He didn’t mind the people who wanted to shake hands with the Boy Who Lived, hold Storm, or just stand next to him. Hugging some of the little kids wasn’t too stressful, so long as he knew it was coming. But the blokes – some of them schoolmates – who wanted to put a companionable arm around his shoulders, and the matrons who wanted to give him a motherly hug were very unwelcomely intrusive, and as the Calming Draught wore off he found it increasingly stressful to tolerate. And the less said about the giggling clingy teenage girls who wanted to crowd into his personal space for their photos the better! He didn’t like people crowding him, and he didn’t like hugs – even Hermione knew that and didn’t inflict them on him too often. As the day wore on Harry perfected a technique of coaxing people into holding a copy of the book for their photo, sometimes shaking hands with him at the same time. It kept their hands busy and preserved him from being the recipient of too many affectionate gestures. Rita Skeeter stopped by for a few quick questions and wanted a photo of Harry too, and was taken aback when her press photographer had to pay a fee for the privilege, the same as if Creevey had taken one.

The easiest but most embarrassing part of the day was when various people he knew from school and elsewhere stopped by to get a book signed. Pansy asked for her copy to be signed “to my favourite cousin” and nagged him again about his promise to go shopping with her – he promised to meet up as soon as they got their Hogwarts supply lists.

Hermione ordered him to shake out his hand periodically so he wouldn’t get cramps, but in such a caring worried way that he was warmed by the attention rather than cross. Harry noticed she started reading Lockhart’s book right away after her purchase – bumping into a few people on her way out of the shop.

Millicent was escorted by her father as she got her book signed and had brought along a bright purple grasshopper in a glass jar with a perforated parchment lid as a snack for Storm, re-establishing her status as ‘favourite friend’ once more with his fickle pet, to her delight.

“No-one else brought me a gift. She is the most thoughtful friend. Tell her she is my favourite after you, and I am not hungry right now, but I may eat it tomorrow,” hissed Storm contentedly from his
pose draped over Harry’s shoulders.

The only teacher Harry saw was Professor Sprout, which was a relief as she was a friendly little soul who said she was sure Mr. Lockhart would appreciate all Harry’s help promoting his book, and had only lined up to say so and thus didn’t really need her book signed. He signed it anyway though, and she called him a good lad.

It was only a few hours until it was all over, but it felt like a lot longer. The store manager and Mr. Sayre were thrilled with the sales, and Colin was divvying up Harry’s share of the proceeds for the photos. Harry’s face ached from all the smiling, and he made a few odd faces as he stretched his mouth out and rubbed his sore cheeks. He also found that he had to shake out his hand, as it had become sore from all the autographs despite his taking Hermione’s advice to stretch it occasionally. Merlin curse those people who wanted special messages in their copies – it made everything twice as long, but he hadn’t wanted to disappoint anyone and send them away cranky. Some had already started out rather miffed due to Lockhart’s absence, even though all the advertising said it was just going to be Harry.

“Excellent work today Harry! You have quite the gift for working with the public, just like Gilderoy,” praised Mr. Sayre, shaking Harry’s aching hand. “A very profitable book launch for all of us.” Harry plastered on one last charming smile for him.

“Thank you, sir. I did my best.”

“See you tomorrow at Moribund’s in Knockturn Alley! Six in the evening – don’t forget! I’ll have a Portkey to France ready for you then, for Wednesday.”

Harry’s smile remained fixed as he promised he wouldn’t forget, then fell away again the instant Mr. Sayre turned away.

“It was a long day, wasn’t it, Potter?” Creevey said sympathetically, as he handed over a black silk bag full of coins that clinked softly as Harry tucked it away in his belt pouch. “You wouldn’t believe how many rolls of film I went through!”

“Yes, but it’s done for now. You still happy to come tomorrow? I know Knockturn Alley has a bad reputation.”

“Does it? Well, I won’t go in any pubs down there then, but I’m sure a bookshop will be fine,” Creevey said with blithe unconcern. “My dad made sure Mr. Sayre will be keeping an eye on me anyway. It’s a lot of fuss about nothing. I’m thirteen! I can look after myself.”

Harry spent the evening and the next morning relaxing at Potter Cottage. He’d left the Dursleys with smiling farewells on both sides a day earlier, though how sincere they all were would be hard for a casual observer to discern. Dudley still seemed a bit put out that Harry was leaving so soon, and Harry had promised again that he’d write regularly (and yes, help with study notes for a few subjects once school went back).

Dobby was ecstatic that Master Harry would be staying for a week, and while Harry felt a bit guilty about it he let the little house-elf fuss over him just as much as if he was Dudley sick in bed with the flu. Harry soaked in hot baths, had books fetched for him, and ate breakfast in bed. If Dobby had had his way he wouldn’t have done a single thing for himself, but Harry insisted on doing some of the cooking and Dobby agreed to it in the end, albeit with a slightly insulted air.
Anticipating the house-elf’s driven need for chores, Harry had brought a bag of dirty laundry from home for Dobby to wash, which distracted him nicely for a little while. Harry also enlisted his help in setting up a tiny household shrine in the bedroom, on top of one of the bedside tables. It was to honour his household protective spirits, the spirits of his ancestors, and Magic in general. Not that he worshipped Magic like it was a god or anything – it was a force, not a being. He just wanted to support the flow of magic through the world, and in his house in particular.

Ambrosius had recommended that the shrine should include representations of the four elements, offerings of food and wine, images of his family’s genius and of a snake, and death masks of his ancestors. He didn’t have the latter, as they just weren’t something done in modern wizarding society – at least not that he knew of – so he’d decided to substitute that last Ancient Roman component with a display of a nice photo of both his parents, extracted from the photo album Professor McGonagall had given him a couple of years before.

He fussed happily with organising his shrine for some time, filling a silver goblet with the Potter crest on it with wine for an offering and as a representation of the element of water, and placing an apple on a similarly marked ceramic plate for earth. If anyone ever spotted it and asked what it was for, it was “obviously” a bedtime snack, and he’d act repentant at being caught drinking wine (he’d actually tried a small sip – he thought it was pretty sour and disgusting). A candle was placed to represent fire, and a feather for air. A photo of his Hippocampus genius – taken by Creevey at one of the Potterwatch meetings – was displayed next to his parents’ photo, along with one of Flavia’s drawings of Storm. He got Dobby to magically tack up all the pictures on the wall behind the shrine.

Storm had argued very persistently until Harry had put his picture up. “I may not be the ssspirit of a ssserpent, but I am a very protective friend, am I not? And he said you sssnakes were a lucky thing to have on an altar. Auspiciouss,” Storm insisted, “even if they are not your family’s ssspecial clan totem.”

Despite Harry’s best attempts to keep Dobby happily occupied, even on the first day he’d arrived Dobby had started fretting about how Master Harry would be leaving soon. So, Harry had written letters to both Neville and Sirius asking if he could bring Dobby along on his visits. Neville’s formally polite welcome sounded like his Gran was proof-reading all his letters before he sent them, but it was enough to reassure Harry that it would be fine if Dobby accompanied him. Sirius’ cheerful and oddly desperate-sounding letter practically begged Harry to bring Dobby along, and the sooner the better. He got the impression that Sirius might be one of those bachelor types who didn’t know how to cook or clean for themselves.

“What is Master Harry sir wearing this evening?” Dobby asked, as soon as Harry came down for breakfast.

“Well,” said Harry slowly, “I wore my formal robes yesterday – the purple ones with the gold embroidery. But I felt a bit overdressed at the signing. Most people were just wearing casual robes, or you know, dresses or trousers. Not modern normal clothes, it was mostly just wizarding-style old-fashioned stuff. So I was thinking this evening I’d wear a casual robe – maybe with the green cloak the Malfoys gave me for Yule? And my pointed hat with the hawk feathers in it that Daphne gave me. It’s still very stylish, apparently. I saw a few people wearing them.”

“Dobby promises to have everything laid out for Master Harry after Master Harry’s bath!” he said enthusiastically. “Dobby will polish Master Harry’s boots for him, too.”

“You don’t have to, but you can if you like. You know, I really need some new trousers – I keep growing,” Harry mused aloud. “All I’ve really got that still fit properly are the scarlet ones. I guess
I’ll wait for Pansy’s threatened – ah, promised – shopping expedition. When Hermione visited last week at the Dursleys she dragged me out to get some jeans and t-shirts, but I can’t wear those in Knockturn Alley.”

The Dursleys had been on their very best behaviour for Hermione’s brief one-day visit. But somehow, she still hadn’t seemed terribly impressed with them, even though they’d generously and conspicuously given Harry lots of money as an early birthday present so he could buy plenty of clothes.

“Master Harry said Dobby can suggest things without being punished?” Dobby asked, a little hesitantly.

“That’s right,” Harry said encouragingly, crouching down to take Dobby’s wizened little hands in his own. “Well done for remembering. Please do say whatever you like.”

“Dobby could… sew up some of Master Harry’s father’s clothes for him? With hems and tucks? If Master Harry trusts Dobby to be doing this.” The house-elf wrung his hands a little anxiously.

“Do you like sewing?” Harry asked.

Dobby nodded. “Yes, Master Harry. More than… more than cleaning!” he burst out bravely.

“Dobby likes making and mending clothes. Dobby would like to knit, and embroider. But what if Dobby makes mistakes?”

“Then you know what will happen if something goes wrong? Do you remember our House of Potter rule? Say it with me,” Harry urged.

Together they chorused, “Dobby sits and thinks quietly about what he did wrong, and plans how to do things better next time. Dobby does his best to fix things, and asks for help if he needs it. Dobby doesn’t hurt himself, and won’t be punished.”

Harry felt a warm inner glow at seeing the relieved smile on Dobby’s face. The little house-elf still needed occasional reassurance. Hermione had helped him formulate the saying (she hoped it might catch on with other house-elves too) and having a “rule” about being treated well seemed to be helping Dobby a lot.

“I’ll be at another bookstore tomorrow, Dobby. I’ll buy you some books on how to knit and embroider,” Harry promised earnestly. He remembered not to flinch as Dobby flung himself at Harry’s legs with a sobbing howl of delight for a big hug.

“There, there,” Harry said comforting, giving him an awkward reassuring pat on the back. “You can knit as much as you like – I’ll give you some money to buy some wool and stuff. I’d like a new jumper, and you can make yourself one too of course if that doesn’t count as me giving you clothes. So that will keep you busy and happy at the same time.”

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That evening when the Knight Bus arrived at the Leaky Cauldron there were two extra people waiting for Harry, along with his expected escort of Mr. Sayre and Creevey. Sirius Black was standing on one side of Mr. Sayre, and was directing dark looks at the person on the other side of the publisher… Professor Snape.

_Uh oh_, Harry thought. A few people pushed past him to hop on the Knight Bus as he dragged his feet and stepped slowly off the bus. _They don’t look very happy with me._
“Harry!” Sirius said, turning to him with a tight smile. “We’ve been wondering where you’d gotten to, so I’ve come to meet you.”

Oh right, I didn’t write to Dumbledore to say I was leaving Privet Drive.

Snape’s greeting was a more restrained nod. “Mr. Potter.”

“Sirus, Professor Snape, Mr. Sayre, Creevey, it’s a pleasure to see you all again,” Harry said politely, with a tip of his feather-decorated pointed black hat. “Or is it Mr. Snape now?”

“Master Snape,” his former professor corrected. “Due to my Mastery in Po-”

“We were very worried when you took off without warning,” Sirius interrupted. “But then of course we heard about your book signings.”

Harry wondered who “we” was. Was he thinking of Mr. Lupin, or Dumbledore? Or even Professor – Master – Snape?

Snape scowled at Sirius. “I see your manners remain unchanged.”

“I can be courteous to those deserving of such efforts,” Sirius muttered darkly.

“Sirus, Master Snape-” Harry started formally, only to pause briefly for a snort from Sirius, “I assure you that while I did indeed neglect to write to the Headmaster, I didn’t disappear entirely without warning. I told the guard on my final night at home that I was departing the next day, and thus guarding services were no longer required. A Mr. Fletcher. I didn’t see him because he was under an invisibility cloak, but we talked briefly. I assumed he would pass on the message.” He’d been quite curt in his response, and Harry had a sneaking suspicion from the man’s attitude and the lingering scent of tobacco and alcohol he’d noticed around the wizard that it was the same man he’d previously accidentally set the Aurors on.

“Ah,” Snape said blandly.

“That explains that,” muttered Sirius, rolling his eyes.

“Well then, shall we be on our way, gentlemen? Time is a-wasting and we must not be tardy,” said Mr. Sayre, rubbing his hands together eagerly. “As I promised earlier, I have no objections to the addition of two extra members to our party, so you are welcome to accompany us.”

Creevey had just been watching the whole interchange with quiet fascination, but as soon as they pushed off to walk to Knockturn Alley he jogged up to Harry’s side to whisper to him. “They’ve been arguing with each other for half an hour,” he hissed quietly. “I think they both hate each other, and they both want to kind of be your bodyguard tonight or something. They both think the other should leave, and they’ve been really… Hello Professor!” Creevey finished his quiet chatter with a loud, bright greeting as Snape swooped into view.

“Creevey,” Snape said curtly, greeting and dismissing the boy in one breath. “Now Potter, you must take care this evening not to offend the patrons-”

“Fine one you are to be giving advice on how not to insult people,” sneered Sirius, coming up on Harry’s other side. Creevey slunk back to walk with Mr. Sayre, who was following them at a more sedate pace. “Now Harry, where have you been staying? You know you’re welcome to stay with me early. I have a room prepared just for you!”

Harry felt a little surge of happiness at the thought of someone making up a room for him.
“He has been at Potter Cottage, were you not aware of that? Since you are such good friends,” drawled Snape.

“Uh, yes, I am. How did you know that?” asked Harry, surprised.

“You didn’t think I’d stopped investigating the matter of your mysterious departure from the bosom of your ‘loving’ family last year merely because you had been recovered safely, did you? The Knight Bus conductors were most… helpful.”

Yes, I had actually, Harry admitted to himself. He’d thought being caught and deposited at Longbottom Manor had been the end of it. But, given how Snape had similarly ferreted out the details of his Yuletide stay at Malfoy Manor, perhaps it shouldn’t have been such a surprise.

“Harry and I are friends, Master Snape,” Sirius said, with clear emphasis on their respective levels of familiarity as evidenced by the differing usage of names.

Harry was torn. He wanted them both to be happy with him, and to not fight. “Any advice for the bookshop signing this evening? I presume you’re both planning on attending?” he asked, trying to distract them. It worked a little, and the two started arguing over the proper treatment of any hags he might encounter, as they tended to frequent Knockturn Alley.

“Be polite and friendly but don’t let them touch your hair,” Snape recommended.

“I don’t make friends with hags,” Sirius said grandly. “No-one would dare to touch your hair, Snape, so you’ll be safe in any case. Don’t worry Harry, they are dangerous but I’ll keep them completely away from you. Did you know that they literally eat babies?”

“No, they don’t. Not in modern times, at least,” Snape said with a scowling look that suggested Sirius was a drooling idiot.

Harry sighed. At least they weren’t arguing specifically about him.

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Thankfully, the two self-appointed guards (or perhaps appointed by his benevolently nosy Headmaster) didn’t hover over his shoulder once he was set up for his book signing at Moribund’s. Snape lurked in a corner of the shop behind some curio cabinets where the flickering candlelight cast shadows to hide in, relatively unseen but able to observe much of the room. Meanwhile Sirius had pressed his back against the wall behind the shop counter Harry was seated at and looked ready to hex anyone who so much as blinked menacingly in Harry’s direction, with his hand never straying far from his wand.

Before they’d opened for the evening’s event Harry got to have a little browse around the shop and purchased a few books. He bought knitting and sewing books for Dobby, and for himself he picked up his order (placed via Draco’s borrowed owl) of the Guide to Advanced Occlumency by Maxwell Barnett. In addition, he nabbed a few extra books that looked promising – two old books on the history of enchanted paintings and statuary he hoped might give him some insights into Ambrosius’ mosaic and the animated snake statues in the Chamber of Secrets, and Poisons and Antidotes by Pierre Monvoisin, which was an old leather-bound tome written in French that looked potentially useful for his medical studies.

Harry thought it was a delightful shop, if a little dusty. It smelt of old paper, and decaying leather and parchment, much like the Hogwarts library did. Antique carved wooden bookshelves made a messy maze of twisting paths through the centre of the shop, with no two bookshelves looking
alike. Gothic cabinets with leaded glass doors lined the walls, full of curios for sale – like jars of mermaid scales, cursed telescopes, and gold-rimmed self-cleaning crockery. A few rare tomes were on display chained behind the counter where curious fingers couldn’t easily reach them – Harry had seen books like that in the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts library. Any book that needed to be literally chained to a lectern was best treated with cautious respect, and with advice from Madam Pince on how to handle it. Some of the more dangerous books bit or cursed you if approached them wrong.

Harry kept away from the chained books – at least, he did once he’d determined they didn’t have visible titles on the covers to peek curiously at.

He settled into his place perched up on a high wooden stool behind the shop counter, and when the shop opened he signed copies of Battles with the Basilisk for a steady line of customers just like he had at Flourish and Blotts. But the experience of it was quite different.

For one thing, people seemed generally less interested in Lockhart’s book. Oh, he’d gotten that a little in Diagon Alley too – some fans clearly just wanted to get to say they’d met the Boy Who Lived. But… that was all they seemed to want in Diagon Alley. A brush with his dubiously earned fame, that he honestly thought belonged more rightly to his mother. They were fans who just wanted a handshake, or a photo. Here some of them wanted more.

One older witch with a loose frizz of long white hair brought in a snake of her own for him to chat to. At barely a foot and a half long, it was dwarfed by Storm’s ever-increasing size – he was currently four feet long and counting, and still had his juvenile band of pearlescent white scales ringing his neck as his mane hadn’t grown in yet. He was still just a baby, really. The visiting snake – called Fáfnir according to his owner – was a creamy brown colour with a zig-zag of darker brown scales along his back.

“It looks like it’s an adder of some kind, right?” Harry asked her interestedly, peering through the loose weave of the lidded wicker basket she’d brought him in. “Hello there in the basket. How are you in there? Sssnug and well?”

“I won’t share my tank or my food,” warned Storm.

“Sssspeaker! A Ssspeaker!” came an excited hiss from the basket-cage, and a little brown snout pressed eagerly against one of the larger gaps in the wicker lid. “Let me out and I will ssserve you, Master!”

“He is my Clever-man,” Storm said jealously. “Tell it you don’t need another sssnake familiar, Harold. You have me. You mustn’t buy it. I will eat it if you do.”

“You will not eat me,” Fáfnir hissed indignantly.

“Alright there, Harry?” Sirius asked warily, hand on his wand.

“Yes, perfectly fine,” Harry reassured him, “snakes love me, you know – he won’t hurt me. But ma’am, I must inform you that if you were planning to make a gift of him, it won’t work out well. Storm is quite jealous of a possible companion.”

“Oh no,” smiled the old woman, showing her yellowing teeth. She had a shrewd look in her eye. “I just wanted you to translate something for me. Just one question. Could you ask him what he got up to yesterday? I’m ever so curious.”

He noticed her careful avoidance of eye contact with him as soon as she’d started asking her
question. A test then – to make sure he really was a Parselmouth and wasn’t cheating with Legilimency. It was a test he didn’t see any harm in passing, however. Harry obligingly translated her question into the sibilant hisses of Parseltongue, and then translated the resulting answer into English.

“He says you should probably know that already. He spent most of the day in a basket of some kind, lined with grass and flowers. You let him out into a barn around sunset – there was a lot of straw. He’s proud to say that while you watched he caught a particularly large and tasty grasshopper, and then he chased a mouse but unfortunately didn’t catch it. Then you summoned him with magic back into his basket, which he’s still quite indignant about. Did you know he’s poisonous, ma’am? I’d take care in handling him. He’d like to go home to the meadow where you found him, but he’s a big vague on when or where that was. Snakes don’t have a great sense of time.” He stroked Fafnir gently on the snout, where it poked out determinedly through the basket, and the snake’s tongue flicked gently against his skin.

The woman bowed to him. “Thank you, young sir, for translating for me.”

“Quite alright. I trust you’re satisfied now as to my ability, ma’am?” he said.

“Yes, young master,” she said respectfully. “It all happened just exactly as you said. He is a meadow viper I caught in France a few weeks ago, and I set him to hunting mice in the barn yesterday evening, but all he got was one bug.” There was a murmur of interest at her confirmation from a few of the people further back in the line. She bowed again as she left, autographed book in hand, and Harry nervously glanced behind him at his two watchers to gauge their reactions. Sirius looked just as high-strung as he did before. Snape was hard to spot and his expression impossible to make out, but Harry thought he glimpsed an approving nod from the shadows.

He signed another half-dozen more books without any significant conversations, and with only one photo – someone who wanted Storm in the picture too, much to his scaly friend’s delight. Then there was another test, or challenge of sorts.

“Lockhart’s books are rubbish,” a dark-robed wizard said, tossing him a dutifully purchased copy to sign. No-one got to line up and meet and greet Harry without buying a book from the bookseller’s assistant stationed at the front door, according to Mr. Sayre and the bookshop owner’s rules. “You know, that, right? They’re absolute balderdash.”

The sneer on the man’s face would give Snape a run for his money. “Did you read Break with a Banshee? I’ve been to Ireland – lived there for ten years. He’s got almost no idea what he’s blabbering on about. Maybe he went to Bandon once, but I doubt he really banished their banshee without help. A lot of it.”

“I thought it was wonderful,” huffed a woman two places down in the line.

“And what’s this book going to be like, then?” demanded the wizard. “Another load of tripe, in your opinion?”

“It’s been a little dramatized, but it’s based on real events,” Harry said with a nervous smile. “If you enjoyed his other works I’m sure you’ll enjoy this one too.” He leaned slightly to the side to smile at his supporter further down the line.

“Is that so?” drawled the man. “Why are you promoting the idiot’s books for him? Don’t you have anything better to do, or a better patron than him to follow?” His brown eyes glared piercingly into Harry’s, and the familiarity of the resultant faint tickle in his mind provoked a quick reaction from him.
Harry filled his mind with fluffy clouds drifting through a peaceful blue sky and broke their gaze to glance down at the man’s hands instead. The wizard was keeping them calmly down at his sides. “Next customer, please,” Harry said, with a plastered-on smile.

“That’s all, sir,” said Sirius, warningly.

Storm’s tongue flickered out to lick at the air. “Trouble, commander?” he asked. “You ssmsmell-taste of fear.”

“Wait,” hissed Harry briefly, eyes flicking up briefly to glance at the wizard’s face, then back down to his hands again. He looked calm. That didn’t mean safe, of course. Even a happy face didn’t mean you were safe.

The man coolly left the line without any fuss, like he’d never intended anything different.

More customers passed through, a steady and patient trickle. A hag with a balaclava over her face wanted to know what he thought of _Holidays with Hags_. “Do you think we’re ‘terrifying beasts with monstrous appetites’ like in the book?” she asked in a croaky voice, while Sirius pushed off the wall to stand guard right next to Harry.

“I wouldn’t presume to judge your people on the basis of just one book, ma’am,” he said politely, but nervously. “You’re the first hag I’ve ever met, I think. Would you say you ah… enjoy raw flesh?”

“Just raw liver and the like,” came a cackling eerie laugh from beneath her knitted hood. “Sweetmeats or sweetbreads, for a sweet tooth.”

There was something wrong with her eyes. Harry couldn’t put his finger on it at first, but eventually realised the pupils were a slanted in an oval – not the completely round circles normal people had. He wondered if it was typical for hags, or if she had some kind of vision problem. He promised himself he’d look it up later – he didn’t want to offend her accidentally by asking.

“Liver from what, or who?” demanded Sirius, hand clenched tight on his wand.

“A little of this, a little of that,” she said in a croaky sing-song voice. “But not the wee babes, never no more for ages past. Not your people.”

“Then I would take your word on the matter of your diet, ma’am. I have no quarrel with your people since you have none with ours,” Harry said courteously, if warily. It seemed to satisfy her, and she moved along peacefully, nodding to the corner Snape was lurking in before she turned to leave. She hummed a quiet discordant song to herself as she went, brushing her sharp-nailed hand along the wooden shelves as she wound her way out. Harry wasn’t the only one around who found the scratching sound eerily discomforting, and he and Sirius watched her exit warily.

A witch with a scarred face standing in line near the entrance stopped her on the way out, and by the looks of things the pair exchanged a few words before the hag left the store. Harry guessed she would be one to watch, and indeed she was when her turn came to meet Harry.

She dropped her book uncaringly on the counter when she eventually reached it, eyes flicking from Harry to Sirius, to Snape, then back again to Harry. Creevey she ignored, except to glare witheringly at him when he asked if she wanted a photo, making him shrink back nervously. It hadn’t been an especially profitable evening for the young photographer, who was starting to let out an occasional yawn as the night wore on.

“And who shall I sign the book to?” Harry asked, scrawling another signature.
“You can call me… Hyndla,” she said, with a moment’s hesitance that instantly convinced Harry it wasn’t her real name. “I would be interested in knowing your opinion on the rights and dangers of werewolves. *Wanderings with Werewolves* had Mr. Lockhart curing one of lycanthropy, you may recall.”

“Yes, I do believe he ah… optimistically believed that to be so, but I heard on good authority that the relevant spell at best only brings about a temporary transformation back to human form. Also, that the spell is additionally only effective when it’s not a full moon.”

*The next full moon isn’t until Friday*, Harry reassured himself, looking at the woman’s scarred face. It wasn’t an especially pretty sight. She had the weather-beaten look of someone aged before their time, a bit like Professor Lupin. *Two nights away still. It should be enough.*

Harry said, “I understand the Wolfsbane Potion is extremely reliable in helping restore the affected person’s mind during their transformation, so I think a werewolf isn’t dangerous unless they wish to be so. Much like anyone else.”

“Few can afford that potion, Mr. Potter. But your point is taken, and I believe you have been well-informed regarding the so-called cure of the Wagga Wagga werewolf. I would be interested in hearing your stance on werewolf rights and the Werewolf Registry, if you would be so kind?”

“I’m not quite fourteen yet, ma’am, so I don’t think my opinion holds much weight with anyone,” he said with genuine modesty. “But for what it’s worth, I support werewolves gaining wand rights and full citizenship status – Cives class – rather than their existing Peregrini class status. So long as they don’t have a history of deliberately attacking and infecting people, that is. Though I suppose in such cases they could still be Cives anyway, but you know, prosecuted properly. I don’t think they should be hunted or discriminated against just because they’re infected with a magical disease, and I don’t think they need to be on a list if they’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Well said, Harry,” came Sirius’ warmly approving voice from behind him.

‘Hyndla’ smiled at the both of them. “Thank you, I’ll let people know,” she said with a slightly choked voice thick with gratitude. She also gave a flirtatious wink to Sirius that seemed to startle him. As she left, a couple of men abruptly peeled off from the waiting line to accompany her, like they had no interest in seeing Harry at all now she was leaving.

“*Did she sssmell like a wolf to you?*” Harry asked Storm. “*Like a ssstrange and wild dog, like the Professor did last year?*”

“Yess,” Storm said unconcernedly. “*She liked you – you are not-prey for her. When are the Sssnake-men going to talk to you? Tell them to hurry up. I want to meet them.*”

After hearing that, Harry was eagerly hoping to meet some Nagas in disguise somewhere in the queue. But what he actually got, once the line of customers and gawkers had trickled to a stop and the store was almost empty, were some vampires. A quick discussion with Storm (who was rather disappointed to learn that the men couldn’t turn into snakes) determined that it was their low body temperature Storm was sensing with the heat pits on his snout that had led to the confusion. That and the fact that they exuded a certain predatory air that Storm could vaguely sense but couldn’t explain properly.

“Excuse me Mr. Sanguini, but did you want to know my opinions on vampires?” Harry asked, tiredly but politely as he tried to hurry the man through a painfully long and drawn out courteous greeting full of meaningless small talk. It was almost midnight, and Mr. Sayre had already taken Creevey off to escort him in catching the Knight Bus home. These customers definitely wouldn’t be
wanting photos, after all. Harry thought he would rather like to head home himself than play odd political games with vampires.

“No,” their leader said, amusement thick in his voice. He was a tall, emaciated pale man with dark shadows under his eyes, and was dressed in wizarding-style frilly shirt and trousers, with a dark velvet waistcoat. “You’re but a child yet, and your opinions still forming. Your opinion and stance as a man grown would be of more import, one day in the future. I merely hope to form a pleasant acquaintance at this point in time, Mr. Potter.”

“Well it’s a pleasure to meet you too, Mr. Sanguini.”

“Just Sanguini. I have a gift for you, Mr. Potter. I have heard tell of your aspirations to become a Healer and thought I might offer you some rare insight into vampire physiology. For there are few Healers willing to treat our kind, and even fewer with the skill to do so successfully. Perhaps you might be interested in training in treating our kind one day, as a speciality.”

Harry perked up with interest as Sanguini snapped his fingers and a pale man in a black frock coat scurried forward to offer a package to Harry, placing it on the counter. It was a lumpy shape wrapped up in silvery soft tissue paper and tied with a green bow.

Ah, ‘Heir of Slytherin’ supporters, thought Harry.

He reached out for it but was stopped at a word by Snape. “Not yet, Mr. Potter. One moment, please.”

Sanguini rolled his eyes and smiled in close-mouthed amusement as if Snape was a child doing something adorably cute as Snape strode forth out of the shadows in a swirl of billowing black robes. The sight of the dark-clad wizard striding forward with wand in hand seemed to trigger something completely different in Sirius, however. He looked frozen in place, lost and dazed. He started absent-mindedly rubbing at his own upper arms, as if warding off a chill.

Snape eyed him warily as he slowly cast some detection spells on the parcel. Harry noticed he was careful not to point his wand in either Sirius’ or Harry’s direction, at any point.

Eventually Snape lowered his wand and stepped away again. “You may proceed, Mr. Potter.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Tch. A sad display of distrust from a fine wizard of such illustrious reputation as yourself,” said Sanguini. His face and tone of voice said he was disappointed with Snape, but Harry didn’t miss the glint of amusement dancing in his eyes.

The metallic paper made a soft crinkling noise as Harry unwrapped the package to reveal a book, and a scroll in a tube.

“Oh! Blood Brothers: My Life Amongst the Vampires, by Eldred Worple. Yes, I read this a couple of years ago – it’s very good and I’m most grateful to have my own copy so I can read it again. Sanguini… yes, I think you’re in a couple of chapters! I thought the name sounded familiar. Well perhaps I can get your autograph too,” Harry said with a smile, passing over his quill since the vampire seemed in a good humour and likely to oblige.

“Mr. Worple was the author of course, not I,” Sanguini clarified. “It is not a nom de plume of mine.”

“And I’m not Professor Lockhart,” Harry said cheerfully, “but we star in their books so it’s good
enough for a signature, I think.”

While the vampire signed his singular name with an easy flourish, Harry carefully extracted the rolled scroll from inside its thin wooden tube. It was a long parchment scroll with two wooden rollers. Unrolling it carefully, he found it was entitled *A Treatise on Vampire Anatomy and Ailments* by “A Witch” – a woman who clearly wanted to remain anonymous. The parchment was fresh and dry to the touch, rather than being like the faintly greasy-feeling scrolls at the Hogwarts library, which were often treated with some magical unguent to preserve their longevity and decrease the brittleness that came with age.

Scanning it quickly Harry saw a few rather gruesome but fascinating looking diagrams of vampire stomachs and hearts in a side-by-side comparison to normal human ones. There was also a long section listing the effects of imbibing blood adulterated with various substances, including alcohol and medicinal potions.

“Oh, there’s a section on Scrofungulus!” Harry added excitedly, as he rolled the scroll down a bit more. “I didn’t know vampires could catch that. This looks marvellous, thank you so much, sir.”

“Just a token of esteem,” Sanguini said politely. “It was no trouble at all.”

After a round of polite courtesies and farewells that felt like it took forever, Harry was free to go home. Sort of. It wasn’t sorting out the money that slowed his departure down – Mr. Sayre was handling that, and Harry had Griphook keeping an eye on the deposits. His thirty per cent share from the book signing from *Flourish and Blotts* had already gone in, he was pleased to say. No, the problem was his self-appointed minders, neither of whom seemed keen for him to go home to Potter Cottage, where he’d be living on his own.

“I’m not *alone*. I have a house-elf,” Harry optimistically objected.

“You are still not yet fourteen,” Snape argued, “not nearly old enough to run a household. Several interested parties are concerned about your welfare, Potter. The presence of a solitary house-elf as guard and guardian will be insufficient to assuage their fears.”

“If you don’t want to stay with me, Molly – Mrs. Weasley that is – offered to take you in,” suggested Sirius.

“You will have to either return to your former abode or locate *an* suitable and competent adult to act as a guardian for the remainder of your holiday,” added Snape, with a notable slur that cast doubt on both Sirius and Mrs. Weasley’s qualifications for the role. “I would be happy to suggest some names.”

“Like the Malfoys?” sneered Sirius. “A fine upstanding family of *spotless* reputation.”

“Look, it’s late. I’m already planning to stay with a few people later on – including Sirius – and I don’t want to argue about this now as I’m really quite exhausted,” Harry said, with a deliberately pitifully tired look. “I have to be in France tomorrow by midday. I guess… you can both come around to Potter Cottage tomorrow for morning tea if you want to discuss it then?”

“Can you get through the wards?” Sirius asked with a smirk at Snape, who glared at him.

“I don’t see why not,” he replied stiffly.

“You’d both probably have trouble, they’re pretty strong,” Harry said conciliatorily. “There was a Knight Bus full of tourists last week, and one of them got excited and tried to get through the gate when he saw me working in the garden. It was so rude! And a little scary. But guess what? When
the gate stuck fast and wouldn’t open for him, he tried to climb over it and it was like he bounced right off the gate, like it suddenly turned into a rubber band slingshot. He skidded right into the road and got all scraped up! The Ministry’s wards are still holding strong, for now.

“But don’t worry,” Harry added, “I’ll have Dobby – my house-elf – meet you at the gate with some amulets to get you inside.”

-000-

In the end, it was only Sirius who showed up for tea the next morning. Dobby reported that a white owl had delivered a letter from Snape sometime during the middle of the night.

Dear Mr. Potter,

I must tender my apologies for my non-attendance at your tea this morning. Upon consideration, I decided the morning would be more pleasant without Black’s constant slurs and provocations directed towards myself, which would both spoil the event and tax my forbearance; scenes might arise unpleasant to more than myself.

In Harry’s opinion it was very thoughtful of Snape to consider that in advance – he really hadn’t enjoyed how the two men had argued last night.

Let me assure you that what support I can offer to any of your decisions regarding your temporary place of residence remains available, and should you, after further consideration, still desire my attendance for morning tea then simply send a return note with my owl. (Though I confess I think it inadvisable as I believe Black will be less reasonable in my presence.)

Harry guessed he would probably know. It was a shame the two weren’t better friends, given they’d both been friends of one of his parents.

Do not let Black’s blatant House prejudice sway you against your plan to visit Malfoy Manor. Yes, I am aware of that plan, for the Malfoys are already boasting publicly of your planned stay, and I understand a small ball is planned. To cancel would be a public humiliation of the Malfoy family – and of your friend Draco Malfoy in particular – that you should hesitate to inflict. They will assuredly be on their best behaviour for your visit, so it affords almost no risk whatsoever despite what some might imply.

Harry groaned aloud. Dear Merlin, a ball! he thought with horror. He’d have to dance. There was no way out of it! Maybe it wasn’t too late. He’d write a letter begging for a dinner party instead of a ball.

You should be aware that the Headmaster, Black, and other interested parties all beg to differ with you as to the wisdom of allowing you – a thirteen-year-old – to live on your own. Supposing your finances can take the strain of paying for your upkeep, the only matter of particular concern that I would personally wish to raise would be that of your physical safety. In regard to this matter I have enclosed a stone amulet that will function as a one-use Portkey to Hogwarts upon touching it while saying the trigger word ‘sanctuary’. Carry it always and utilise it only in the direst of emergencies. Add a drop of saliva or blood on the surface and it will subsequently only work for yourself – no other may then use or trigger it to your disadvantage. You may wear it as an amulet or attach it as a charm on a fob chain. As it is not, shall we say, officially sanctioned (the Ministry paperwork for the creation of such being both tiresomely slow and insufficiently secure) I would appreciate and advise that you keep it secret, if not for your own safety then for my own. The ink in this final paragraph will disappear within a day, so do not be distressed when it changes to a mere bland valediction, should you retain this missive.
A Portkey for emergencies sounded like a great idea. Harry shook the token out of the envelope it was enclosed in – it was a smooth small grey pebble, a disc of river stone with a hole worn in the middle of it. It looked like a thin slice of doughnut. A length of silver wire had been threaded through it to form a loop, so it could be attached to a chain. Harry dabbed a little spit on the stone charm, then added it to his Double Albert watch chain as an extra fob, next to his Potter Heir ring and Gringotts key. When he wasn’t wearing a waistcoat he almost always carried his pocket watch and its attached chain and fob weights in a robe pocket. It was nice to have something of his father’s to carry around with him, and having a pocket watch to check the time with was often useful.

Sirius was visibly pleased to find Snape hadn’t shown up for tea, and his pleasure in that fact was eclipsed only by his evident enjoyment of Dobby’s plates of sandwiches and scones.

“Absolutely smashing,” Sirius sighed happily. “You know you’re very welcome indeed to bring him to the Black townhouse. We do have a house-elf there – Kreacher – but he’s well… he’s not the best cook. He’s getting on a bit.”

“Dobby and I are managing just fine here, as you can see,” Harry said with an ingratiating smile.

“I’m sure you are,” Sirius agreed, “but it’s really quite simple, Harry. If you don’t stay with an adult as your guardian or host, sooner or later the Ministry’s going to get wind of it. And when they do, you’ll be at the centre of a political and media whirlwind. It’s not like you’d be able to pick what happens to you, you know. Either you’d be forced to go back to those miserable Dursleys, or your placement would be up to those with the deepest pockets and best connections.”

Harry frowned. That scenario sounded hauntingly plausible.

“Now I don’t blame you at all for not wanting to stay with those Muggle relatives of Lily’s a second longer than you have to. Should you want to leave them permanently, let me assure you that as your godfather and Regent, I would stand an excellent chance of getting official custody?” he said, with a questioning lilt at the end of his statement.

Harry shook his head and said quietly, “No, thanks for the offer though. I mean, we get along alright most of the time – me and the Dursleys. I’m just enjoying a break on my own – things to do, you know. We’re fine.”

After he voiced his pat reassurances, the memory of Snape’s voice softly saying something similar echoed in his thoughts. *I said things like that a lot too. Things were always fine.*

“Look Harry,” said Sirius, “I’m trying to give you a choice here. It doesn’t have to be with me, but you have to pick somewhere. You can’t stay here on your own.”

“I was planning on staying in a hotel in Paris tomorrow – I have another book signing. So I won’t be alone there. Later on, I have two visits with friends, and you as well. It will be hardly more than a couple of weeks on my own, when all’s said and done.”

Sirius ran his hands through his long hair, looking frustrated. “There are Death Eaters on the loose, Harry. No-one is going to let you stay here on your own unguarded and uncared for any longer, now that we’ve found you. You can argue, and you can hide, and you can complain, but in the end, it won’t make one jot of difference. Either your friends or the Ministry are going to force you to
stay with some adults who can care for you! You’re just a child still in the eyes of the law and the world, no matter how old and capable you feel right now. I’m trying to make this easy on you – a friendly chat. I thought that would be better than some of the other plans.”

He leant forward, elbows on the table as he looked intently into Harry’s eyes.

“You have to understand, it’s not just me worrying about you, Harry. And there are reasons for that concern - you’re a war target. Lots of people are worried about you. I’m just the spokesperson, the one who argued the loudest to get to talk to you. Well, Snape talked a bit too, I suppose,” he grudgingly conceded. “Though his opinion is more based on what’s good for the war, and less on what’s good for you.”

Harry doubted that. Snape in his own prickly way actually seemed to care a fair bit about Harry – he’d proven that again even this morning with the Portkey he’d sent as a secret gift.

Harry guessed who was behind all this outpouring of concern, and it wasn’t likely to be the Minister. “The Headmaster’s worried?”

Sirius let out a brief snort of laughter. “Him and about twenty others are in on the ‘secret’. Obviously, I’d like you to stay with me. It’s supposed to be my job you know, being your guardian. It’s what your parents wanted. But if you won’t, well… the Weasleys offer their hospitality too – Molly said you’re welcome to bunk with Ron. I do warn you though – she sounded ready to mother-hen you to death. Dumbledore also relayed an offer from McGonagall to stay in her spare room, so long as you don’t mind a few cats around the place.” His bias was clear in the reluctant tone of voice as he confessed that Harry had alternative offers of lodging.

“I guess there’s not really room for someone to stay here with me,” Harry said begrudgingly. “I like it here, though. I mean, at first it was a little creepy, and I still don’t like going in the nursery…”

“Can’t blame you there.”

Harry thought about it for a moment. He’d wanted to stay at Potter Cottage and take his time covertly investigating the runic circle in the nursery, but it looked like that wasn’t going to be an option. It could wait another year or more until he was better at runes, anyway.

He didn’t really want to stay with the Weasleys, despite their friendliness. If he stayed any longer with Neville over the holidays, Draco would get upset… well, more upset. Draco was jealous of Neville’s obvious status of ‘best friend’ quite enough already without adding more fuel to the fire. The Parkinson family was nice but hadn’t ever offered to host him for a visit, so he’d definitely feel like he was imposing despite their kinship. Perhaps the Grangers would be good hosts – he’d stayed there before, and they were really welcoming and kind. But… he’d feel pretty dreadful saying he wanted to stay with someone else right to Sirius’ expectant face. Maybe he should give him more of a chance. It was what his parents had wanted, after all. And, if it didn’t work out, he could always ring Hermione for help. She lived in London too, so it wouldn’t be too much of a trip to get there if things didn’t work out at the Black townhouse.

“Alright Sirius, so long as I can still visit my friends, I’ll come early to stay with you.”

Sirius sighed with happy relief. “It will be great, I promise.”

Chapter End Notes
Hyndla – In mythology this character is a völva – a wand-carrying witch – who rides a wolf when accompanying the boar-riding goddess Freyja on an adventure in the Old Norse poem The Lay of Hyndla.

“Scenes might arise unpleasant to more than myself” – This excellent line has been borrowed from “Pride and Prejudice” by Jane Austen.
The Catacombs of Paris

Chapter Summary

Harry visits the magical district of Paris – Lutetia as the British call it, or Lutèce to the French. He also relocates to Grimmauld Place, where his settling in doesn’t go quite as smoothly as everyone hoped.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

20 July 1994

Having extracted Harry’s promise to arrive that evening to stay with him (not counting excursions for Harry’s book signing commitments and visits with friends) Sirius departed to get things ready for him. Dobby spent the afternoon packing Harry’s belongings for him and shutting up Potter Cottage. Harry, meanwhile, was off to Paris, whirled away by the Portkey Mr. Sayre’s had passed on the night before.

It was just before midday when Harry left England, and when he arrived in France with a whirl of colour and a nauseating sensation like he was being yanked by his belly-button through a straw, it was the middle of the night. Or so he thought at first, to his great bewilderment and with growing panic that his Portkey must have malfunctioned.

The bookstore – *Esprits Curieux* in French or *Inquiring Minds* in English – was lit with the warm orange glow of dozens of candles, and the vista glimpsed through the lead-lined store windows was one of darkness, lit by flickering brass lanterns along the footpath. It wasn’t at all reminiscent of the dim light of a cloudy day, it was dark as a moonless night outside. There was no light filtering down from the sky – there was nothing around but the artificial glow of lamplight and candles to light up the dark.

A middle-aged wizard in a dull orange robe welcomed Harry eagerly. He was a little bit on the short and dumpy side, and with a darker Mediterranean complexion than Harry had unconsciously expected of a Frenchman, with straight, thick black hair. He swept into a short bow, and greeted Harry in a heavily-accented, cheerful voice, “Ah, Monsieur Potter! *Bonjour!* Welcome to Lutèce! I ‘ave been told zat you speak French well, yes?”

“Oui-” began Harry, but the wizard didn’t wait for more confirmation than that before launching into a rapid self-introduction in French.

“Excellent. I’m very pleased you could come today, it should be a great help for sales in the regrettable absence of your patron, Monsieur Lockhart. I am of course Monsieur Jean Lambert, son of the House of Lambert, and the owner of *Esprits Curieux*. As you can see I have closed the store for lunch so we can get set up, and there is already a line forming outside.” He gestured to the windows, where indeed a few witches and wizards could be dimly glimpsed milling around outside. “It is a very promising sign for our business today that people are willing to use their lunch break simply to line up in front of my bookshop, as the lunch break is usually sacrosanct in France.”
“I don’t mean to be a bother, but where are we exactly?” Harry asked in fluent French. “I was told the Portkey was taking me to a bookshop in the middle of Paris – where is Lutèce exactly? It is midday still, is it not? Why is it so dark outside?”

The man chuckled in a friendly fashion. “Worried you got lost, hey? Never fear, you’re exactly where you should be. Lutèce is the name for magical Paris – though I think you British like to call it ‘Lutetia’ – is that more familiar? No? Well, it’s the same name really, it’s just like how tourists don’t know how to pronounce Paris properly,” he said, stressing the proper pronunciation of his city as Par-EE, “it’s just an alternative name. As for why it is dark outside – you are underground, young man! Didn’t anyone tell you anything at all about magical Paris before you came here?”

Not really. Though, a faint memory did spring to mind of Anthony and Tracey arguing about French history last year. “I was only told a little about your bookshop, but not much about Paris. I know you focus on selling new books and a lot of fiction, rather than antiquarian offerings or textbooks. Hmm, I think I remember the French Department of Mysteries – a Chambre something – is hidden in some catacombs? Though it started out openly as part of one of the universities?”

Mr. Lambert nodded. “Yes, the Chambre des Augures lies in the Ministry’s section of the catacombs of Lutèce. You can find it on the Grande Rue du Ministère, directly underneath La Sorbonne. My bookshop lies far underneath the Rue Valette in the Latin Quarter, just to the east of the university. If you went outside and headed south down the street – which is the Place du Marché – and then climbed up an excessive but necessary number of stairs on the Montée du Panthéon, you would reach the Panthéon, which has one of the major exits to the Muggle world in its crypts.”

“It has crypts? I know more about the Roman temple Pantheon, sorry…”

“Yes, it used to be a church, dedicated to St. Genevieve. Now it is a mausoleum – many famous French people are interred there. It has lovely old galleries full of Doric columns – you should have a look even if you’re going home by Portkey. Heading south-east, the Montée des Arènes – which leads up to the old Roman amphitheatre Arènes de Lutèce on Rue Monge – is a popular secondary exit.”

“The main entrance to magical Paris-”

“Lutèce.”

“-Sorry, the entrance to Lutèce is in a crypt? That sounds a bit… spooky. No offence. Are we linked to the Catacombs I’ve heard of in my studies… aren’t they full of bones? No, we’re too far north for that if we’re in the Latin Quarter. I could be wrong, but I thought the Catacombs were under Montparnasse?”

Harry finally paused long enough in his questions for Mr. Lambert to answer him at last. “You’re right, the area for tourists with the ossuary is in a different area altogether, though we don’t find it ‘spooky’. It is all still a part of the network of old Lutetian limestone quarries dug out in Roman times, however. It’s quite the labyrinth of tunnels winding underneath central Paris – hundreds of kilometres! The Muggles know of the tunnels to the south, but not those under the Latin Quarter or St-Germain-des-Prés. Muggles are banned from exploring the old mines except for a select scant few areas of catacombs – while the mines stretch for a couple of hundred kilometres, and some of them link up with our sections. Of course, we’re hidden and warded but why take the chance? Our Muggle government here is very co-operative, by the way, and have ensured their Tube railway tunnels avoid our hidden streets.

“Also, by Muggle government mandate high-rises aren’t permitted to be built above Lutèce – we
can’t have them digging too deep to build the foundations of their monstrous buildings, and risk
them discovering and destroying our district. Of course, they justify it to their people on the
grounds that it’s to preserve the historical buildings. That helps a lot – it’s an easy reason for
Muggles to grasp and it keeps them satisfied.”

The wizard’s typical patronising attitude towards Muggles didn’t go unnoticed by Harry, but he
just let it slide past. “Tell me, does everyone in Lutèce live underground, then?”

“Many live here – not in the shopping district of course. The big underground residential suburbs
are in the side streets to the west of us in Faubourg St. Germain underneath Muggle St-Germain-des-
Prés, or to the south in Faubourg St. Marcel. However, the wealthier families live
aboveground on Île Saint-Louis, the smaller of the two islands in the river Seine. It’s an almost
entirely exclusive wizarding district with many beautiful old homes. Only a few wealthy Muggles
are allowed to have homes there – ones who are aware of our world and understand and appreciate
the values of privacy and discretion. I have family on Île Saint-Louis, but the old family home is
too crowded – I personally live outside Paris, and simply Floo in to work.

“Well, enough chatter! I think we’d better get you settled – it’s almost time to open the doors.
Monsieur Sayre couldn’t stay, but he was by earlier with the paperwork and set up a desk how you
like it – no-one will be grabbing at you for photographs, I promise. Also, I will be keeping an eye
out for you also so do not fret about overenthusiastic fans.”

Harry nodded his gratitude as he thanked the chatty wizard. With Colin busy with his family today,
and Mr. Sayre off doing business of his own, he was all on his own this afternoon and it did make
him a little nervous. It was nothing compared to how he’d felt at Diagon Alley, though. He was
over the worst of his nerves now, having dealt with nothing worse than a few cranky customers
and a handful of confused letters from those who’d read or heard Lockhart’s earlier tales about his
adventures, who were wondering why the story had changed. Harry had been taking the easy route
and was pretending to know nothing about Lockhart’s reasons behind the editorial changes. It was
mostly true – he only had guesses, really.

“I have your return Portkey here when you’re ready for it. Tiberius told me there’s unfortunately
no chance of Monsieur Lockhart showing up?” Mr. Lambert queried, with an optimistic look that
said he hoped Mr. Sayre had somehow been wrong about that.

Harry shook his head, as he settled down at a lovely white-painted wooden desk near the front
counter, hedged in by a small stack of Battles with the Basilisk in both the English and German
editions (Bekämpfung des Basilisken), and much larger stacks of copies of the French translation
(Batailles avec le Basilic). He laid out his collection of ink bottles and a couple of fancy quills.

“I’m sorry sir, I’ve written to him a few times and so has Mr. Sayre, but we haven’t heard from
him for a couple of months now – he’s busy adventuring in Africa.”

Mr. Lambert frowned unhappily. “Well I hope all is well, and that he hasn’t gotten into more
trouble than he knows how to deal with. Still, I’m glad you’re helping him out with his book
promotion. I’ve read all about you, young man! You had quite the pivotal and prominent role in
these latest adventures – I’m not surprised Monsieur Lockhart is sharing the profits with you, for I
think you saved his life at least a couple of times! He’s a good man and an impressively prolific
author, if a little too inclined to be melodramatic for my personal taste. Still, his books sell well and
that makes them very beloved indeed to a bookseller!”

With Mr. Lambert’s lunch break over and customers queuing outside, it was time to get started.
The line of customers filed in politely between the tidy wooden shelves – witches and wizards who
were mostly clad in familiar-looking robes and pointed hats. A few wizards were wearing
alternatives, such as a frock coat and trousers, while some witches were dressed in old-fashioned corseted gowns with puffed sleeves, topped with short capes. Normal Muggle attire was almost entirely absent. They all looked a little out of place to Harry in *Esprits Curieux*, which was a more modern-looking shop interior than Harry was accustomed to seeing in wizarding Britain. Oh, there were still candelabra everywhere and a roaring fire in the enormous fireplace against one wall, and the bookshelves were all wooden rather than the enamelled steel of Muggle bookshops. But the décor was in general more recent – from the fifties rather than a century or two ago. In place of the ancient shelves overflowing with books and the occasional collection of parchment scrolls Harry had unconsciously expected, there was a more modest and tidily arranged selection of books, including many colourfully-covered Muggle paperbacks mixed in with the more traditional cloth and leather-bound hardcovers. There was also no risk here of customers bumping a shelf and sending things crashing to the ground! Everything was neat and tidy.

After Harry had signed books for about a half-dozen friendly customers, a young witch arrived at the shop very out of breath, elbowing past the line of customers to the front desk (to mutters of discontent and outrage from the other patrons). She had very short shockingly pink hair and was clad in a dark brown Auror’s robe.

“Sorry, excuse me, pardon ee moi, coming through!” she said in British-accented English, with a burst of very poor French. “Potter, hello there! I’m Tonks, here to be your um, here to watch out for you today. Sorry I’m a bit late – I didn’t know there was a set Apparition point you had to arrive at in the tunnels here. I was expecting to come straight to the bookshop, so I got a little lost I’m afraid.”

“I sink you will find I was next, mademoiselle,” the witch at the front of the line sneered frostily with a notable French accent. “Zere is a line, I ‘ope you realise.”

Harry nodded slowly. He recognised the witch’s surname – perhaps she was a relative of Andromeda Tonks, who’d represented Sirius at his trial. Andromeda was some kind of relative of the Blacks – a cousin of his of some degree. Harry should’ve guessed someone would show up today, since Sirius and Snape had done something similar yesterday.

“Yes, I think I’ve heard of you. Any relation to Andromeda Tonks?”

“She’s my mother,” the young witch said, beaming at him.

She turned to the witch at the front of the line and said with a smattering of bad French, “I’m not trying to push in line, by the way, ma’am. *Moi excuse*? I’m here as security, so I’ll just um… *un moment si voo play, pardon ee moi*…” She shuffled to one side of Harry’s desk, almost knocking over a pile of copies of *Batailles avec le Basilic*. The cranky witch gave her a scornfully superior look as if her horrendous French was hurting the ears of everyone who had to suffer through hearing it.

“If you could sign it to my mother please, Yvonne de Chenizot,” the witch asked Harry, pointedly ignoring Tonks. “It is a pity Monsieur Lockhart is not ‘ere, no? But I ‘ave been told you are most famous in ze book too. Ze Boy ‘Oo Lived – quite a Marie-Louise, a *jeune héros* you are. Very brave, I sink you are.”

He didn’t know what she meant by calling him Marie-Louise, but he guessed he was a bit of a young hero, though not really on purpose. Most of the time. Harry checked the spelling of her mother’s name carefully and signed her book obediently.

The next wizard stepped up with two copies of the book and a little lavender beribboned cardboard box, looking a little uncertain. He was a tall young man barely out of his teens, with a spotty face
and short blond hair. “Is Monsieur Lockhart not coming?” he asked, looking past Harry and gazing hopefully around the shop as he spoke in English with only the slight French accent, dropping the occasional h. “Monsieur Lockhart always comes to signings at Esprits Curieux. He never misses out on visiting Paris. I brought the chocolate éclairs from Ladurée for ‘im – they are ‘is favourite.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” apologised Harry. “I’m sure he wanted to be here – he did originally plan to be. I was only supposed to be going to the Diagon Alley signing, but I’m trying to help him out since he can’t make it.”

The young man sighed in frustration. “This is going to ruin my set, you know. Is he alright? He would never miss a Paris signing, not for anything. He always said visiting Lutèce was ‘is favourite stop. You would tell me, would you not? If… something bad ‘appened to ‘im?”

Harry frowned. It was really odd, actually. Lockhart loved the limelight. Not to mention the fact that foisting his promotional duties off on Harry meant that Harry had negotiated a greater share of the profits as compensation for his efforts. “I would tell you if I knew. Last I heard he was in Africa saving a village from Fwoopers. Mr. Sayre – the publisher – heard from him most recently. There were a few last-minute changes to the book. Um, did you want your copies signed?”

“Just the one for reading, thank you. I will keep my other copy aside for when ‘e visits next. Please sign it to Jacques Gontaut-Biron.”

The man left with a pensive expression, still holding onto the box of éclairs, somewhat to the disappointment of Harry’s hungry stomach.

“Hmm,” Tonks hummed thoughtfully in the background. “I’ll add Lockhart to the list.”

“List?” Harry asked, but she waved away his question with a vague promise to talk about it later, and new customers quickly claimed his attention.

One name amongst the many stood out to him while signing, even though he didn’t recognise the witch in question. He guessed from the lines around her eyes and mouth that she was about fifty years old, though wizarding ages were notoriously hard to judge. She wore a long black robe with odd tight sleeves that buttoned up her forearms with a row of bright gold buttons, and her dark brown hair with strands of grey was tied back in a long braid.

“Could you sign it very formally for me, if you don’t mind?” she asked in rapid French after greeting him properly, presumably since he’d been conversing in fluent French with the couple of people in line before her. “To Master Catherine Monvoisin, Daughter of the House of Monvoisin, Guildmaster of the Potion-makers Guild, Master of the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers.”

She used the French phrase ‘Corps des Fabricants de Potions’ to refer to the local French guild but spoke in English to subsequently list her related British qualification.

Harry addressed the flyleaf as directed, signing with, “With my best wishes for your health and happiness, Mr. Harold James Potter, Heir of the Noble House of Potter.”

Guildmaster Monvoisin took the book back to read his inscription and titled her head. “No other titles then?” she asked, with a meaningful glance at Storm, who was napping in the leather bag Harry had set atop the desk as a haven for his nocturnal pet to snooze in. Only the tip of Storm’s grey-brown tail was currently visible, glimmering with subdued rainbow highlights in the candlelight.

“No. I wouldn’t want to presume,” Harry said. “I have an ability, not a relevant genealogy.” When claiming the title of the Heir of Slytherin had meant a giant snake wouldn’t try to petrify or eat
him, he’d been very happy to be called that. But out in public? It just meant more trouble.

“Modest,” she said, sounding surprised, “but your explanation makes sense.”

“Excuse me, but by any chance are you related to Pierre Monvoisin, author of *Poisons and Antidotes*? It’s a book I picked up recently. Perhaps it’s a common name but I thought since it’s in French and you have a Mastery in potions…”?

“Yes, he was my grandfather. Though I’m surprised you were able to acquire a copy,” she said very quietly. “It has been banned in France for some years now, due to the ill use the unscrupulous might put it to. Perhaps matters are different in Britain?”

“Oh! Well, I didn’t see anything dangerous like poison recipes in there. It seemed very focused on antidotes,” Harry said softly, rather startled. “But I admit I haven’t had a chance to look it over thoroughly yet. I did see a marvellous chapter focused on antidotes to misbrewed medicinal potions – the type people brew as home remedies. There was a section about brewing Pepperup Potion and the symptoms someone would display if the brewer had used a noble metal cauldron rather than a base metal cauldron, which boosts the effects of the Bicorn horn in promoting too much Sanguine humour in the drinker.”

She smiled in pleasant surprise. “My, you are quite the promising young Potioneer!”

“Well, I’m hoping to train as a Healer after school,” he admitted, “but I do enjoy Potions of course. It’s a very necessary skill for a Healer, from what I’ve read.”

“Well good luck in your studies, Monsieur Potter,” she said with a friendly smile. Then she added in a whisper, “Do keep in mind that notes on how mistakes can occur when brewing a potion may be followed deliberately, rather than avoided for a perfect potion. So, take care who observes you reading my grandfather’s book.” Her eyes flicked briefly to where Tonks was standing, dressed in her distinctive brown Auror’s robe.

Harry blinked, startled. Of course. I hadn’t thought of that, he thought. He felt rather glad that Tonks’ ability to speak French was extremely basic, and that she had just been standing by looking bored and not following their conversation at all.

“Thank you, madam. I’m much obliged.”

The people lining up to buy books and get them signed were predominantly French. However, there were a scattering of people from other nations as well, including a young plump couple from Belgium on their European tour honeymoon, three fair-haired Germans of various ages including a young backpacker, and a rather shy blue-eyed middle-aged British man who’d missed out on the London signings, whose long brown hair was streaked with grey and tied back in a ponytail with a blue ribbon.

“Ovid Mortalem, at your service,” he said softly in English, with a short traditional bow suitable for greeting one of equal rank.

“That is Ovid with a v not a w – I’m named after the Roman poet Ovidius,” he said, pronouncing the full name like Oh-widi-us, “better known as Ovid. He wrote the *Metamorphoses*.”

“It’s nice to meet you, sir,” said Harry agreeably, double-checking the spelling of the wizard’s surname for good measure as he signed the man’s English language copy of *Battles with the Basilisk*.

“I thought I would Apparate across the Channel, since I did not want to miss the chance to meet
you, Mr. Potter,” the wizard said, “as I wasn’t sure if you were doing any other book signings?”

“Just one left in Gabon on Friday – in Libreville. I was asked to do more, but I think that will be plenty since I’m not the author.”

The man nodded politely. “Much too far for me to Apparate, so I am certainly glad I did not miss you today,” he said. “I was also hoping to meet your lovely snake of whom I’ve heard so much, as well. I wonder perchance if you could please greet him for me? Might I hold him a moment if he is here? I adore magical creatures, even snakes. It would be such a treat for me!” He looked around with a shy but eager expression, perking up noticeably when he spotted the tip of Storm’s tail peeking out of the leather satchel on the desk.

“Oh, well he’s nocturnal, so he’s sleeping in my bag at the moment,” Harry explained apologetically. “I’ll see if he is willing to wake up and say hello.” Mr. Mortalem seemed like a nice man, and Harry tried to be as obliging as he could to everyone who lined up to meet him. Harry was getting over his nervousness at meeting crowds, but part of him still worried about upsetting people and making a scene.

Storm wasn’t terribly thrilled to be woken up from his sleep but was always willing to meet new admirers. “So you ssay he likes magical creatures, and wantss to meet me?”

“If you don’t mind,” replied Harry, as the man listened to their hissing with a fascinated glint in his eye. “He ssseemed very keen and I don’t want to disappoint him. And you know every new fan we make will help reduce the prejudice against Parselmouthss.”

“He may admire me, then,” he said, feigning grudging reluctance. But Harry knew Storm secretly loved the attention.

Mr. Mortalem looked a little uncertain and embarrassed but didn’t flinch as Storm slithered up his arm and wound around his neck and shoulders. A few people oohed and aahed at Storm’s unexpected appearance, and the shy wizard ducked his head in embarrassment at the attention, smiling as he silently stroked Storm’s glimmering rainbow scales with a gentle finger.

Looking up at Harry, he said very quietly, “Please tell him he is a spectacular snake, and his Master is a fine Heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Slytherin.”

Not again. Harry sighed, and echoed what he’d said earlier to Guildmaster Monvoisin, “Well, I don’t really lay claim to that title, actually. I just have a talent, not a genealogy, so I wouldn’t want to presume.”

“Pray tell what does the lovely Storm think of that? Will you ask him his opinion on the matter?” the man asked with a curious smile. “Perhaps a snake can tell such matters instinctually?”

Harry hissed an obliging question to Storm, “He wantss you to know he thinkss you’re ssspectacular.”

“Naturally. He must be a Clever-man of great taste and discernment.”

“He also wonders if you think I’m really the Heir of Sslytherin?”

“Of course you are, Harold. Custoss agreed, the xsstatues acknowledge you, and you always complain how those owls find you with their letterss to that name too, so I think you must be.”

“I guess I am, sssince being a Parselmouth ssseems more important than proven descent. Unless the Dark Lord ssstill claimss the name as well. Maybe we both get those letters – I wonder who
getss more of them.” Harry stopped and considered that for a moment. It was less funny the more he thought about it.

Mr. Mortalem waited quietly, listening to their sibilant conversation with patient incomprehension as he smoothed his hand over Storm’s hide and looked curiously and fearlessly at Storm’s many sharp curved teeth when the snake opened his mouth briefly during his chat with Harry.

“You won, he didn’t,” Storm stated bluntly. “You defeated him twice. I think the name is yours now. Like if you attack an owl and it dropss itss mouse, and then you can eat it because it’ss yours.”

“Do you do that? Don’t sssteal the owls’ mice!”

“If they really wanted them they would ssswallow them faster.”

“He thanks you for your compliment and says you have good taste. In regard to your question about me being the Heir of Slytherin, Storm says he doesn’t know and doesn’t really understand genealogy. But he thinks the fact that I can speak to snakes is certainly very special and wonderful, and a blessing of Magic,” Harry said, ‘translating’ their conversation with deliberately appalling inaccuracy. “You seem very keen on snakes. Were you in Slytherin at Hogwarts?”

The man smiled shyly, ducking his head. “I am usually well known as quite the bookworm Ravenclaw, actually. I went to school some years before your parents did. I am sorry for your loss, Mr. Potter. Who are you staying with during your holidays, by the way? Other relatives, I presume?”

“I was until recently, but I’ll also be staying with my godfather in London and then visiting some friends for the rest of the break,” Harry said, keeping his response polite but vague.

The man nodded shortly and pulled out a pocket watch from a tiny waistcoat pocket, glancing at it crossly. “Well I hope you enjoy your time at Hogwarts this year, Mr. Potter, and work hard in all your endeavours. I would love to talk more with you and your wonderful serpent, but I am afraid I was in line for over half an hour and I have little time left, as I have friends to meet shortly who will worry if I am late. In any case, you have other admirers to greet, and I would not want to monopolize all your time.” He handed Storm back again before he left, giving Harry another short courteous bow.

There were only a couple more people that day who really stood out to Harry – a mother and daughter who caught his eye as the most beautiful women he’d ever seen, with their long silvery-blond hair and deep blue eyes. There was a dark-haired man and a younger girl with them too, but they barely registered at all. He signed two copies of Batailles avec le Basilic for the Delacours in a bit of a daze.

In English with a thick French accent, the older girl said with a charming smile, “Perhaps I will see you soon at ‘Ogwarts, Monsieur Potter?”

“Yes of course,” he said, hardly knowing what he was saying as he gazed into her entrancing sapphire eyes. She was stunning – he’d never noticed girls as alluring before, but she was different. He wondered if she had a boyfriend. Surely a girl that beautiful would have many admirers. “You know, I’m actually incredibly rich. I don’t need to be here – it’s just that the fortune in my family vault is locked up until I’m seventeen, so some more spending money would be nice. I could spend it all on gifts for you.”

Harry froze in panic, mouth agape as his brain caught up to what he’d just blurted out. “What?
I’m… I’m very sorry. I don’t know why I said that. Please pretend I didn’t say that,” he stammered. He felt his cheeks heating up with a mortified blush.

The short, plump father of the family chuckled in amusement, stroking his small black beard while Mrs. Delacour told her daughter off sharply in French. “Fleur! Some more control please!”

“Mes excuses Mère,” the young witch said apologetically to her mother.

Then the beautiful girl turned back to Harry to apologise in accented English. “I am very sorry, Monsieur Potter. Sometimes I cannot control my ‘éritage. I cannot ‘elp but influence people to like me.”

“Oh, is that what… How is that…? Well I suppose that’s quite alright, let’s all just forget what happened,” he suggested, his heart still pounding with panic.

After the last few customers had left, the bookseller Mr. Lambert whispered an explanation in French that cleared up Harry’s confusion. He explained that the women clearly had Veela heritage. There was a large Veela population in Eastern Europe, and a smaller enclave of a few families who had settled in France.

“They admit mixed blood students at Beauxbatons,” he explained, “so some families settle near the school in southern France, and the Veela also love the secluded beaches you can find around Massilia and on Corsica. Beauxbatons allows Muggle-born and half-bloods, half-breeds from Veela or goblins, and a couple of other mixed bloods, I think. Not werewolves or vampires, of course. They have to go to Durmstrang if they want a formal education.”

“So she’s a magical creature, or partly so. That explains why I couldn’t stop myself – it was like I had to impress her,” Harry confessed, still feeling very uncomfortable about the lack of control. The more he thought about it, the more upset he got, in fact. It was bad enough when he’d thought he’d just suddenly and inexplicably been attracted to someone. The revelation that there were ordinary-looking people out there who could make him feel things with just a glance was terrifying. Veela sounded kind of like pretty blonde Dementors.

“Occlumency can help with that,” Mr. Lambert said sympathetically, “and with resisting a vampire’s gaze, so I’ve heard. I don’t know the trick to it myself though. I’ll have to recommend a competitor if you want to learn more about Veela, I’m afraid. Les Livres Sauvés d’Alexandrie specialises in more traditional subjects and has a larger non-fiction section that I offer here.”

Harry got directions, and a quick hand-drawn map of the local area. Mr. Lambert sketched out the Place du Marché – which was the street they were currently on – and the Rue du Roi Thaumaturge, which was a tunnelled street one level above where Les Livres Sauvés d’Alexandrie was located, which had the Grande Rue du Ministère as a cross-street which led west to the local Ministry buildings. Mr. Lambert recommended Flooing if Harry needed to do banking, as it was quite a walk to the local Gringotts branch, so that wasn’t on his map. His sketch also included where to find the steep staircase of the Montée du Panthéon from either level, in case Harry wanted to exit to the Panthéon on the surface.

“Though you should note the gate guards won’t let you out into Muggle Paris dressed like that,” Mr. Lambert warned, gesturing at Harry’s old-fashioned and eye-catching ensemble. Today Harry was wearing scarlet trousers, a lace-edged white shirt, one of the smaller of his father’s embroidered maroon waistcoats, and a gold silk cravat tied in a Mail Coach knot.

“You’ll attract too much attention,” continued Mr. Lambert, “and there’s only so many people who can claim to be eccentric artists or with a street theatre before the Muggles get suspicious. Your
escort’s robes won’t pass muster either. There’s changing rooms at the gate, if you both have some Muggle clothes to change into.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Harry confirmed that Galleons and Sickles were in use in France, and in fact were used worldwide amongst most wizarding communities.

“Goblins set the currency standard centuries ago,” Mr. Lambert explained, while serving a customer who stopped by to pick up a non-Lockhart book order. “We have a Gringotts branch here if you need to exchange your Galleons for Muggle money but do otherwise stay away from the goblin city section in Faubourg St. Marcel if you go exploring. We have the largest goblin community in the world here in the cosy catacombs of Lutèce, but tourists are highly discouraged there – it’s invitation only.”

Tonks spoke up rather impatiently, obviously tired of waiting around while they talked in a language she couldn’t understand. “Uh, Potter, are we done here? Because all the customers seem to have dried up, and I was wondering when you were Portkeying out, and where to?”

“Sorry Auror Tonks,” he apologised in English. “I didn’t mean to leave you out of things.”

“I’m still officially in training for another month, so just ‘Tonks’ is fine,” she said amicably.

“I was just chatting with Mr. Lambert – the book signing is all over, so I’m going to go and be a tourist for a while in Lutetia’s catacombs. Then it’s back to Potter Cottage, where I’m finishing packing before I go over to Sirius Black’s house.”

She nodded. “Alright then, let’s go shopping!”

“You don’t have to come with me.”

“Yes, I do.”

Harry sighed, and gave in. He figured it would save time and a fruitless argument. Even if he refused she’d probably just follow him anyway, and it wasn’t like he could stop her.

The street outside was a narrow tunnel carved into solid rock, with the shops lining it burrowing into the walls in places, while others were freestanding buildings where the tunnels were wider. Much like in Diagon or Knockturn Alley, it was foot traffic only. Harry did see one teen wizard zipping by on a broomstick, though, to the amusement of some, and the outraged shout of one old lady who almost got knocked over. Flickering lamps atop tall ornate brass lampposts lit the streets, but overall it was still rather dimly lit compared to the bright glare Muggle electricity could offer. Storm was interested to see that some wizards lived in burrows underground, but the novelty of it soon waned as he was unexcited by the prospect of watching Harry shop. Storm elected to nap in Harry’s bag for the duration of Harry’s browsing.

“Looking for anything in particular?” Tonks asked as they started wandering.

“Not really?” said Harry as he meandered along. “I might check out another bookstore, and maybe buy some clothes, but I promised Pansy… Oh! Sweets!”

Harry distractedly led them inside Les Confiseries de Madame Borboleta, which smelled delightfully of toffee and flowers. He picked up some Sugared Butterfly Wings after being assured that they didn’t contain parts from real butterflies. The colourful wafer-thin pink sugary “wings” fluttered realistically in his hand and dissolved in his mouth with a delicious rosewater flavour. He
picked out a selection of other flavours and had a few packed away in tiny boxes as gifts to give out to friends and acquaintances during the upcoming year.

While he didn’t think he personally needed a new hat, he stepped inside a millinery called Les Chapeaux de Madame Bonhabillé, to select a hat in “the very latest Lutetian fashion” as a present for later for Daphne. She had given him a pointed hat with a hawk feather in it last Yule, and thus presumably might appreciate a fashionable hat for herself too. Madame Bonhabillé assured him in French that his selection of the black hat with a shimmering green ribbon and tiny accent of green mallard duck feathers would “make glad of ze ‘eart of your lady-friend.”

“Who’s your girlfriend, then?” teased Tonks, with a sly look as they left the store with a magically shrunken hatbox.

“It’s for Daphne Greengrass, and she’s just a friend,” Harry said stiffly. “I don’t have a girlfriend – or a boyfriend for that matter – and I don’t want one.”

“Maybe when you’re older, then,” suggested Tonks. Harry just shrugged.

Gladrags Wizardwear had an outlet here, just a couple of doors down from the milliner’s, and Harry sighed. “I promised to go clothes shopping with Pansy, but I really do need some more things now. I hadn’t realised how I’d grown out of most of my shirts and trousers, and my old waistcoats don’t fit any more. Do you think she’d mind if I bought stuff now?”

“You’re planning on cheating a woman out of a shopping trip? Yeah, she’ll probably be miffed with you. Make sure to leave at least a few things she can nag you into buying, is my advice,” Tonks said sagely. “That waistcoat you’re wearing today is too big for you, by the way. I know they cinch at the back a bit, but it’s not really working for you. It looks a bit odd under the arms.”

“Right,” Harry said determinedly.

He was as swift and business-like as he could be in the tailor’s, not wanting to be in there being poked and prodded with pins forever. The first thing he grabbed was a purple cloak that was on sale – it was rather cold here deep underground in the catacombs, despite it being summer above ground, and he hadn’t known to dress for it. It felt more like the cooler temperature of the middle of the night rather than a warm summer’s day. He escaped a full fitting by buying pre-made black trousers, hemmed with a swift spell. Two white shirts with slightly puffy sleeves and plain cuffs with only a hint of embroidery got added to the pile, and a black waistcoat with looping purple Art Nouveau style embroidery around the edges completed his list of purchases. He still needed more things, so hopefully Pansy would still be happy. But that should be enough to get him through his last book signing or an extra outing without embarrassing himself in public or leaving him no option but robes.

“It reminds me more of Knockturn Alley than Diagon Alley, don’t you agree?” he said to Tonks. “Narrow streets, really old-looking shops. I thought maybe they’d all look kind of modern like Esprits Curieux, but most of them have that really old-fashioned look to them.”

“I think they’re about two hundred years old?” Tonks said tentatively. “I saw one store that had ‘1789’ on it, I think for when it was founded, so I imagine lots of them have been here a while.

“Say, did you know the whole area’s heavily warded against Apparition? I didn’t,” Tonks said. “There’s an arrival room you get shunted to if you try to travel directly here. The guards told me off – they said it’s Floo or Portkey if you want to go somewhere in particular. They’ve had too many accidents over the years with people Splinching into the walls or rock ceiling, so they’re very strict about Apparition around Lutetia. I guess it would only take one or two accidents to really put
people off – just think about it!”

Harry thought about it and stuck out his tongue in disgust. “Urgh. I can imagine it, and I really wish I couldn’t.”

Lots of the stores seemed to have gargoyles perched on their rooves and door lintels, and a couple had them sitting on either side of the doors like guards. Tonks told him those ones were – strictly speaking – called grotesques rather than gargoyles as they wouldn’t be acting as waterspouts. A few stores had decorative Christian crosses as ornamental engravings in the stonework, while others had whole engraved scenes of people in robes, and pillars flanking the doors.

They passed by a Quidditch store, and Harry peeked curiously in the window. A white-painted sleek broomstick had pride of place in the window display and framed animated posters of a Quidditch team in pale blue robes formed an eye-catching backdrop.

“The French national team,” Tonks commented. “They made it to the semi-finals this year.”

Five witches and two wizards zoomed around in a bewilderingly complex move full of lots of spinning that according to the posters was “Le Ballet Foudroyant”. An autographed poster of the devilishly handsome Beater Alain Lacroix was selling for what Harry thought was an outrageous number of Galleons.

The scent of fresh-baked bread and pastries drifted through the air, and Harry followed his nose down the street to a bakery, picking up some croissants that the plump and cheerful baker swore were so airy they would practically float away, and so deliciously buttery that he would faint from the pleasure of eating them.

They weren’t that good, but the sales pitch was so amusing that he didn’t regret buying them. They were still flaky and delicious. With a little pointing at items on the trays Tonks bought herself a half baguette with ham, and a slice of tarte tatin. Then they turned around in circles as they discussed finding somewhere to eat, rather than just standing around crowding the narrow street.

“There is a square not far from here,” the baker volunteered helpfully, obviously understanding their conversation in English, but preferring to reply in French. “Five stores down, in an alcove off to your left.”

“Merci, monsieur,” Harry said politely, and translated the baker’s suggestion for Tonks.

The square was an underground park – of sorts – and was an unusual change from the plain narrow tunnel they’d been traversing so far. Down a side-street of a short, wider tunnel they found a large cavern available for passers-by to pause to visit and admire. A few wooden and stone benches were arranged for people to relax on, some with little solid stone tables between them for the convenience of visitors who might like to have lunch, write letters, or play board games.

In lieu of sunlight-craving plants, the park’s garden beds, bowl-topped podiums, and hanging planters were instead filled with fungi of varying colours and shapes. There were old logs edging the garden beds covered with bright orange and yellow bracket fungi growing in flat clumps like a stack of colourful saucers atop each other, as well as odd ruffled lumps like golden jelly, and a few patches of waves of lettuce-like frilly fungi that were glowing with pale green bioluminescence in the lamplight.

In the beds of fungi that substituted for flower gardens, a wide variety of mushrooms and toadstools took pride of place. There were creamy-stalked morels with pitted brown lace-like caps, delicate tiny blue mushrooms with slimy-looking tops, and vivid plum-capped mushrooms with
yellow gills. Some branching tubular bright violet fungi with no caps reminded Harry of coral, and there were beautiful smooth orange and red mushrooms with yellow stalks whose caps made him think of all the colours of a gorgeous sunset. From the bowls atop the squat carved limestone pedestals, branching spongy clusters of either butter yellow or rose-pink mushrooms grew one on top of the other, spilling out over the edges of the bowls like miniature waterfalls of living colour.

Along one wall behind a low stone fence, a few odd red crystalline plants with no leaves spread out their large tree-like branches, glimmering enchantingly in the soft flickering light. Small white-spotted red-capped toadstools grew like a carpet beneath them. A large sign warned visitors not to touch the Fire Seed Bushes or their seeds, in multiple languages including French, English, Spanish, Italian, and what Harry guessed might be Chinese or Japanese. Harry thought the way the leafless bushes were glowing a threatening red and emitting heat probably should be enough of a clue for most people to leave them alone, but he had to concede that far too many people in the world lacked common sense. He didn’t recognise most of the mushrooms, but the red and white Fly Agaric toadstools he thought deserved a warning too, until he remembered that witches and wizards could tolerate ingesting a lot of noxious substances in potions that Muggles couldn’t safely consume. Any hypothetical mushroom thieves would probably be sick at most and make it to a hospital for treatment just fine.

A couple of perches were installed at the entry to the park with litter boxes underneath them, and a few owls were perched on one, while two bats with velvet collars hung sleepily upside down on another, wings wrapped around themselves like snug security blankets.

There was a faint smell of mulch and rot in the air and an odd earthy scent from some of the mushrooms, with a faint bittersweet smell like almonds lingering in the air. On the whole, however, the smell wasn’t as bad as Harry had expected, and now he’d stopped to pay more attention to his environment he noticed a soft cool breeze was circulating throughout the tunnels of Lutetia, keeping the air fresh.

At one side of the park there was a small ornamental pond with a miniature waterfall bubbling over some rocks. Harry wandered over to look in it, and saw it was filled with small pink cave fish with whiskers on their snouts like catfish. A few gold and silver coins glittered at the bottom of the pond.

There were a few other visitors who’d also come to the park to quietly enjoying their lunch, and a small cluster of people around a stone table playing a game with dice.

Harry settled on a bench near them to eat his croissant, where he could peek curiously at their game without looking too obvious about it. Tonks joined him companionably.

“Three sixes, come on sixes!” one robed wizard cried excitedly in French, picking up two clear crystal dice to roll again. The three dice left behind on the stone table were glowing a soft purple, and the face up displayed six dots that were etched into the crystal with a couple of rings of concentric circles.

“Hah! Jactus Venereus!” he cried triumphantly as the two dice rattled to a stop to display more sixes, evidently completing his hand. All five dice started shining brightly and shooting off tiny sparks. He set a Galleon down on the table in front of him, and the wizard to his left grumbled a bit about how he’d wanted those sixes.

The triumphant wizard picked up the glowing dice (clearly those tiny phosphorescent sparks didn’t hurt you) and rolled them again.

“Only one six for you, Jérome. There’s two fours though – maybe you should try for fours if you
want a chance of winning the pot,” he suggested, as play passed to his left. Only one die glowed a
gentler purple now, and two of them were a soft glimmering red.

“Excuse me, what game are you playing?” Harry asked politely, interjecting in the tiny break in
their conversation.

“It’s called Jactus,” a witch at the table replied. “You can buy a set and a copy of the rules at The
Queen of Spades, if you want to learn. Head south, then go up a level on Montée du Panthéon.
Then go north along Rue du Roi Thaumaturge until you see it on your left, just past the broomstick
workshop. You could take a shortcut and Floo near to there, but if you’re new to Lutèce you
should probably just save your Sickles and walk, as you’ll just get lost that way.”

Harry thanked the young woman, who politely volunteered to amend his sketched map with
additional details when she saw him puzzling over it.

“There’s a games store a level above us – La Dame de Pique – that sells the dice game,” he
explained to Tonks, “and I’d like visit a bookstore that according to my little map is not far from
there that sells older books and non-fiction. Then I want to look for a Herbology store and buy
something for Neville. I still haven’t gotten him a birthday present and it needs to be something
good. Maybe some fungi? After that I want a quick peek at the exit to Paris, then I’m happy to
head back to England. How does that sound?”

“Well, it sounds more fun than being back at the Ministry doing filing,” she said with a grin.

From the La Dame de Pique Harry nabbed a few of sets of Jactus – one for Ron, another for Greg,
and a couple more for whoever else needed a gift later on. He didn’t think he was personally going
to have a lot of free time this year for games with all his studies, but a Jactus set would surely make
a great gift for friends who loved frittering away their free time.

From the same store he also bought a dragon statuette carved from Lutetian limestone in the hope
that Draco didn’t have it already in his collection, or at least might not mind another one. There
were a lot of knick-knacks in there that he liked, but he didn’t want to spend all the Galleons he’d
recently withdrawn from Gringotts just on fripperies.

The antiquated bookstore Les Livres Sauvés d'Alexandrie didn’t yield any good books on
Occlumency that he hadn’t already read, but Harry picked up an intriguing book on Veela. In
English the title translated as Half Bird, Half Woman: the Mystery of the Veela. He also bought a
few good books written in English on French history for Tracey, Anthony, and Hermione. He had a
few people left to buy for like Luna, but overall, he was feeling very smug about getting most of
his gift buying out of the way so early this year. However, he was still a bit anxious that he had
nothing yet for Neville.

He also bought, for his own collection, two books in French on Healing – one that looked like a
modern reference text full of medical charms (interestingly, all the spells were in the muddled-up
mix of Latin and Ancient Greek that was also popular in Britain), and a dense textbook that looked
like a long academic ramble on the theory of the Humours in regards to medicinal potion brewing,
and the influence of the phases of the moon when harvesting ingredients.

While it still had shops, Rue du Roi Thaumaturge appeared to be more of a business district than
the level below (which had been predominantly retail shops). The street was home to craftspeople,
apothecaries, broomstick manufacturers, fortune tellers, and weavers.

It took asking three people for directions, but Harry and Tonks eventually found their way to a
garden store that sold fungi, along with cages of tiny chirping crickets and boxes of bugs and
worms as snacks for bat familiars. There were also little crafted stone alcoves you could buy, like giant hollow stone eggs cut in half, for your pet bat to sleep in that were apparently all the rage. Some top-of-the-range bat habitats had been fashioned from glittering amethyst geodes.

After some consideration, Harry settled on a hanging terracotta terrarium for Neville that was pre-planted with four different kinds of fungi, one of them a rare magical variety of cream-coloured fungus shaped like a crinkly-edged cabbage leaf that had gills which glowed faintly green in the darkness. The shopkeeper assured him that the terrarium would be no trouble at all to look after and could be safely kept inside a dorm room, even in Scotland.

“A very gentle warming charm on the ceramic – not directly on the fungi – might be necessary on frosty winter days, and your friend will need to mist the terrarium contents regularly to keep everything moist. But it is all very easy, especially with my custom enchantments on the pot to help things along, and I will include a complimentary instruction sheet on maintenance and harvesting.”

After another hour of shopping, Harry was ready to head back to Potter Cottage, loaded up with miniaturised packages for Dobby (or Sirius) to unshrink for him later. Lutèce had been very interesting to visit, even if the décor with monstrously ugly statues everywhere looming forbiddingly had been a bit creepy. Though that paled in comparison to the ossuary he and Tonks had passed by, with decoratively arranged piles of skulls and femur bones of long-deceased wizards for visitors to presumably admire. It seemed to be quite the tourist attraction. He’d asked a local if they should really leave people’s bones out in the open like that, and the man hadn’t really understood his implicit concerns about both public health and good taste. He’d just kindly assured Harry that of course the ossuary was warded against theft or tampering and left Harry with an unwanted reassuring pat on his shoulder.

Tonks waved goodbye to Harry as he activated his Portkey back to the gate of Potter Cottage, and he was finally alone at last… for a few scant seconds. Then Dobby popped up out of nowhere to promise that everything for Master Harry was packed for his visit to the Black townhouse (including the snacks Harry had asked Dobby to pack… just in case), and to fret over who would feed the fish in the pond while they were gone from home, and to ask if he was allowed to take his knitting.

“Master Harry’s jumper isn’t finished yet,” Dobby worried, “and snakey’s fish might get hungry with no-one to feed them.”

“You know you can pop back here any time you need or want to,” soothed Harry. “You know that you don’t even have to come at all if you don’t want to, right? I want you to be free to make your own decisions. I just thought you might like the company, and maybe having more things to do? I’m sorry it gets boring here during the year while I’m at Hogwarts. I don’t really know what else to do to help, and this was just an idea…”

“Oh, Dobby wants to come!” the little house-elf said emphatically, ears flapping. “Dobby is looking forward to having more work, and Master Harry is very kind to not leave Dobby alone. Dobby does like being free during the year, but work is also good for house-elves.”

“You can bring all your knitting and sewing to work on whenever you like,” Harry promised. “Though it would be kind to spend some time helping out Sirius’ house-elf when you can, as I understand he’s getting old and isn’t as spry as he used to be.”

Having been informed by Sirius yesterday of the location of the Black townhouse, Dobby popped back and forth in a few trips to deliver Harry’s Hogwarts trunk, Storm’s tank, and a couple of other bags of miscellaneous supplies Dobby considered essential for their visit. Harry was “too big” to pop directly there without some danger to them both, which they both agreed wasn’t worth the
risk. Storm declined being “popped” to Grimmauld Place, as while he found the repeated experience of house-elf travel tolerable, he didn’t think it was as pleasant as riding the Knight Bus with Harry would be.

“It feels ssstrange,” Storm said in rather vague objection to house-elf teleportation, “I will travel with you instead. Wake me if there is sssomething interesting going on.”

Harry changed into Muggle clothes for the journey – a pair of jeans and his favourite grey t-shirt with the Whitesnake band logo on him that Dudley had bought him as a present. He’d have to travel through a couple of Muggle streets to get to the Black townhouse, as he was concerned that that the bus driver might have a little trouble finding Sirius’ house since it was under the Fidelius and Unplottable Charms.

The spotty young bus conductor Stan Shunpike found the sight of a snake draped around Harry’s neck a little startling, but not too worrisome.

“That ain’t the strangest passenger we’ve ever ‘ad on the Knight Bus,” he said after a moment’s surprise. “Once someone brought a giant jar of fairies on, but they got out when the jar tipped over, didn’t they? An’ last year we ‘ad someone who insisted on bringin’ a lame pegasus on the bus!”

He nattered away cheerfully about his anecdotes for pretty much the entirety of their trip to the Borough of Islington on the relatively deserted bus, and Harry listened with weary politeness.

“…an’ we never did get the smell out!” Stan concluded with a chuckle. “Well, ‘ere’s yer stop, Mr. Potter. ‘Ave a nice day, then!”

From there it was only a couple of blocks to Grimmauld Place, and as Harry walked down the street past a large fenced-off park with a small round hill in the middle of it on his right, he kept an eye on the numbers of the row of four-storey townhouses on his left.

Just as he passed number eleven, it and its neighbour number thirteen gave a shimmer along their adjoining edge, and a new building appeared between the two of them. It was almost like it elbowed them aside as it stretched into existence – it was one of the most impressive displays of magic Harry had ever seen, watching a whole building materialise out of nowhere! Oh, he knew in theory that places like Hogwarts and Diagon Alley were magically hidden, the latter in some kind of compressed space. But here he could actually watch it in action!

The townhouse’s appearance wasn’t as impressive as its enchantments were, however. The brickwork was solid but dark and grimy. The windows were unwashed, and the curtains behind them were either grey with dust or tattered with holes in them. Number twelve’s sole claim to fame in comparison to its neighbours was its height. Harry suspected that much like the Weasleys’ cottage, at some stage the inhabitants had decided they’d needed more room and had promptly tacked on an extra storey and an attic. At least unlike at the Burrow, the builders here had paid attention to making sure the architecture matched properly and that the building was structurally sound.

The tarnished metal gate creaked loudly as Harry passed through on the way to the worn black front door. When the bell pull didn’t work, Harry rapped on the door instead, using a silver doorknocker shaped like a coiled snake. He hissed at the doorknocker in greeting but it didn’t say anything, so he guessed it wasn’t enchanted, or at least not animated. The door looked a little odd, in a way Harry thought Aunt Petunia would hate, for it that ruined an otherwise rather normal-looking home exterior. There was no doorknob, and no keyhole. Harry wondered how you got in if no-one was home to let you in. Was everyone expected to cast an Unlocking Charm to enter? What about kids who shouldn’t use their wands? Squibs and Muggles of course would have been sadly
kicked out of the Black family, but surely allowances should be made for children?

The front door opened quietly without the almost expected creak, as if the hinges had been freshly oiled. “Harry! Welcome to Black House,” Sirius greeted him cheerfully, though rather quietly. “Please, come on in.”

“Thank you for having me.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

Harry looked around the entrance. The hallway must’ve been an impressive sight of luxury once upon a time, but its days of grandeur had faded away. The rich green carpet was faded and worn down the middle from years of foot traffic, the wallpaper was peeling, and the paintings on the walls were dusty. One patch of wall had a small pair of brand new curtains on it like a display for some unknown reason, made of some thick black material – one of the few new things in the room. The gorgeous hanging crystal chandelier was unlit, dusty, and covered in cobwebs. The gas lamps on the walls were lit but somehow not doing enough to prevent the hallway from seeming gloomy. The thing Harry liked most was the snake décor – tiny snakes were carved into the frames of some of the paintings, and the silver handles on the large double doors that Sirius said led to the formal dining room were shaped like arching serpents. He suspected the chandelier might have some snakes on it too, but it was too high up to be sure, as it was suspended a whole extra storey above them where a room far above overhung the hallway.

“Your room is all ready,” chattered Sirius softly as they went upstairs. “You’re up on the third floor. I’ve done it up for you in red and gold, since you’re a Gryffindor. Brand new carpet and linens, curtains too! The desk is freshly polished, and we’ve cleared out the wardrobe. You’ll really dig it, I hope! Your house-elf didn’t seem too impressed though. Said it wasn’t fit for his Master, so he’s sulking in the drawing room with your bags. I admit the room’s a little on the small side, but it’s got a nice view of the back garden. Well, the garden needs a bit… okay a lot of work, but the window’s big and lets a lot of light in. Bit snobby is he, your house-elf? You don’t mind if it’s not the biggest room, do you Harry? I promise it’s actually the nicest!”

“It sounds fine to me,” promised Harry, for whom anything bigger than a cupboard was fine. “I don’t know what bothered Dobby, he’s usually very polite, if a bit stubborn at-”

He cut off abruptly as they went up the stairs and he caught sight of a display on the wall.

“Are those house-elf heads on plaques?” he asked, aghast. “I’d heard it was traditional in some families, but…” His mouth screwed up in distaste at the sight, before he trailed off without finishing his criticism, and schooled his face into a politer expression. Luckily Sirius didn’t seem at all offended.

“I know, right? I tried to take them down, but there’s a strong sticking charm or something keeping them up, and Kreacher kicked up a terrible fuss. Remus and I-” Sirius started, before stopping with a worried look. “I did tell you Remus is living here, didn’t I? I’m pretty sure I hinted about that a lot, or told you?”

Harry nodded, and Sirius let out a relieved sigh. “Good. Where was I? Well, there’s a lot to do here, and we’ve been working mostly on the big picture things. Reinforcing the floors and roof, getting the plumbing and kitchen in working order, and a couple of the bedrooms ready for use, of course. We’ve fixed some of the treads on the stairs – some were in a shocking state – so all the stairs are perfectly safe now. Oh, and we had to clear a ghoul out of the fourth-floor bathroom, next to my room.”
As they continued upstairs, Sirius gave a bit of a tour with running commentary as they passed various rooms. “We never use the dining room – we mostly eat in the kitchen downstairs. Now, here on the first floor is the drawing room facing the street – we’ll come back to that later – and a small bathroom. Behind the bathroom tucked away in the back corner is Mother’s old potions room. If you’re tempted to go in, please don’t touch any of the ingredients. As she got older she got a bit… well. Let’s just say that some of the ingredients have misleading labels and might be dangerous. I wanted to throw the lot out, but Moony – Remus, that is – said there might be some rare and valuable things in there and we should go through them carefully. He wants to say hello to you before he leaves, by the way. He’s off for a couple of days, the stubborn thing – he’ll be back after the full moon’s waned a bit.”

Harry nodded in appreciative agreement. “You know, if there’s things like phoenix tears or unicorn horn in there, they could be worth a lot.”

“That’s what Moony said,” conceded Sirius.

“So, second floor is vacant,” Sirius continued. “It has the old Master bedroom at the front of the house and the nursery at the back – tucked in the middle between them is the library. We’ve had a quick sort through it – though we really need to do a more thorough job later and actually throw things out – and all the Dark books and ones with wards on them are locked up in the cabinet or on the highest shelves, so keep clear of those and you should be fine. We might have missed some though, so let me know if you want to read something and I’ll check it out, okay Harry?”

“I’ll be sure to do that,” Harry said. He had a healthy respect for the potential dangers of enchanted books that could literally bite or burn the unwary.

“Here we are, third floor – that’s you! I’m the next floor up at the back of the house, and above that’s just the dusty old attic. Remus is on your floor too – he has the room at the front facing the street, and there’s a bathroom you’ll have to share between the two of you. The bathroom’s a bit musty but perfectly safe. Just stick to using the towel rack rather than the old cupboard, which is a bit on the whiffy side. It’s got all the modern conveniences – taps with hot and cold water, and a flushing toilet with a lever on the cistern, not a pull chain.

“Between the bathroom and your new room is a spare guest bedroom, but you probably shouldn’t go in there. There’s Doxys in the curtains, and something’s nesting in the mattress that we haven’t caught yet, so the door’s locked as a precaution. But never mind that, here’s your corner room!” Sirius concluded, with an expansive gesture that invited Harry to go in and admire his new accommodations.

Harry opened the door slowly and peeked in, but he didn’t see much to admire. “Wow. Sirius I’m sorry but, it’s… a mess. I’m sorry,” he apologised again. “I mean, I can try and clean it up if you have some supplies I can borrow, but it’ll take a while.”

Sirius’ expectant expression fell. “Oh. Well, we fixed up the wallpaper as much as we could, I promise you. Don’t you like the-” Sirius started, before Harry pushed the door open wide to reveal the devastation. “Guide me to the Summerland! What in Merlin’s name happened in here?!” Sirius physically recoiled, he was so taken aback.

It was a wreck. The brand new red curtains had been cut to tattered ribbons, and the faded cream wallpaper was hanging off the walls in long strips. The shiny new polished desk was missing a leg, so an inkwell had slid off its tilted surface to make a soggy spreading puddle of black ink onto the previously pristine golden yellow carpet. A wadded-up poster had fallen – or more likely been tossed – right into the middle of the puddle, and Harry glimpsed an animated Appleby Arrows member hovering worriedly on their broomstick in the last corner of the poster untouched by the
spreading ink. The cupboard was completely missing one of its doors – removed at the hinges by the looks of things.

But that wasn’t even the worst of it. It looked like a pressure cooker had exploded in the middle of the room. Or, more likely for a wizarding house perhaps, a giant had projectile vomited his dinner everywhere. Splatters of some reddish stew covered the walls and even the ceiling, and there were chunks of meat and vegetables on the maroon bedspread.

“What happened in here?” asked Harry as he gazed at the mess. Was that really bolognese sauce inside what was supposed to be his cupboard? “Was it a spell gone wrong? A very nauseous and upset visiting giant?” He wrinkled his nose as a draught of air brought a wafting new stench of rotten old fish and rat droppings, replacing the relatively pleasant scent of tomato and cooked meat.

“Kreacher, you nasty little worm!” bellowed Sirius angrily, making Harry flinch slightly.

A wizened ancient house-elf in a ragged filthy loincloth popped in next to Sirius. His large nose looked squashed and rather snout-like, and his eyes were bloodshot. His posture was stooped and hunchbacked, and overall, he looked completely exhausted.

“Yes, …Master?” he said slowly in a hoarse, deep voice that Harry found startlingly different to Dobby’s piping young voice. Kreacher creakily dropped into a slow bow, nose pressed almost to the floor.

“Get up! Did you do this? WHY DID YOU DO THIS?!” Sirius yelled. “I worked for months on Harry’s room and you’ve ruined it in a single day!”

The house-elf wrung his hands together in a subservient manner as he rose to a hunch, but Harry had never seen such a rebellious look on a house-elf’s face before. “Kreacher only does what Kreacher is ordered,” he smarmed insincerely.

Then in a quiet mutter to himself, as if not realising he could be heard, Kreacher glanced away and added under his breath, “My poor Mistress doesn’t want the half-blood filthy brat brought into the House of Black. Kreacher does what he is told. Ungrateful son soils the family House with muck and werewolves and traitors…” He trailed off quietly into indecipherable murmurs after that but judging by his theoretically covert gleeful looks around what was to be Harry’s room, he was clearly guilty and didn’t regret a single thing. He looked Harry up and down next, and sneered dismissively at him as if distinctly unimpressed with both Harry’s Muggle attire and his whole self in general. Then he turned away with more low mutters about “filth”, “Beasts”, and “Mudbloods”.

“That vile old hag!” fumed Sirius. “Methinks it is time to have words with her.”

Harry noticed that Sirius’ accent got a lot less hippy-sounding and a lot more posh and pure-blood traditional when he was surprised or upset. As Sirius stormed downstairs with a heavy thump on the stair treads, Harry trailed after him. He was curious to see who Kreacher’s Mistress was – presumably she was the final inhabitant staying in the house. If Harry wasn’t going to be welcome here, he needed to know how quickly he had to leave. So, this was a conversation he needed to listen in on, openly or otherwise.

Chapter End Notes

Stefan Bathory and alias64 – Thank you very much to my two French betas who
helped me polish up my section set in magical Paris, correcting errors and helping me name things. Any errors remain my own responsibility.

The German translation alliterative title for Lockhart’s book (Bekämpfung des Basilisken) was provided by Beastcallisto and in English would be “Combating the Basilisk”. The French translation of the title (Batailles avec le Basilic) was provided by Alias64. Thanks, guys!

Marie-Louise – This is French military slang from the Napoleonic Wars. A Marie-Louise is an enthusiastic but inexperienced young conscript of the 1813-15 drafts. Catherine Monvoisin – this name is drawn from history. She was a French witch who was executed in 1680 – a sorceress, poisoner, and fortune teller. In my fic, she was a namesake ancestor of the character who makes a cameo.


Rue du Roi Thaumaturge – the Street of Magic-Working Kings. This street name is inspired by real-world legends about the magical healing powers of kings.

Fungi – If you’re curious to learn more please visit my website for images and information on the various fungi Harry admired in Paris, and many other images relating to the “Perfectly Normal” series.

Grimmauld Place – The description and floorplan are based of JKR’s books, information from the HP Lexicon, movie stills, and floorplans and Google Earth images of the townhouse used in the movie or its neighbours. Also, I’ve drawn heavily on a very useful floorplan drawn by FirePhoenix86 (used and modified with their permission). My modified floorplan and some more images will be uploaded to my website next week, as Harry still has a little exploring and settling in to do and I don't want to give a couple of plot points away.
A Grim Old Place

Chapter Summary

Harry settles in at Grimmauld Place.

Chapter Notes

Content warning/reminder: Sirius in this fic explicitly suffers from PTSD, and this and future chapters that feature him may contain discussion and portrayal of this topic, including flashbacks and dissociative episodes. If you might personally find this triggering, please proceed with caution. You’re welcome to leave a comment/review if you have any questions or concerns, or if you need more information before proceeding.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

July 1994

It hadn’t taken Harry long to suss out the situation, once Sirius had drawn back those mysterious black curtains on the ground floor wall. Kreacher’s ‘Mistress’ was the portrait of Walburga Black, Sirius’ deceased mother. A few more things quickly became clear: she had died years ago, Sirius hated her and the feeling was mutual, she was a pure-blood bigot, and she shrieked like a madwoman. It hadn’t taken long for Sirius to give up on a stern lecture in favour of shouting back at her portrait.

“What’ss all the noise about? Is sssomeone a threat to you, Harold?” Storm asked crankily, slithering out of Harry’s satchel and coiling up his arm to his favourite position draped around Harry’s neck and shoulders. “Warn the Dog-man that I shall hit him with lightning again if he attackss you. Harder than last time!”

Harry hissed back a quick explanation. “There’s no need for that. It’s just a portrait doing most of the yelling. She’s ranting about me being filth and scum befouling her house, and her ssson being a blood traitor abomination she’s ashamed of. Sssirius – the ‘Dog-man’ – is her ssson and he is yelling back at her and calling her a hag. She was very rude to me and ordered a house-elf to destroy my lovely new guest room because she doesn’t think my blood is pure enough to merit me ssstaying here, and he’s furiouss about all that. I’m not very impressed either, frankly. It was lovely to have a room made up ssspecially for me, and now it’s ruined!”

“They are getting quieter now - why have they ssstopped yelling? Is she ready to attack? What do paintingsss do when they attack?” Storm asked. He posed aggressively, hissing and opening his mouth to show his sharp rows of teeth to the woman in the painting.

Harry glanced over at Sirius and the portrait, as he too realised how quiet it had gotten. Sirius had a wicked grin spreading slowly across his face, while his mother’s mad rant had stopped, and she looked deeply shocked.
Her jaw was agape as she stared at Harry and Storm. Breathlessly, she asked her son, “He’s... a Parselmouth?”

“Whoops, didn’t I mention that? I’m so sorry,” Sirius said, with insincerity dripping from every word. “Perhaps you weren’t aware that in addition to his being the Potter Heir, young Mr. Harold James Potter here is also the new Heir of Slytherin.” Sirius gestured for Harry to step up next to him, and Harry warily walked forward to join him right in front of the portrait.

“Informally,” Harry said uncomfortably. “It’s not official. I mean, some statues and a few people call me that, but it’s just because I’m a Parselmouth, really. I don’t have a genealogy going back to Salazar Slytherin, or anything.”

“You just ordered Kreacher to ruin my welcome of the new Heir of Slytherin, mother. That’s a four X magical snake around his neck that he’s controlling, you know – a Muggle or child killer, call in the Ministry specialists if you see one on the loose. It can shoot lightning bolts if it’s unhappy, and it’s looking rather cross with you right now,” he added smugly. “I wonder what would happen to your portrait if it was struck by magical lightning? It sounds like a rather interesting experiment.”

“He’s promised not to eat anyone, even when he’s grown. He’s a sweetheart really,” Harry said, wincing a little as he reminded himself uncomfortably of Hagrid. “He only summons storms if there’s danger, and well, last time we had reason to think there was. Sorry again about that.”

He paused at an impatient querying hiss from Storm. “What’s going on?”

“It’s fine, we’re talking. And portraits can’t attack directly. But do keep looking threateningly at the portrait, as you’re scaring her and that’s working in our favour. No storms or lightning, please.”

Storm lunged forward in a false strike – body stretching out in a quick dart at the painting to snap his mouth right next to it – then he drew back again into a tight S shape, hissing loudly. “Show some respect! You were painted to teach the hatchling Clever-men the old Dreaming stories, to teach about the land, and remember the ancestors, not to disrespect my Commander, cold one!”

“What is the serpent saying?” Walburga Black asked with wide eyes.

“She won’t like it,” Harry warned Sirius.

“Then you should definitely tell her, Harry,” Sirius replied gleefully.

Harry translated obediently, “Storm says you should show some respect, and that paintings are made to teach young witches and wizards the old stories, and about the land and their ancestors, and you shouldn’t disrespect his commander.”

“Really? That’s just delightful!” Sirius said, with a happy snicker.

“Uh, yes, that’s pretty much exactly what he said. Well, he said ‘hatchling Clever-men’ technically but that’s better translated as young wizards,” Harry clarified.

“Perhaps,” Mrs. Black said in a strained voice, “I have been a tad hasty in my judgement and remiss in my duties as a hostess.”

“Just a tad,” Sirius agreed solemnly, nodding his head gravely which didn’t match the mirth dancing in his eyes.
Though his casual attire of jeans and a Whitesnake band t-shirt ruined the effect somewhat, Harry assumed the “pure-blood Heir” pose he’d learnt from Draco and Pansy – straight back, chin up, hands clasped behind his back – and said in a haughty tone, “It has thus far not been the welcome I expected from a pure-blood hostess of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black who should be familiar with the old and binding traditions of hospitality.

“Narcissa Malfoy was much more gracious and welcoming when I stayed at their manor, and so were all the family portraits who behaved in a more civilised manner. She was a lady who knew how to properly welcome a family member who is a descendant of the Blacks. The Malfoys have been the height of courtesy and are throwing a ball in my honour during my stay there next month. If I am unwelcome here I can always travel there early, madam, as I know they would be delighted to receive me.”

Sirius looked like he was biting his tongue as he waited with wide-eyed, eager anticipation for his mother’s reaction. She made a strangled sound like she wanted to explode in outrage and grovel in apology all at once, and all that came out was a garbled, “Urk!”

“Little cousin Cissy’s outdoing you, mother,” goaded Sirius.

“I must of course apologise for my attire,” Harry added with false humility. “I did have to travel through Muggle areas to reach your house, and I am of course a young gentleman who understands the importance of discretion and dressing appropriately for any occasion.”

Walburga Black’s portrait looked wild-eyed and lost, and her eyes flickered rapidly back and forth between Harry and her son as she said, “But Lily Potter was just a Muggle-born! Wasn’t she?”

“She was a half-blood actually, though it is unclear if she ever discovered that fact. My grandfather was a Muggle,” Harry explained, in a polite, formal tone of voice. “But my maternal grandmother was a pure-blood Squib from the Parkinson line, and the Head of the Sacred House of Parkinson has confirmed and acknowledged our familial relationship. I believe Greg – Gregory Goyle that is – defines me as a ‘nigh-pure half-blood’, if that helps you establish my level of so-called purity, madam.

“I think you’ll find, however, that it is the magical power in our blood that matters most, not blood itself. ‘Consider the Squibs; for of what account is blood in the end, should puissance be lacking?’” Harry argued, roughly quoting his Knights of Walpurgis booklet which he thought held an argument that might appeal to her. He didn’t want to just let her bigotry stand completely unchallenged, even though he was playing on it to his advantage.

Her brows rose to push her forehead up into lines of wrinkles as her eyes widened more, with the pupils just tiny specks of black in her large brown eyes. “Kreacher!” she screeched, and the house-elf appeared instantly with a pop.

“Yes, Mistress?” he said adoringly.

“We have made a grievous error. Young Harold Potter here – as my son cruelly neglected to inform me – is in fact the new Heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Slytherin, and a nigh-pure half-blood.”

Kreacher looked dubiously at Harry, did a double-take at the angry rearing rainbow snake draped around his shoulders, and turned back to his Mistress for further instructions.

“You will repair his room immediately, and show him and his familiar every courtesy,” she commanded.
“That’s more like it,” Sirius said smugly. “I told you, but would you listen?”

“You told me nothing of import!” screeched his mother angrily with a spray of spittle, her face contorted into a rictus of anger.

Then she choked down her rage as she focused again on Harry with an apologetic strained smile. “I am very sorry for the inconvenience, young Heir.”

“Mistress,” Kreacher said, grovelling low, “Kreacher did as you ordered. So the room is not being… not easily repairable. The other bedrooms is not ruined, but is still not fit for guests and will needs some hours of work at least. Kreacher will punish himself however you order.”

“Later. You will show the young Master to Regulus’ room, if it is clean and ready for use,” she ordered, a pronouncement which appeared to greatly shock both Kreacher and Sirius, who looked flabbergasted.

“I will air the room immediately, Mistress,” Kreacher promised after he recovered, and popped away.

Sirius let out a low whistle of surprise.

“I don’t want to take anyone’s room away from them?” Harry said uncertainly.

“Don’t worry, you won’t be,” said Sirius, as he drew the curtains shut on his mother’s portrait, brusquely cutting off her ingratiating farewell to Harry. Storm subsided on Harry’s shoulders once the picture was hidden, relaxing his tight curves and looking a lot more like a scaly limp noodle.

“It was my brother’s room,” Sirius continued. “He died in the war, the year before you were born, so it’s been empty for a long time. But Kreacher still cleans it every week – it’s the only room in the whole house he does clean properly, apart from dusting mother’s portrait of course.”

“Did we win?” asked Storm.

“Yess we did! You were magnificent, and played a pivotal role in helping intimidate her,” praised Harry, gently stroking Storm along the chin, which was one of the few pats his picky snake actually liked. “She was very impressed that I was a Parselmouth and the Heir of Sslytherin and is going to be polite from now on.”

Storm sounded very pleased indeed as he proclaimed proudly, “Ssspeakerss are the best Clever-men. It is good she learnt her place. She is just a cold painting and not even properly alive.”

While Harry and Storm chatted as they ambled back upstairs, on the first floor Sirius opened the drawing room door and poked his head in to call out, “You, house-elf–”

“Dobby,” corrected Harry.

“–Dobby. Your master is here and is being moved to a new room, so grab his things and follow us.”

Dobby emerged from the room, a conga line of baggage floating in the air behind him. “Master Harry!” he said, apologetically wringing his hands. “Dobby wanted to be polite, and didn’t want to make a fuss, but the other room–”

“Yes, we saw it. It’s alright. It got sabotaged at the last moment by their house-elf – Sirius didn’t know it looked like that.”
“Definitely not,” averred Sirius. “It was in top condition last night – newly restored and sparkling clean, all ready for Harry’s visit.”

Dobby looked deeply shocked at the thought of such behaviour by a fellow house-elf.

“It’s all sorted out now though, and I’ve got a new room up on the...?” Harry trailed off with a questioning look at Sirius.

“-Fourth floor,” finished Sirius. “It’s the room right next to mine. You’ll be at the front of the house overlooking the street.”

Remus Lupin met them on the stairs, coming down as they were going up. He looked rather more scarred than the last time Harry had seen him, with a few rows of red lines down his forehead and cheeks. He was limping and holding onto the bannister carefully as he walked. “Sirius? I heard your mother’s dulcet tones – is Harry here? Ah, there you are Potter, it’s a pleasure to see you again. I hope Walburga didn’t spoil your welcome, we usually keep the curtains closed-”

“Oh, she spoiled it alright,” Sirius grumbled. “She ordered Kreacher to trash Harry’s room just before he got here. It looks like Peeves went berserk in there.”

“Oh no,” sighed Lupin. “Can we get it fixed by tonight?”

“No, he made a right mess.”

As they reached the third floor – going slowly in wordless agreement to allow Lupin to keep up with them – Lupin peeked inside Harry’s room. “Merlin’s beard. That’s… Oh, I’m so sorry, Sirius. All your hard work!” He let out a deep sigh as he closed the door and wrinkled his nose. “We can fix it, I’m sure. But not tonight. Or… tomorrow either, I think. Well, we will need somewhere else for him. Perhaps the Master bedroom would be the easiest to fix, with some Mending Charms and some fresh linen?” Lupin said doubtfully. “Or I could take the sofa and he could have my room?”

“No need,” Sirius said smugly. “He’s going to stay in Regulus’ room.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Lupin said, clutching the bannister tightly as he stumbled mid-step on the stairs. He gave a wide-eyed stare to Sirius as if trying to communicate an unspoken message by Legilimency. Harry wondered if either of them were skilled in that.

Sirius grinned. “Absolutely. Mother agreed. She even sent the little pest to get the room ready for him.”

“But why?!”

“Storm,” Sirius said concisely, pointing at the snake.

Remus paused for a moment to think, then resumed slowly walking upstairs. “Parselmouth? Heir of Slytherin? Upstanding young Dark wizard who’s not a blood traitor like we horrible two are?” he asked.

“The first two were enough to do the trick,” Sirius said. “She’ll be on her best behaviour now. Harry helped a lot too – he did a good pure-blood Heir impersonation, sneering at Squibs and citing his connections and ancestry.”

He tossed an approving grin in Harry’s direction. “He told her Cissy was a better hostess than she was and knew how to be hospitable – it really got up her nose when he threatened to leave, like it should be an honour to have him here.”
“That was alright, wasn’t it?” Harry double-checked.

“It was marvellous,” reassured Sirius. “Perfect. You couldn’t have done any better. You’ll have to keep your good manners up, of course.”

Harry bowed dutifully. “Yes, sir.”

“Merlin! Just Sirius, please. I meant with mother. I didn’t mean you should keep that pure-blood courtesy act up with me.”

Regulus’ room was the first door at the top of the stairs on the topmost landing. There was a small, pompous sign in the middle of the door. In a careful calligraphic script, it read:

Do Not Enter
Without the Express Permission of
Regulus Arcturus Black

The door immediately to the right of it had a simple dull brass plate that simply read:

Sirius

“My old childhood room, obviously,” Sirius said, with a superfluous wave at his own door. “The creaky little spiral staircase over there leads up to the attic. Best stay out – we haven’t tackled it yet, and frankly I’m not inclined to bother with it.”

“Why didn’t you move into the Master bedroom?” Harry asked curiously.

Sirius and Lupin exchanged a look, and Lupin nodded. Sirius cleared his throat, and said, “That’s where Moony – Remus – usually spends the three nights of the full moon. The bigger the room, the less trapped the werewolf feels.”

“It’s not as good as being outdoors,” Lupin added, “but it helps.”

Harry nodded. “It makes a difference even with the potion?”

“I ah, don’t have… that is, I don’t have it every month anymore. It’s notoriously difficult to brew, and I’m not employed at Hogwarts anymore,” Lupin said, stumbling over his words in his embarrassment.

“Surely Professor – Master Snape, that is – might… Ah, no,” Harry said, trailing off at Lupin’s snort and Sirius’ eye roll, and the memory of Snape’s pronounced distaste for the pair of them.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be spending the next few nights elsewhere,” reassured Lupin. “To be doubly safe for you.”

Harry wanted to ask him to be careful. Not to hurt anyone. Not to get caught by the Aurors. But they were all rather obvious sentiments, really. So he just nodded silently.

Sirius twisted the coiled-snake doorknob and pushed open Regulus’ door. “Unlocked,” he muttered in faint surprise, as the room was revealed.

Kreacher bowed low as the three wizards crowded into the room, his snout brushing the floor he grovelled so deeply. The room was much more spacious than the one downstairs that had been first picked out for Harry. Its lavish grandeur was clearly faded, but the room was clean and in good condition, and smelt faintly of lavender rather than stew and rotten fish.
The décor was all in a Slytherin colour scheme – green and silver were everywhere. There were emerald green sheets on the bed, which had a thick wooden headboard with stars and animals carved on it. A pair of clean but faded emerald velvet curtains had been drawn back to let the late afternoon sunlight into the room through a tall glass window with a view of the street and the park opposite. The walls were covered with some kind of silver wallpaper that looked silky in texture, and held a few fine if slightly dusty wall hangings. On the wall above the bed was a large family crest, painted with meticulous care in black paint onto the silver wallpaper. Two dogs flanked a shield, which had an upraised dagger on it at the bottom. Above the dagger there was a chevron, then a star in each of the top corners of the shield. A painted black ribbon winding underneath the shield had silver writing on it – ‘Toujours pur’ – presumably the family motto. Stuck to the wall underneath the crest was a collage of yellowed newspaper cuttings that Harry couldn’t make out from where he stood just inside the entrance.

“Well this looks nice,” Harry said approvingly, as he looked around. He glanced up at the ceiling where a chandelier hung above his head. It was unlit with old candle stubs still resting in its sockets, and old solid wax hung in frost-like drips. But it was free from spiderwebs, which is more than could be said for the other ones in the house he’d glanced at. The rest of the furniture also looked solid and intact –the wardrobe, the large desk and matching chair with a silver cushion on it, and the bedside table. The desk was dust-free and held a tidy pile of old textbooks, an inkbottle, and a squat crystal vase full of decaying green-feathered quills.

Sirius let out a relieved breath, and Lupin patted him gently on the shoulder. “It’ll be fine,” Lupin reassured. “He likes it.”

“Should Dobby bring Master Harry’s trunk in?” Dobby piped up from behind Harry, who was still blocking the doorway.

“Sorry Dobby,” Harry apologised, stepping in and to one side. “Yes, come on in.”

Dobby trotted in, with the trunk, bags, and Storm’s tank floating behind him, which he deposited on the floor against a wall.

“Kreacher,” Harry said, making the little house-elf straighten attentively, “I would like to introduce you to Dobby, the Potter house-elf who’ll be visiting during my stay, with Sirius’ permission. Dobby, this is Kreacher, the Black house-elf.” Harry hesitated after that. He’d originally planned to give a little ingratiating speech about how Dobby would work under the Black house-elf’s authority and would help out with cleaning as directed, but Kreacher hadn’t impressed him at all so far. “Um, maybe you can chat with each other a little, and sort jobs out between you.”

Kreacher stared fiercely at Dobby, who stood tall and proud in his clean white toga painstakingly embroidered with the full Potter crest – the black and white patterned shield with three cinquefoil flowers and a patterned stripe, topped with a fancy knight’s helmet with a hippocampus on top of it. Dobby glared right back at Kreacher, who was clad only in an old rag and an almost palpable aura of resentment.

“We will starts with cleaning Master Harry’s rooms properly,” Dobby said, with a raised chin and a determined look in his eyes. Then he and Kreacher went into a little huddle in a corner near the bags and trunk as they began whispering fiercely to each other.

“We’ll get the newspaper clippings down as soon as we can, but like a lot of things in this house they’re glued to the wall with Permanent Sticking Charms,” Sirius said. “I never could wreck them.”

“What’s wrong with them?” Harry asked, approaching them cautiously. “Oh.”
They were all about the Dark Lord. Some even called him that, while others favoured Lord Voldemort, and a scattering were about You-Know-Who. A couple had animated photos of the Dark Mark floating above a ruined house, and the panicky sounding article titles reported Death Eater attacks. He glanced quickly over them, and away.

“Is… Potter Cottage up here?” he asked nervously.

“No,” Sirius promised. “Regulus died before you were born, remember. He was… well, he wasn’t on our side, Harry. He died a good little minion, probably bumped off by one of his fellow Death Eaters – I doubt he was important enough to be killed by Voldemort in person. I’m sorry Harry, it’s not what I planned – I know it’s not the best room, but-”

“It’s fine, I really don’t mind,” vowed Harry with sincerity. “So long as there’s nothing cursed in here that can hurt me, I’ll be alright. I like the green and the snakes just as much as red and gold, and I can just ignore the clippings.”

The muttered conversation between the house-elves was getting louder, and they caught an aggrieved mutter about “Master Regulus” from Kreacher.

Dobby piped up loudly, “Dobby can cook dinner tonight, if Master Harry and his friends would like? Kreacher will be busy cleaning.”

“Can Dobby really cook?” Lupin asked Harry optimistically.

“Dobby is a very good cook, when Master Harry is lets him cook,” Dobby answered loudly, drowning out Kreacher’s unconsciously uttered stream of thoughts.

“Sirius? Where can Dobby stay? I don’t remember you mentioning a house-elf room?” Harry asked.

“Oh, there’s a little room off the kitchen in the basement,” Sirius said. “He can stay there with Kreacher. I’ll show you two down there as soon as you’re ready.”

Turning to Dobby, Sirius asked, “Can you cook a roast?” He looked delighted at Dobby’s nod of affirmation.

“I’ll just get Storm set up, and we’ll go back down then, I guess,” Harry said, lifting Storm’s tank onto the desk. He unwound Storm from his shoulders and placed him down gently on the leafy mulch.

“Is he going to have a nap?” Sirius asked curiously.

“He’s already asleep,” Harry replied. “He fell asleep on the way upstairs.”

“But his eyes are open.”

“He’s a snake. His eyes always look open. He doesn’t have eyelids like we do.”

Sirius nodded. “I never thought snakes were cool, but yours is alright I suppose, if a bit bloody-minded. And he’s not at all slimy!”

“I’ll stay up here,” Remus volunteered, “and do some checking for curses and pests before I have to leave. Pop back up to see me before I go, won’t you Harry?”

“Sure.”
Sirius looked around the room critically as Dobby floated one of the bags in the air in preparation for their exit. “Do you want the family crest gone? That bit of rubbish should come off easily. It might all come off if you don’t mind losing a bit of wallpaper along with the articles.”

Kreacher made a choked sound of offence. “Not Master Regulus’ painting!” he pleaded. He started muttering and snuffling sadly about how his Mistress would be heartbroken.

“I don’t mind if it stays,” Harry said, with a light shrug and an uncomfortable pitying glance at the pathetic house-elf. “There’s nothing wrong with having a bit of pride in your House.”

Kreacher’s sobs died off with a spluttering choke, and a last snuffle. “Young Master Harold is kind to Master Regulus’ memory,” he muttered with an approving note in his voice.

Harry stared into the kitchen cupboard. Most of it was taken up with a very large and old-fashioned boiler, but in the scant foot of space underneath the pipes Kreacher had made himself a nest of rags and smelly old blankets.

“I guess there’s not really much room in there for two house-elves,” Sirius mused thoughtfully.

He wants Dobby to sleep in a cupboard, Harry thought dully. Harry saw a tiny pile of treasures glinting in one corner, and some stale bread crusts and mouldy old bits of cheese tucked in a fold of blanket. The sight and smell reminded him of his hiding spots for food at the Dursleys, and old memories of hungry days locked in the cupboard at Privet Drive flashed back to him. The gnawing emptiness of his belly, the stale hot air growing more unbearable the longer he was in there, his tongue thick in his dry sandy mouth, and the rain of dust from the stairs above as Dudley ran thunderously up and down them over and over again, laughing at Harry’s pleas for him to stop.

A hand on his shoulder made him flinch away and duck as he covered his head with his hands. “I’m sorry!” he blurted out, hardly knowing what he was saying.

“Harry?” Sirius said softly, dropping his hand away instantly. “Sorry, I didn’t know you were… Your house-elf can sleep somewhere else, alright? Would that… be better?”

“Yes, sorry, I was just thinking of something else,” Harry said vaguely, wincing at his own poor excuse as he tried to calm his rapid breathing. “Somewhere with a bit more room would be good.” Sirius just nodded as if there was nothing to talk about, which was fine by Harry.

“Maybe in uh… well the last few bedrooms really do need clearing up,” said Sirius. “Maybe the Master bedroom, or the attic? There’s lots of room up there, I think. Would that do?”

“Dobby has a nice little space set up in the attic at Potter Cottage,” Harry agreed with relief. “He tried to sleep in the pantry cupboard at first, but he agreed to move eventually. So, I could help fix a spot up here for him in the attic here too? And maybe for Kreacher as well?”

Dobby cocked his head as he heard his name, and paused in his exploration of the kitchen cupboards, but he didn’t interrupt their conversation. Kreacher was another matter, and he arrived with a pop right behind Harry, making him jump slightly.

“Young Master called?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to distract you from your work,” Harry apologised, crouching down to look Kreacher in the eye. “I was just talking with Sirius about where Dobby would sleep, and we were discussing setting up a place in the attic, with a bit more room. Would you like a larger space to
Kreacher stared at him, and briefly looked at Sirius. Harry glanced at him too. Sirius’ focus was solely on Harry, and he was watching Harry with a soft and slightly concerned expression.

“Kreacher has always slept in the kitchen. It is warm in winter,” the old house-elf said slowly.

“Change can be difficult,” sympathised Harry. “But I’m sure I could find a warm space for you upstairs too, perhaps next to a chimney. How about I set something up, and you see if you like it before you decide whether or not to move?”

“Master Harry says Dobby must look after himself for the honour of the Potter family,” Dobby urged. “Dobby has a nice nest in the attic out of Master’s way at Potter Cottage. Malfoy house-elves gets a little alcove in the kitchen each, and at Longbottom Manor they has their very own room just for house-elves with real beds!”

Kreacher hesitated uncertainly. “Kreacher must check with Mistress. Mistress might disapprove.”

“Isn’t Sirius your Master?” Harry asked. Kreacher just looked kind of shifty as he stood there silently, rocking slightly from foot to foot, and it was Sirius who answered him in the end.

“Technically I’m his Master. But while I’ve inherited the house thanks to entailment laws, I haven’t put the ring on or said any formal words to assume the title of the Head of the Nobby and Most Annoying House of Black. It bugs him, so he keeps trying to weasel out of orders if I leave any loopholes.” Spotting a glint of silver inside the boiler room, he added, “Like squirrelling away old photos I told him to get rid of!”

“Kreacher got rid of them from the library wall like Kreacher was told,” the old house-elf justified.

“I’ve thought about getting rid of him – to another family that is,” Sirius added hastily, at Harry’s shocked look, “but I’m not sure he’d survive the change and that seems a bit cruel. We don’t get along, but this is his home too.” Harry thought Sirius’ smile looked a little forced, but he didn’t dare comment on it.

“May I try and get him settled in the attic if he agrees?” checked Harry. “I might need some spare old sheets or blankets if you have some.”

“Sure, if you can get him and mother to co-operate, be my guest. Kreacher, remember I want you to follow Harry’s orders while he’s a guest here. You be polite to him and keep his rooms – any of his rooms – clean and tidy. But for now – back to work.”

Kreacher glanced at Harry, then popped away.

Harry said, “Okay Dobby, head up to the attic, see what you can do with that. Ask Kreacher for supplies that Sirius can spare, and rig something up like we have at Potter Cottage with cloth walls, but for two house-elves.”

Dobby popped away, his bag of wool and sewing supplies held securely in his arms.

“But he was going to cook dinner for us,” Sirius said wistfully.

“He really needs somewhere to sleep, though,” Harry argued. “I’ll start dinner myself, it’s no trouble.”

A little bit of polite arguing and repetitive insistent offers later, Harry was cooking dinner for three
people and two house-elves. Sirius lit the wood stove for him, and Harry got to work rummaging in
the enchanted ice-box for supplies. The familiar motions of cooking settled his shaking hands and
soothed his lingering rattled spirits that had been upset by the sight of Kreacher’s den, and the
uncomfortableness of arguing with the host he was staying with and upon whose goodwill he now
depended. Harry hoped cooking a nice dinner for everyone might put people back in a good
humour after a rocky welcome with lots of arguments, and he hoped it would impress Sirius if he
did a good job of it.

Sirius watched for a while and offered to help, but once Harry discovered that peeling potatoes with
a charm was pretty much the limit of Sirius’ cooking abilities, he gingerly encouraged Sirius to do
something elsewhere. His host agreeably wandered off to check on the attic and make sure that
there weren’t any magical pests up there that might be a danger to anyone.

Soon enough Harry had a beef and vegetable stew cooking in a freshly scrubbed cauldron
suspended in the massive fireplace, a kettle of water bubbling away on the stove top for some tea,
and an apple pie baking in the oven. He found a half a loaf of bread in a bread box in the pantry
and cut and buttered some slices to go with the stew. Then he rinsed off a dusty little copper
saucepan and started making some fresh custard on the stove to go with the apple pie.

“Mmm, that smells grand, pity I’ll miss it,” sighed Lupin, wandering into the kitchen sniffing the
air.

“It’s still two days until the full moon – that isn’t until Friday. Aren’t you alright for tonight?”
asked Harry, pouring a saucepan full of hot milk and cream into a ceramic bowl full of a mixture of
egg yolks, sugar, and a little flour. He whisked it continuously with a silver fork, as he’d been
unable to locate a proper whisk in any useable condition and hadn’t wanted to risk using the fancy
gold cutlery for such a mundane task. He wondered absent-mindedly if the material cooking
utensils were made of affected the dishes you used them for magically, like potions. Would custard
be tastier if stirred widdershins?

“It was my understanding that you only had to change on the full moon and the night either side,”
Harry checked. “I had presumed you don’t choose to transform on other days?”

“Well, yes, that’s right. But the full moon’s getting close, and… I wasn’t really sure how
comfortable you’d be with me here. I thought I’d give you time to settle in with Sirius – I didn’t
want to ruin things.”

“But this is your home, and I already know you’re a werewolf,” Harry said. He poured the custard
mixture back into the copper saucepan while they chatted and returned it to the stove to thicken.

“Now, however, I’m also a criminal. An Azkaban escapee with dubious… Well. It’s messy, that’s
all. There are things… I can’t be seen, I can’t be talked about, or they’ll drag me back there in
chains. If I’m lucky. Though I think I would rather not be lucky, if it came to that. I don’t regret
any of it, though. I did what I had to, for Sirius. I have somewhere else I can stay, if you need me
to… It’s all about what’s best for Sirius, and he wants you here.”

It was all rather nervously incoherent, obviously with much left unsaid, but it was enough for Harry
to get the gist of what he was trying to say. Harry glanced back at him, still stirring his custard so it
didn’t form lumps. “Are you a danger to me?”

“No! No. I promise I’m not. And I won’t transform tonight.”

“Then stay for dinner tonight. Stay here in general, too – this is your home, not mine. Just spending
the three nights around the full moon somewhere safe elsewhere is good enough for me, since you
“I don’t have any potion.”

“Alright then,” Lupin agreed softly.

Lupin got out some crockery and the good gold-plated cutlery, plus two smaller place settings for the house-elves at Harry’s prompting, and then settled down at the long wooden kitchen table which was big enough to seat a full dozen guests if needed. He snuck a piece of buttered bread off Harry’s prepared platter to snack on, watching Harry work.

“How do you like cooking?”

“I guess,” Harry shrugged. “It’s better than most other housework. I like gardening the most, I suppose. It gets you out into the sunlight and fresh air. Could you find a jug for the custard, please?”

Lupin located a gravy boat, which they agreed would have to do, as Lupin suspected Sirius had thrown out the custard and milk jugs in one of his “cleaning purges”.

“So…” Harry said slowly, as he decanted the custard into the dish, “Sirius is my Regent, right? Do you think he’d be happy to help me sort out my finances a bit? There are some expenses I’d like to get approved, from the Potter Vault. For property maintenance, and a house-keeping allowance for Dobby. He’s also keen to have some wages, though he bargained me down a lot – he doesn’t want too much. Just enough for food and sewing supplies, mostly.”

“I’m sure he’d be happy to help!” Lupin said. “He likes to keep busy, and something to focus on is good for him. He is officially bound to serve House Potter for a year, so the more official tasks along those lines you can set, the happier he’ll feel that he’s repaying his debt to you, I think. Or perhaps more precisely, to James and Lily.” He looked a little pensive after saying that, and nibbled slowly at the rest of his slice of bread.

“Harry?” he said quietly, glancing around to make sure they were unobserved. “About Sirius – he’s… he’s doing alright but he still has bad days, sometimes. If he starts looking a bit lost, or if he turns into a dog, just leave him to it, alright? Don’t try and shake him out of it – he hates that. Just make sure the room is warm – light a fire or use a Warming Charm. Sorry, not the latter, you can’t use your wand out of school, of course. Anyway, it helps him – the warmth. It reminds him he’s not in Azkaban any more – he said it was always cold there. If he gets too cold he sometimes forgets where he is. You could try fetching him a mug of hot chocolate, too. He always tells me not to fuss like an old mother hen, but he drinks it anyway.”

Harry nodded understandingly. Chocolate was an oddly efficacious remedy for wizards for a lot of mental disturbances, and the warmth of the milk would probably be good to chase away the cold. “Anything else?”

“Don’t invite anyone over without checking with him, which you’d have to do anyway since the townhouse is under the Fidelius. Uh… keep him out of the bathroom on the third floor if you can. It’s the mould – the dank smell of the room, I think. But he won’t want to talk about any of it, so I wouldn’t even try if I was you. Just help him stay busy and encourage him to get out of the house while I’m gone if an opportunity arises. He gets a bit guilty at having to leave me here on my own, but that won’t be a problem while I’m away.”

“Is it… because of the Dementors?”

“Yes. Dementor exposure isn’t good even in the short term, and he was there for a decade,” Lupin said, looking horribly guilty. “They call it ‘Athena’s Curse’ if you want to look it up – I know
you’re interested in being a Healer. I think it’s a lot like what Muggles call shellshock.”

“What’s Athena’s Curse?” Harry asked, intrigued. “How is it different? Has he consulted a Healer or a doctor?”

“Yes, he saw Healer Smethwyck, and that’s what he called it – Athena’s Curse. The term comes from the *Iliad*. After surviving years of battles, Homer wrote that Ajax went mad under Athena’s spell. He slaughtered a herd of sheep that he thought were the enemy, and then killed himself. It’s not a pretty story, I’m afraid,” he apologized.

“Smethwyck wasn’t a lot of help, really. It’s not his area of Healing specialisation, but he was the only one Sirius was willing to trust, since the man spoke up for him at his trial. I can’t really share any more – I don’t want to discuss Sirius’ private medical details any more than is necessary.”

“I understand.”

“Don’t worry though – he’s never violent,” Lupin attempted to reassure him anxiously, “he just retreats into himself, typically. Don’t tell him I talked about this with you, please. Just act like everything’s normal, if you can.”

“No problem.” Harry guessed he knew a little what that felt like. He was really hoping Sirius wouldn’t tell Lupin about his brief breakdown earlier in the kitchen.

Dinner went smoothly (unless you counted Lupin not wanting custard on his pie), and copious praise on the meal left Harry basking in the glow of rare and treasured compliments on his cooking skills. Sirius promised to take him out for a visit to Gringotts to sort out his finances to pay for maintenance of Potter Cottage, and Harry accepted his offer to teach him “a bit of boring tosh about estate management” whenever it was convenient for both of them. They also agreed to spend the next morning having a proper tour of the townhouse, and Harry’s offer to help clean up was graciously accepted.

Dobby and Kreacher reappeared with empty plates and bowls, having presumably enjoyed their meals too. Kreacher hadn’t thought it “fitting” to eat in their presence, and Dobby had obligingly acquiesced to his insistence they take their supper elsewhere. But soon enough his natural wilfulness reasserted itself, as he slipped into one of his usual habits – nagging Harry to let him work more.

“Master Harry will let Dobby do the washing up,” he half asked, half ordered, snapping his fingers and making the dirty crockery from the kitchen table float over to the plain grey stone-topped counter next to the sink.

“I promise I won’t try and do the washing up tonight,” Harry swore, “but you should ask Kreacher if it’s alright with him, first.”

Dobby hesitated and turned to Kreacher apologetically. “Dobby forgots he was a guest. May Dobby wash the dishes?”

Kreacher jerked his head in a stiff nod. “Yes. Kreacher will work in the attic.”

“Don’t you dare try and get that moth-eaten stuffed Nundu head back on the wall, it’s ugly and cursed,” Sirius warned sternly.

“Yes Master,” Kreacher promised with an insincere smile. Then in a low mutter he added, “Another heirloom, Mistress would never have gotten rid of such things but the ungrateful spawn doesn’t care-”
He disappeared with a pop, mid-rant. Harry suspected he would be continuing his monologue up in the attic – he didn’t seem to even notice he was speaking aloud.

Dobby cheerfully started doing the washing up, as if nothing was wrong at all.

“Does he do that a lot?” Harry asked hesitantly. “Muttering?”

“Constantly,” groaned Sirius, “he’s done it ever since I moved in. I think he’s gone loopy on his own here with no-one but mother’s portrait to talk to for years. He’s always been a nasty little beast, though. You don’t have to be nice to him if you don’t want to, Harry. It’s alright to be mad at him for trashing your room and being a bigoted bitter old thing.”

“I’m not mad, honestly,” promised Harry. “He was just doing what he was ordered. Sort of.”

After dinner Remus said his farewells. Harry was escorted by Sirius as he peeked into the attic to see how the improvised house-elf bedrooms were going. It looked good – the attic contents of old furniture and boxes had all been pushed to one side to make some clear space, and on the side with the chimney some old striped flannel sheets had been hung up with ropes and hooks to make a slightly saggy-walled cubby, with separate piles of old pillows and blankets on the floor for each house-elf to sleep on.

Dobby proudly pointed out the improvised shelving he’d made for each of them out of wooden crates, stuck together by their sides with charms. Kreacher’s shelf was still empty as yet, but Dobby had tidied away his stash of wool and fabric into his.

“Kreacher said he will try the new room tonight – his Mistress told him to, and to listen to Master Harry,” Dobby relayed.

“If only she’d tell him to listen to me, too,” sighed Sirius. “But I’ve always been the white sheep of the family, I’m afraid. Fancy her favouring a half-blood over her own son!”

“I’m sorry,” Harry apologised, with a repentant look.

“Not your fault, don’t mind my grumbling. She’s a nasty bit of work and no mistake – she was always a bigoted old cow and we’ve fought for longer than you’ve been alive. Come on, now you’ve seen your house-elf is settled in let’s get you to bed.”

The display of old newspaper articles had been covered over with a square of thick black fabric that matched Mrs. Black’s curtains downstairs, presumably affixed with some kind of sticking charm because it was glued fast to the wall. Dobby or perhaps Kreacher had unpacked for him – his clothes were all put away in the cupboard. However, Harry did notice that his Muggle clothes were in a messy pile in one solitary drawer rather than carefully folded or hung up on wooden coat hangers like his robes had been, as if to ensure they wouldn’t contaminate his other clothes. It made him conclude that Kreacher must have done the unpacking.

“This isn’t one of my robes?” Harry said hesitantly, noticing a couple of black and green formal robes at the end of the wardrobe.

“Regulus’ formal robes,” Sirius said, showing off the embroidered Black crest on the front. He pulled open a couple of drawers and peeked inside. “Nothing else out of place. I guess everything else was packed up. My, he rarely works this hard. And he’s left you a pitcher of water and a glass next to the bed, unless that was Remus. I know Remus did the wall.”

“The window’s cleaner,” said Harry, glancing around. “And there’s a new candelabra on the bedside table. Well, see you in the morning?”
“Good night Harry. Sleep tight, don’t let the Lethifolds eat you.”

“What?!”

Sirius blinked at his surprised exclamation. “It’s just a saying. You know – sleep safely. Don’t get smothered in your sleep.”

“OH. GOOD NIGHT THEN SIRIUS, DON’T LET THE LETHIFOLDS EAT YOU.”

Harry awoke safely the next morning, having escaped the rather gruesome imaginary prospect of being smothered by leathery wings in his sleep. He’d kept his wand on his bedside table, just in case.

Thankfully, he had a day off from his tiresome book-signing duties, with his trip to Gabon on Friday still another day away.

Sirius looked tired at breakfast time, citing some late-night reading as the cause. But he gamely chatted with Harry about getting an international Portkey so he could accompany Harry to Gabon the next day – an apparently non-negotiable plan, of which only the details remained to be ironed out. Sirius was easily wheedled into a promise to make up for his hovering by taking Harry to Gringotts the following week, and to escort him while he went shopping with friends.

“Have you got your supply list yet?” Sirius asked, sipping his tea in a well-trained dainty-looking manner.

“Not yet, but I think it should arrive soon. Though I already know a few of the books I need. Anyway, I also need a few new clothes and I promised Pansy we’d go shopping together,” Harry said with a small grimace. He didn’t mind shopping with her, but was a little scared she might treat him like a dress-up doll if not reined in.

“Parkinson, right? I can still hardly believe Lily was related to the Parkinsons – how trippy is that?!” Sirius said, shaking his head in bemusement. “Oh, about the book list – owls won’t find you unless you’re outside the property boundary. Wards. Go into the park across the road or even just stand on the footpath on the other side of the road – they’ll find you there safely.”

“Well that explains my lack of post last night. I left the window open and everything – nothing!”

“Popular, are you?” Sirius teased with a tired smile.

Harry shrugged and mumbled embarrassedly, “It’s not so much being the Boy Who Lived, it’s the Heir of Slytherin thing, mostly. I mean, I have a few friends who send letters, but there’s also lots of strangers writing to me. There’s some people asking favours, others sending ads for their stuff or inviting me to go to things. And the book promotion thing hasn’t been helping, either. Lately there’s been a lot of people trying to butter me up or ask my opinion on things like they think I’m someone important just because I can talk to snakes. It’s silly really. Hermione says that, statistically, it’s likely that at least half the wizarding population of Britain is descended from a Founder. Not that talking to a snake even counts as proof of that. Tracey told me that being a Parselmouth is not quite so rare in India, where it’s a very respectable talent.”

“Well, I had not heard that! There you go. Not so special then, are you?”

A knot of tension eased inside Harry at that. “No, quite ordinary, really. For a wizard.”
They made plans for a quiet day in – Harry wanted to do some reading and studying, then make a trip outside after sunset so owls could locate him. Sirius wanted to get some more house-cleaning done so Harry offered to help, not wanting to be a burden. Kreacher muttered in the background about “Master ruining everything” before Sirius brusquely ordered him out to continue fixing Harry’s original room.

Harry spent a quiet morning studying as planned. He and Sirius reconvened later that day in the drawing room, which was a long, high-ceilinged room with a cobwebbed chandelier. Two of the olive-green walls were covered in large dirty tapestries, while the wall directly opposite the door looked a little nicer with a large fireplace flanked by two ornate glass-fronted cabinets. The last wall was lined with curtain-covered windows that overlooked the street. A writing desk had long ago been placed near the windows to catch the theoretically available sunlight, which currently failed to penetrate the heavy drawn curtains and grimy windows. A few spindly tables and a sofa set took up the centre of the room. As was true of most of the house, Harry felt the room must have looked very fine back in its glory days but was now faded and grimy.

“There’s a lot in here that needs work,” Sirius said grimly, “but we should really deal with the Doxys first. Remus got the Boggart out of the writing desk earlier this week, so that’s dealt with, but those creatures have got to go. Watch out for their bite – they’re venomous. I’ve got some Doxycide, so I’ll spray them, and you bag them, alright? It’s got dragon liver and essence of hemlock in the potion, so if you get it on you wash up right away. Oh, and I have a bottle of antidote for Doxy bites if we need it, but I doubt we will.”

Harry nodded obediently. Little clouds of dust rose from the carpet as they walked across the room to the long, moss green velvet curtains, which were buzzing as though swarming with invisible bees. Harry wished he was armed with something more substantial than an empty sack, but he didn’t want to get in trouble for complaining about a chore. His wand in his pocket was scant comfort since he wasn’t allowed to use it. Maybe some extra protection would be alright?

“Sirius, do you mind if I wear gloves?” he asked hesitantly. “I don’t want to be bitten.”

“Be my guest! Good idea.”

Dobby was called to fetch Harry’s dragonhide gloves for him, which he did with delight at the opportunity to help.

The Doxycide was a foul-smelling black liquid which made garden fertilizer smell like roses in comparison. Sirius started squirting it into the curtain folds. Each spray paralyzed a few Doxys which Harry gingerly picked up to throw in the sack. The little beetle-winged bristly black creatures might have too many arms and legs, but they still looked uncomfortably similar to the more pleasantly humanoid fairies. However, once they started swarming Harry lost all his former sympathy for them. He swatted them out of the air with a sofa cushion trying to keep them away from his face, while Sirius frantically drenched the curtains in black sludge, swearing loudly in a mixture of Muggle and wizarding slang as they started biting him. Sirius’ nose started to drip blood, and he was gritting his teeth in pain.

“Dobby! Kreacher!” Harry yelled, and the two appeared with pops of displaced air – Kreacher looked cleaner than previously and was wearing a plain toga. “Help us deal with the Doxys, if you can!”

What was a terrifying and overwhelming job for two people was more manageable with extra helpers. Telekinesis seemed to be Dobby’s forte, and with hasty gestures he floated struggling Doxys right into Sirius’ line of fire. Kreacher seemed either less powerful or less motivated, and mostly helped Harry pick the tiny dazed creatures up off the floor to shove in the sack. But
Kreacher sprung into creaky action when some of the fleeing creatures tried to shelter by clinging onto the tapestries, and Sirius pivoted to aim the spray gun at them.

“No! Not the tapestries! Kreacher will get the Doxys off!” he cried anxiously, and physically pulled them off, throwing the creatures into the air for Dobby to catch and whisk over to Sirius.

It took a couple of hours, but eventually they were all dealt with. A small pile of glistening marble-like black eggs – free from Doxycide – was even found and set aside for Storm to enjoy as a snack later when he woke.

Sirius slumped on the sofa with a little puff of dust from the fabric, pulled off the cloth tied around his mouth to ward off fumes, and took another sip of Doxy anti-venom. “I think,” he said tiredly, “that we won’t try the upstairs curtains until Remus is back to help. That was a lot harder than I had anticipated. I’m not even sure we have enough Doxycide left. I might try and get some of those old tapestries off the walls and then call it a day. Mother might have used Permanent Sticking Charms again, but it’s worth a try as I think they predate her.” He passed the bottle of antidote to Harry, who took a swig and passed it on to Kreacher, wiggling the bottle encouragingly at the old house-elf until he took it and drank a hesitant sip.

“Whatever Master says,” said Kreacher, passing the antidote to Dobby, who took a careful tiny sip at Harry’s approving nod. Dobby had been bitten the least of all of them.

“Seven centuries it’s been in the family,” Kreacher muttered under his breath. “Mistress would never forgive Kreacher if the tapestry was thrown out. Kreacher must save it from the blood traitor.”

“If I can get rid of it I will,” snapped Sirius, with a disdainful look at the largest wall tapestry, which was coated in dust and pock-marked with burnt spots.

Dobby politely ignored the fight and began cleaning up the mess from their fight with the Doxys, while Harry wandered over to look at the contentious tapestry. Sirius and Kreacher started arguing about throwing out “treasures” and whether Sirius was a murderer or not.

“Sirius! Is this the family tree you mentioned at the garden party?” Harry cried out happily, eagerly seizing on an opportunity to defuse the situation as he examined the contentious tapestry in question. “Oh, this is awesome! Am I on here? Is my dad?”

Sirius sighed. “Oh, right, I remember – I promised to show it to you,” he said, which ended the argument with Kreacher abruptly, to Harry’s hidden relief. Sirius came over and started explaining the history of the Blacks to Harry, who listened with eager attention. Kreacher listened in too, eavesdropping on the duo as he slowly helped Dobby clean up the room.

Harry sympathised with Sirius’ brief tale of how he’d left home in his teens to live with the Potters and nodded understandingly as Sirius admitted to his anger at his family who’d never been happy with him being sorted into Gryffindor, or for aligning himself against You-Know-Who against their wishes. He was interested to hear about the Tonks family, and they chatted about whether the tapestry could be restored to fix the burnt patches – Sirius didn’t know but agreed to let Harry look into fixing it, since he was keen. Harry was also curious about the mention of Phineas, saying he’d met his portrait at Hogwarts.

“There’s another painting of him around here somewhere,” Sirius said, a bit bemused by Harry’s continuing enthusiasm. “I think it’s in the study, on the second floor.”

Harry was thrilled to see his grandmother and grandfather listed on the tapestry, even if the only
mention of his father was as “1 son”.

“How come Draco is listed on the tapestry, but my father and lots of other children aren’t?” Harry asked.

“Narcissa married *sine manu*, you see,” explained Sirius.

*Without the hand*, Harry thought, translating the Latin in his head.

“It’s a particular type of marriage – though not a distinction most people worry about in modern times. It’s a rather old marriage option not very hip these days, and I don’t imagine Malfoy – her husband that is – would be keen on having it discussed. Officially she retains her maiden name of Black and is still part of the House. Her first child is a Malfoy. But according to her contractual obligations, if she ever has a second child it will have to take on the Black surname. Grandfather Arcturus fretted over the House diminishing in size when he was the Head, even back then when Cissy married.”

“She signs her letters as Narcissa Malfoy,” Harry volunteered.

“Does she? Uncle Cygnus – her father – would’ve hexed her silly if he was still alive for throwing away her name like that. Still, she remains entitled to use the Black surname, and that’s why the tapestry records her children. It puts Draco Malfoy in the line to inherit, though not strongly as he’s the *Malfoy* Heir, and not a Black himself. The thing is, being the paterfamilias of the House of Black is entailed on the male line. Other Houses are more egalitarian, but the Blacks were always overly proud of their bigoted ancient traditions. Young Malfoy has a weak claim, but we are running rather short of Blacks.”

“So, he’s the Heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black?”

“Merlin Harry, keep it simple. The House of Black will do, or the Nobby and Most Annoying House of Black if you want to be formal. That’s what I always called it.”

“Wretched traitor to the family name,” muttered Kreacher in the background. “Master should have stayed away, what a disappointment to his poor mother he was…”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Shut up, Kreacher, and get that muck off the carpet. Anyway, to answer your question Harry – no, it’s not Malfoy, it’s you. You’re in my will as the Heir, so you can add that title to your growing collection. As the nominal Head of the House and with no children or other official heirs to worry about, I can pick whomever I so choose, so long as they’re a blood relation of some degree to the Blacks. I have no direct descendants and there are no other wizards with the family name remaining, so the field is open.”

“Are you sure? What if you have a family? And why do you have a will already?”

Sirius shrugged, and ticked off his answers on his fingers as he replied, “Yes, I’m sure. I don’t see a family in my future – it’s not going to happen and no-one’s going to want a battered old dog like me anyway. I have a will because we’re heading into another war – I don’t like my chances of making it through a second time. Or to put it more simply in one word: goblins.”

Harry looked blankly at him. Perhaps more than one word would help – it wasn’t much of an explanation.

“Oh, I guess they never told you – those dreaded creatures won’t give you the time of day without charging you for it. If you die intestate – that means without a will – the goblins of Gringotts have a chance to seize the contents of your vault if your family isn’t quick enough to secure their
inheritance with valid claims. You should have a will too, Harry, especially since there’s the Potter family vault to think of.”

“I thought… Griphook was quite nice, underneath his bluster,” Harry said dolefully. “He’s been helpful, in a way. I thought I had them figured out.”

“No-one’s ever friends with goblins. There’s too much bad blood between our people and theirs.”

Sirius strode across the room to one of the glass cabinets. He unlocked the glass lid with a tap of his wand and a muttered spell. “Here you go,” he said, lifting out a large golden ring and holding it out to Harry. “The Head of House ring.”

“But I’m not old enough, and you’re the Head of the… House Black,” Harry objected.

Sirius huffed in frustration. “Take it, or I’ll just throw it away with the dead Doxys! It was my father’s, and I want nothing of his to remember him by!”

“NO!” wailed Kreacher suddenly, bursting into furious tears. “Not Master’s ring!”

“No don’t!” yelled Harry. “I’m sorry, forgive me, I didn’t mean it. I’ll take it, I’ll hold onto it until you want it back. Don’t throw it away – family’s important.”

Kreacher choked on some ugly sobs, snuffling to a stop.

“‘Family’s important’? You’d leap to rescue something of the Dursleys’ then, if they journeyed to the Summerland? ‘Oh no, that’s Uncle Vernon’s favourite gold watch, you can’t throw it out!’” Sirius challenged, in a mocking tone of voice.

Harry hesitated, then grudgingly admitted, “No, you’re right, I wouldn’t want anything of his. Nothing.”

“See?! The Blacks are my Dursleys!” Sirius said, smugly triumphant.

“…But I’d keep it aside for Dudley. I wouldn’t throw it out.”

Sirius’ face sagged. “Fine. You can have the stupid ring.”

“Or you could make Draco your Heir, since his mother-”

“I know who his mother is!” Sirius snarled. “And more to the point I know what his father is! That whole harpy-dung Dark family gets nothing, NOTHING! Merlin’s bones, they are our enemies, Harry! Don’t you understand that?!”

“Hey, it’s alright, you don’t have to give them anything,” soothed Harry, backing away slightly with a stumbling step.

Sirius noticed the change in Harry. He fell silent for a moment, looking desolate. “Oh Harry, I’m all bark but no bite. I’m not like my father – I’d never hurt you, I swear,” Sirius said gently. “I’m sorry I yelled. I should have remembered you’re friends with young Malfoy, even if I don’t understand why. Of course you would advocate for him. But I’m not going to make him my Heir. Here, take the ring Harry, go on.”

Harry inched forward slowly to take the ring obediently from Sirius’ hand and heard a slight gasp from Kreacher’s direction as he did so.

He looked at the ring curiously. It was a heavy gold signet ring – chunkier than the Potter ring –
with the Black crest on the top. A shield of some black polished stone, perhaps onyx, was interrupted by a chevron of silver, with two silver stars picked out on the top half of the shield, and a teeny silver dagger inset on the bottom half. The hounds that flanked the shield formed part of the gold setting for the inset stone, with *Toujours Pur* engraved along the bottom of the setting.

With a look of wonder at Harry, Kreacher asked hesitantly, “Young Master Harold is… the Head of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black?”

Harry looked at Sirius, not wanting to answer for him and risk setting him off.

Sirius shrugged. “Not yet, I suppose he has to be seventeen. So maybe we’ll do that later if neither of us have thought better of it by then. For now, he’s the Heir, and I’m the Head. I’d rather the line died out with me, but if he wants the job he can have it.”

Kreacher bowed very low to Harry, his nose scraping the dusty carpet.

“Thank you,” Harry said uncomfortably. “Uh, Kreacher, you can rise and return to your duties, please.”

Sirius slumped down on the sofa and patted the cushion next to him for Harry to join him. Kreacher hastily gestured and the dust on the other half of the sofa disappeared with a puff of air. Harry joined Sirius, who was chuckling at Kreacher’s solicitousness.

“Oh, he likes you now. It’s a bit like having my brother back. Regulus was always his favourite, you know. He was everyone’s favourite, after I sorted into Gryffindor. He was the good little Slytherin pure-blood, not like me. I was the white sheep of the family. When I left the family at sixteen I didn’t plan to ever return here. I didn’t tell you at the garden party but there’s a bit of extra history about that you might like to know since it involves the Potters.

“So, before he died, Charlus was in negotiations with our paterfamilias – our Head of House – whom you might remember was Grandfather Arcturus at that time. Charlus was looking to officially adopt me into the Potter family after Walburga ‘disinherited’ me from the Blacks. Not that it was official since she wasn’t the Head of House, but she gave it everything she had. She stalled the negotiations a bit – caused enough trouble that it never went through, and then I turned seventeen. While you *can* still adopt an adult, it’s not much done these days. Still, he kept trying until the day he died. A good man, Charlus.”

Sirius’ brow furrowed, and he shivered, looking blankly around the room with a doleful expression on his face. Harry waited for him to continue, but he just seemed kind of… frozen.

Harry suddenly remembered Lupin’s advice. “Kreacher, light a fire in here at once, please. Dobby, fetch some snacks and hot chocolate for two, if you’d be so kind. It’s been a long afternoon.”

Dobby popped away to the kitchen, and Kreacher quickly scurried to the fireplace and lit it magically with a snap of his fingers triggering a crackling whoosh of flames. A few short moments afterwards, Sirius blinked as the warm firelight danced across his face. “Sorry, where was I up to in my story?” he asked, clenching and unclenching his hands slowly, nails digging into his palms. Harry pretended not to notice.

“You were up to how Charlus was trying to adopt you. I had Kreacher light a fire, I hope you don’t mind. It’s a little dark and gloomy in here since there’s clouds out this afternoon,” Harry explained, making what he hoped were plausible and acceptable excuses.

“Not at all,” Sirius said. “Yes, right. So, things were stalled, and then sadly Charlus journeyed on. I
fended for myself – Uncle Alphard left me a bit of gold so that helped, and your dad helped too, when I let him. I was a bit too proud for my own good. Remus was the same, mind you. Still is.”

Harry nodded. Accepting charity was awkward.

“Grandfather Arcturus wouldn’t curse me from the family, but he did cut me off from the family funds. He changed his tune later, however, when I was arrested. He must have believed the stories about me being a follower of Voldemort, for he tried to get me out of Azkaban by throwing around his money and influence. He failed miserably thanks to Dumbledore’s superior status and extensive network of clients, but he tried, which is more than anyone else can say. I just wish he’d done it because he believed in my innocence, rather than my guilt,” Sirius said bitterly.

“There’s a note in his will putting me officially in the line of succession, and formally denouncing mother’s claims that I’d been disinherited. So that’s the long story of why I don’t really feel like the family title’s any sort of honour, Harry. I would rather have been a Potter if I could have been. If you want this mouldering old heap, its crazy house-elf, its collection of cursed knick-knacks, and the old rundown manor house in the country, it’s all yours.”

“Alright, Sirius. I understand a lot better now, I think. It doesn’t have the same associations for me, so I’ll be happy to be your Heir if that’s what you really want. And when I’m old enough I’ll adopt you into the Potter family if you want and make you the Potter Heir until I have a family of my own,” Harry spontaneously offered, which made Sirius laugh heartily.

“You’re a good kid, Harry.” He reached out slowly and carefully to ruffle Harry’s hair, and Harry smiled and stayed still to let him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all my wonderful reviewers last chapter! It was fabulous to see my readers appreciating the fine details, and enjoying a variety of different elements in the chapter. :) Thanks also to the lovely readers leaving me kudos.
The Black family crest – Note that I’m not using the one from the movie, instead I’m using the one hand-drawn by JKR for the Black family tree.
Athena’s Curse/Shellsick – After a traumatic childhood, a war-filled adulthood, and a decade in prison being tormented with induced flashbacks of his worst memories, Sirius suffers from what we modern Muggles would call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Most people suffer some stress reactions after a traumatic event, but if the reactions don’t go away or they interfere with their life, they may have PTSD.
Stargirl1061 – Dobby visiting Grimmauld Place. I hope you enjoyed it! :) Grimmuald Place - You can now view floorplans and other images at my "Perfectly Normal" website. Thanks again to FirePhoenix86 for permission to modify and use their floorplan.
One important thing to note is that I differ in places from book canon due to my justification that Sirius at this point in time has not had to repurpose some rooms into additional bedrooms to accommodate the eight guests he hosts in the OotP book. I’ve added a library because why wouldn’t you want a library/study in such a big house?! I have also added a back garden, which my research suggests is appropriate for this style of townhouse.
Harry’s book signing in Gabon is his planned final stop on his promotional tour.

Friday 22nd July 1994

Harry was working at the kitchen table, with a cup of tea and a plate of buttered toast going cold at his elbow, when Sirius stumbled blearily downstairs. Sirius straightened up as soon as he saw Harry and made an obvious effort to look more alert. He ran his hands through his long black hair to comb out some of the worst night-time tangles and pasted on a smile. Sirius obviously wasn’t much of an early riser, though by Harry’s Dursley-trained standards it really wasn’t that early.

“Good morning, Harry. What are you working on there?” Sirius asked, as he wandered over to put the kettle back on the stove to boil for tea.

“My correspondence. I was positively bombarded with owls the instant I stepped out front last night. Two even bit me! I think they might’ve been circling around London in confusion for hours, or even a whole day.”

“Anything interesting?”

“Uh, nothing urgent. Hermione is fretting about who to pick as a patron family to take her to the Quidditch World Cup since her parents can’t take her, which her mother is mad about. Hermione’s also worrying about her book editing which isn’t going as well as she’d like.”

“She can come with us if you like? There’s plenty of room in the old tent – it’s enormous inside. But… we’ve got prime seats for the Top Box. There’s only about forty seats there, and the rest are all taken. So, she wouldn’t be able to sit with us.”

“Hmm, well thanks, I’ll let her know. So, what else?” Harry mused aloud, rifling through his pile of parchment. “Nott is nagging again for me to visit him, but I don’t want to because I barely know him. The Malfoys – thank Merlin – have agreed to change their planned ball to a dinner party with dancing. A small difference, but I hope it will get me out of any social requirement to dance.”

“So, are you not a fan of dancing, or is it more down to a lack of a good partner?”

“Both? Mostly the first. I can’t dance at all, but don’t tell Pansy or Draco or they’ll make me learn. I think he’s already getting suspicious.

“Anyway, apart from that there’s also a few chatty notes from other friends; Derrick’s sister Flavia sent me another drawing of Storm and says she got an enchanted plush snake for Yule, and Daphne wrote about what a lovely holiday she’s having at a wizarding seaside resort in Wales – Cantre'r Gwaelod,” Harry said, mangling the pronunciation somewhat despite his best effort.

“Then there’s a bunch of boring letters from people thanking me for signing their books, talking
about it, or saying how nice it was to meet me, and a couple of ads from stores. Oh, and there’s the Portkey from Mr. Sayre – it can carry a second passenger by the way, and he’s hinting again that it would be good if I’d visit Brazil and Rome to sign books there too, but I don’t want to do any more visits so I’m going to write and remind him I already said no. The whole thing has been quite ridiculous and honestly, I’ve had enough. It was only ever supposed to be one or two signings – that’s what Lockhart and I agreed on.”

“Why do more, then?”

Harry shrugged, a bit embarrassed. “Money, mostly. I get a bit more of the profits from book sales.” He’d ended up with a fair bit more actually, but Sirius didn’t really need to know that.

Harry wrapped up his replies and cold breakfast while Sirius ate some dry toast and drank his tea – he promised to drop Harry’s letters off at the Diagon Alley owl office. Which Sirius accomplished by yelling for Kreacher and getting him to do it. Kreacher’s toga now had the Black crest on the breast – courtesy of Dobby’s careful embroidery – and it was a weight off Harry’s mind to see him out of his old rags.

Sirius dug in a dressing gown pocket. He pulled out a silver ring and tossed it to Harry. Harry caught it easily and looked it over – it had the Black family crest on it.

“My old Heir ring,” Sirius said shortly. “I found it eventually.”

“Thank you,” Harry said politely. He added it to his fob chain next to the Potter Heir ring, his Gringotts key, and the emergency Portkey that Snape had sent him. “I uh… I have some gifts up in my trunk for you too. Well, some bequests. From my mum and dad’s will. If you want them – I don’t want to upset you. I haven’t really been sure how to bring it up, honestly.”

“There’s nothing big, I hope,” Sirius said cautiously. “I always told James I didn’t want anything – that it should all go to you and your mum.”

“There was some money, but that went into your personal vault years ago. Upstairs I have some mementos for you – a silver goblet enchanted to dribble on you when you try to drink from it, and a ‘match-winning Snitch’.”

Sirius barked with laughter and then sniffled slightly, looking a bit melancholy. He discreetly wiped away a couple of tears with a hanky. “Typical Prongs gifts! I would love to have those things, thanks.”

“No problem. Mum wrote that she hoped you’d have a drink in their memory and hoped it would make you laugh through the tears. I wrote out the message for you.”

“Thanks again. I hope you don’t mind continuing to stay in Regulus’ old room?” Sirius asked, changing the topic to one less fraught with emotion. “I hate to say it, but your own room is in even worse condition than it first appeared. There are a few hexes stopping me from reversing and cleaning things, and some hidden cursed and nasty items scattered about. There’s Wartcap powder in the sheets and robes, for instance, and some more Doxys in the curtains again, drat the pernicious little blighters. I think he moved them in on purpose. Kreacher really did a number on it. He was supposed to clean it back up but he’s dawdling like usual and muttering about how ‘the young Master should stay upstairs in a room more befitting his station.’ ”

“It’s fine – I love my current room, it’s really lovely here,” Harry said politely, which seemed to reassure and cheer Sirius. It was certainly nicer than Privet Drive, and less depressing than Potter Cottage. He had no complaints.
Accompanied by Sirius and Storm, Harry arrived in Gabon via Portkey with a tremendous wrenching sensation in his stomach just below his navel, and a splitting pain in his forehead. Heedless of his surroundings, Harry fell to his knees as he vomited onto the hard-packed ochre soil. Storm tightened his coils around Harry’s cravat-covered neck so he wouldn’t fall off, which wasn’t helping.

“Mr. Potter? Welcome to Libreville. Oh-” said a woman’s voice from somewhere nearby. He left Sirius to talk with her, whoever she was. He couldn’t think past the pain and nausea. He put his hand to his aching forehead when he had a break from vomiting up tea and half-digested toast, and his fingers came away with a few spots of blood. He didn’t remember hitting his head on anything. He dabbed at it with a handkerchief from a waistcoat pocket. A gentleman should carry one at all times, Pansy had insisted long ago.

“-So it’s probably best to avoid Portkeys across the Atlantic,” murmured the woman in the background, as Harry got himself under control enough to pay attention to something other than his churning stomach.

“I can’t say I was terribly enamoured with the trip myself,” replied Sirius, waving his wand to vanish the shameful puddle of vomit in front of Harry.

“Sorry,” croaked Harry, pushing himself to his feet shakily as the headache and the roiling sensation low in his guts subsided. He found himself outside in the fresh air, in a dirt-floored square in the middle of a circle of squat old trees. Their sparse shade did little to alleviate the oppressive dry heat or shield them from the baking sunlight. The air had a cloying scent of wood smoke, old meat, and some more unpleasant smells that Harry couldn’t identify but which left him wrinkling his nose and trying to contain his nausea again.

They were surrounded on three sides by two storey concrete buildings, and a couple of stalls with colourful large umbrellas for shade. The stalls had dark-skinned people hawking maps and various glass bottles of drinks in a patter of eager French. If it wasn’t for the fact that they’d just teleported in with no reaction from the locals, Harry would have wondered if they were in a wizarding district at all – he’d never seen wizards selling Coca Cola before.

“Good morning, Mr. Potter. Please do step out of the circle, in case there’s other arrivals,” the woman said politely with only a slight accent which sounded French rather than African, extending her ebony hand for a very quick handshake in greeting as Harry wobbled forwards. “My name is Mrs. Maria Oyonne, I’m the translator for the French and German editions, and I’ll be joining you at the book signing today and helping with sales. I’d also be happy to act as a guide if you’d like to look around the market.”

Mrs. Oyonne was a tall, middle-aged attractive African woman wearing a bright patterned orange and tan dress, with her thick black hair tucked up under a matching headscarf. She nattered away brightly in fluent English while Harry took some deep breaths and recovered his equilibrium. “The bookshop we’ll be doing signings at is more of a stall than a shop, as you would understand it. Government buildings and ah, temples? Yes? Like churches? They take up most of the buildings around us. Some houses there, too. But I promise you it is a very well-placed stall that has had that spot for years, selling texts, scrolls, and written charms. The owner is the best magical bookseller in all of Gabon, and the best for a few countries around us, too.”

Sirius wordlessly passed Harry a glass bottle of cool water which Harry sipped at cautiously. That was very kind of him, Harry thought. It helped soothe his stomach nicely.
“Thanks. Alright, I think I’m ready to go,” Harry said.

They headed out of the alley they’d arrived in and into a bustling open-air marketplace in a large square. Giant multi-coloured or white umbrellas shaded the various stalls, which spread their wares out on rickety folding tables or on mats laid on the ground. A few stalls had canvas awnings, and there were also some with patchwork leather shading the sellers and their goods. While the vast majority of the stall-holders were adults, some of them seemed very young to Harry, and he thought one or two might even be kids younger than he was.

People were standing crowded next to each other with little regard for personal space, and lining up politely for market stalls seemed optional, with some people joining the middle or the front of a queue without much care for those behind them. It was loud, too, compared to the quiet murmur of pedestrians in Diagon Alley. Sellers hawked their wares with shrill or booming voices, people chattered everywhere, and loud singing, drumming, and some kind of odd harp music came from a few of the huts and buildings, as well as from a few musically-inclined pedestrians.

Close by, two men were arguing angrily in the middle of the street, arms waving wildly and yelling at each other in an African dialect Harry didn’t understand. One of the men stormed off, only to come back to yell and gesticulate some more, until something must have been resolved, for the couple shook hands and separated with remarkable amicability, walking off in different directions.

There were very few people wearing either wizarding robes or old-fashioned Regency or Victorian garb, unlike in Diagon Alley or Lutetia where they were a strong majority. Either it wasn’t the fashion here, or it was simply too hot to wear that style of clothing. Harry was certainly sweating in his trousers, shirt, and waistcoat. More common were pedestrians wearing bright Muggle clothes, looking relatively ordinary except for those who had magical amulets hanging from their jean’s belt loops. There were also plenty of men and women wearing colourful lengths of brightly patterned cloth wrapped around their waist or chest like a skirt or sarong. One small group of men caught Harry’s eye as looking particularly unusual – some bare-chested men were wearing raffia skirts decorated with shells and beads, and had white-painted faces. A couple of people were literally glowing with a soft light radiating out from their skin. But no-one else – apart from Sirius – seemed to find anyone’s appearance worthy of a second look.

Even the “normal” Muggle outfits looked a little odd to Harry’s eye, as almost everyone, male or female, was wearing something in a colourful bright pattern. He saw a woman wearing a dress so virulently orange that surely only Ron could appreciate the shade. There were men dressed in colourful striped trousers or flower-patterned shirts that would have Uncle Vernon spluttering derisively about how “that kind of thing was only suitable for the circus or the beach – if that – and what was the world coming to when men dressed like women?!” He was sure the men’s sarongs and raffia skirts would have pushed his uncle straight over the line into some kind of fit. Not that Uncle Vernon would ever be likely to set foot in Gabon, as he thought Majorca was the pinnacle of exotic locales. Harry remembered an anecdote Dudley had snickered about once – how Uncle Vernon always spoke very loudly and slowly when overseas to make up for not speaking a word of Spanish.

Half the women had cloth wrapped around their heads in one style or another – a few women balanced their shopping on the top of their heads, while others strolled around with baskets on their backs and children on their hips. Smaller infants were secured to their mothers’ backs with a length of cloth wrapped around both mother and child which was knotted in place.

It was bright, and loud, and felt a hundred times more foreign than France had, even with its odd and slightly morbid underground city. Harry hadn’t felt like such an outsider since his first trip to Diagon Alley. He knew his skin was white, of course. But he was used to being part of the
majority and had never felt so acutely white until he found himself suddenly surrounded by a sea of dark-skinned people whom he’d never be able to hide inconspicuously amongst, no matter how much he tried to blend in. Well, not without a glamour of some kind, anyway. He patted the wand in his pocket for reassurance, even though he couldn’t use it. Or could he? Perhaps the Ministry didn’t monitor wand use so far from home. He promised himself he’d practice his custom glamour charm again once he was back at Hogwarts.

He and Sirius exclaimed to each other like the tourists they were as they wandered through the market, pointing out oddities and interesting sights to each other. It was crowded and noisy, and sellers called out to them predominantly in French as they passed, calling Sirius “brother” and exhorting them both to buy all sorts of wares – bananas and sweet potatoes, children’s clothing, and statuettes. Some stalls sold goods that were familiar – like metal cauldrons – but also had gourd flasks and earthenware pots for sale. The stall selling animal furs had recognisable goods, but Harry didn’t know what a ‘genet’ was or why you’d want its small pelt of spotted grey fur.

The men in grass skirts who’d been walking ahead of them entered one of the buildings lining the square. Harry pointed at it curiously as they passed, and asked, “What’s that building?”

“It is a Bwiti temple,” Mrs. Oyonne explained. “A Mbandja. The men are probably going to a ceremony, or an initiation ritual.”

“What are the ceremonies like?” Harry asked curiously.

She shrugged. “It’s not my faith, so I’m not completely certain of the details. But I know it is very common to take iboja bark to go into a trance that can last days, to commune with the ancestors and other friendly spirits. There will certainly be a lot of chanting, drumming, and dancing. The Bwiti sorcerers are very socially and politically prominent here – you should be as polite as you can be, if you meet one.”

“Pure-bloods?” asked Sirius.

“Not necessarily. It’s more about how much power you display, not your family. Though family helps of course – the most powerful sorcerers tend to come from powerful families, and some recipes and spells are kept secret amongst your kin.”

“I thought everyone went to that magic school in Uganda like you did?”

“No, the Uagadou School of Magic is too far to travel for many, or too foreign. Some go to other schools, like Beauxbatons – it’s a popular choice in Gabon and other French-speaking African nations. I know there are at least another three smaller and less prestigious schools scattered throughout Africa. However, they’re not very popular and most sorcerers in Gabon and many other countries prefer to learn from family or a skilled local sorcerer rather than go to one of those.”

Another stall had a folding table laid out with a wide variety of masks for sale. Harry rather liked one of painted wood with an asymmetrical pattern of black and white geometric shapes. At the adjoining stall a woman cried for them to come and look at her wares while the mask-seller scowled at her. She sold musical instruments Harry didn’t recognise apart from the drums, and most of those were types he didn’t know the specific names for.

Harry was worried they were taking too long looking around, but Mrs. Oyonne promised they had time for a little browsing so long as they didn’t linger anywhere. There would be time for more shopping after their book signing.

There seemed to be a multitude of people selling potions, or perhaps it was just lunch – Harry
couldn’t tell for sure. Many men and women were sitting on the ground eating bowls of stew, held between the soles of their feet as they sat lotus-style on the dusty earth. Harry didn’t know if the stews and other concoctions were supposed to be magical or not, but he was pretty sure after watching the groups and listening to the stall owners’ patter that at least some were.

On their left he noticed a group of men with guns and spears crowded around a small pot into which hot coals were being dropped. They held their weapons out into a cloud of greasy black smoke as the seller chanted something in a language Harry couldn’t understand. They gave that group a respectful berth, and other pedestrians did likewise.

One cauldron-stirring woman waved and called out to their guide in French, “Maria! How about some trading stew for your tourists, too? Tell them how the steam will help them avoid being cheated in the markets.”

“Perhaps later. We have to keep moving for now, but I shall recommend you!” she replied in the same language, getting a friendly farewell from the woman.

“Is her trading stew really magical?” Harry asked, in English so Sirius could follow the conversation too. “What’s in it?”

“Yes, very magical, she’s a very good nganga. It’s made with boka leaves, hume fish, plantains, palm oil, gourd seeds, and ground nuts. A few other ingredients too, that she keeps secret. You sit on the ground with the pot held between your feet and inhale the steam before eating. It brings luck in trading and any financial matters.”

She pointed out another stall to them, where someone was holding a bundle of fishhooks in the steam rising off a pot, before putting them onto a banana leaf to dry. “That one brings a charm for fishing. After the fishhooks are blessed they’ll eat the stew and place the fish bones and skin next to fish hooks. You don’t eat the bones and skin. But putting them next to the hooks helps the magic – it reminds them of what they should catch.”

“Why don’t they make the potions themselves at home?” Harry asked curiously. “Are they hard to brew? Or are the recipes kept secret?”

“Some certainly are,” his guide answered, “but many are popularly known. Some just won’t have the time or ingredients to cook with, and other customers have no nyemba – no magic light inside them. They can’t brew the recipe properly – it would fail for them.”

“They’re Squibs?” Harry asked.

“No, most would be Muggles, with no magical family.”

Harry’s eyes went wide. “But what if they tell someone? Doesn’t Gabon follow the International Statute of Secrecy? Are the ingredients safe for them to eat?”

He looked around, but there was no easy way to tell the Muggles from the wizards, apart from the people who were glowing (Mrs. Oyonne had just dismissed them as “show offs”). In Diagon Alley the distinction was marked – Muggles, and some of the Muggle-borns, always wore Western clothes. Or… he assumed they did. Creevey wore robes sometimes, after all. Perhaps the locals could spot the differences here, but he couldn’t. There was no handy marker like old-fashioned hats or robes here, that he could distinguish.

“No nganga would feed their customers something poisonous! Don’t worry, they’re very careful and only give the milder concoctions to Muggles. Muggles are allowed into our secret districts so
long as they respect our sorcerers. They dare not do otherwise. They will keep it secret, and in any case, many follow the Bwiti faith. Also, many are in government. They help protect us, and we aid them in success in their careers. If someone betrayed us, they would be... well someone would have a word with them,” she said, looking a little shifty. “Gossip gets out occasionally, but it isn’t a big problem. Not under Omar Bongo’s rule.”

“Oh, gross!” said Harry, catching sight of an animal part stall as they walked on. He recognised the severed chimpanzee hands and the elephant tails, but others he didn’t have a clue about. He lingered, equal parts fascinated and repelled. He guessed it really wasn’t much worse than selling dragon liver and beetle eyes, when you thought about it. “Are they all for potions?”

“And for charms and amulets.”

“What are they all?” asked Sirius, looking less deterred and disgusted than Harry did.

“Skins from flying squirrels – ngunye,” she said, pointing at tiny furry pelts. “There’s also Kilinga feathers, antelope horn, dried water spiders, dried shark heart, Impundulu eggs, Inkanyamba scales, Gbahali scales, and lion claws,” Mrs. Oyonne listed, after conferring with the seller in an African language on a couple of items she didn’t recognise, like the feathers and the shrivelled little dried spiders.

“Oh! I’ve heard of Impundulu eggs!” Harry said to his companions, his attention caught. “I could use some of them for a potion. Do they take Galleons?”

“Yes, the goblin currency is respected worldwide. But you might want to let me do the bargaining for you?” she offered.

Harry shrugged agreeably. “Sure, if you can get a good price. Half a dozen of the smaller eggs if they’re fresh. Only two if they’re old, as then I can only use the shells and I don’t have as many potion recipes that don’t want the whole egg.”

While she bickered in a friendly fashion in an African language with the stall owner, laughing occasionally as if his prices were amusing, Harry chatted quietly with his scaly friend. “Ssstorm, they have Impundulu eggss for sssale. Remember the blood-drinking bird I told you about when I was reading A Treatise on Vampire Anatomy and Ailmentss? The one that can sssummon lightning just like you do? The eggss have powerful healing propertiess so I’m getting a few for potionss.”

“Buy one, I want to eat it,” Storm demanded.

“I’m getting half a dozen, so there should be enough for you to have one,” Harry promised.

“My portion should come first,” insisted Storm. “I want eggss. I’m tired of fish.”

“I got you Doxy eggss just yesterday! I could’ve kept them to brew a Girding Potion, but I let you sssstuff yourself sssilly like a ssstarving Bowtruckle.”

“They were tiny, and I’m ssstill hungry. I’m growing fast, and I think I’m going to shed my ssskin again,” Storm wheedled.

“Fine,” sighed Harry, and Storm hissed in contentment.

“I didn’t know you were interested in potions,” Sirius commented.

“Well, I want to be a Healer. Potions is important for that.”
“Yes, but you don’t have to brew this for class homework, surely… You’re brewing in the holidays for fun?”

Harry hesitated. “If you don’t mind?” he asked cautiously. The eggs wouldn’t last long, and he’d really like to try brewing the topical unguent for treating vampires’ sunlight burns. He thought sending some to Sanguini might be a good return favour for his gift of texts – he didn’t want the vampire to feel like Harry owed him a favour. Who knew what kind of repayment he might hint at as being appropriate in the future?

Sirius shrugged. “I guess not. I suppose I’d better get cracking cleaning up Mother’s old potions room. And maybe the library if you’ve got Ravenclaw tendencies.”

“A bit, I guess. The hat considered it for a while.” Right after Slytherin, but no need to mention that. “That would be lovely if it’s not any trouble, Sirius. Thank you.”

Mrs. Oyonne translated an offer from the stall owner to buy Harry’s snake, which of course was flatly refused. With a disappointed sigh from the stall owner, Harry got handed a wool-lined woven basket full of eggs for only two galleons, which he was quite content with. Storm got fed a raw egg right away, which he was even more satisfied with. Harry held the egg carefully in one palm as Storm slowly swallowed it whole. With a bit of squirming about the egg cracked inside his snake’s gullet, and the round lump compressed to something smaller.

“Is he going to spit out the shell?” Mrs. Oyonne asked curiously.

“No, Wonambi have recurved teeth, so he can’t spit food up again. It’s why he has to be careful not to eat anything too big to swallow.”

Eventually they reached the bookseller’s stall. It was one of the larger stalls they’d seen, with four umbrellas shading an impressive collection of books and scrolls. There were also some more unusual examples of writing for sale such as engraved stones covered in Norse runes, and wooden boxes and brass containers painted or engraved with decorative lines of Arabic or Hebrew script.

The stall owner greeted Mrs. Oyonne enthusiastically with a hug and a kiss on one cheek, then he turned to Harry with a bright smile, teeth a bright white in his dark face. “Welcome Mr. Potter!” he greeted in French. “Welcome to Gabon, and welcome to my humble stall. I hope you will help me sell a lot of books today! And who is your friend here, is this Mr. Sayre?”

“No, this is Sirius Black, my godfather and a cousin of some degree. He’s just here to keep an eye on me today. He only speaks a little French.”

“Bienvenue, monsieur,” the man welcomed Sirius, speaking slowly and distinctly.

“Merci, monsieur,” Sirius replied carefully in his best French, which was better than Tonks’, but not by an especially large margin.

Returning to more rapid French the bookseller said, “And this must be your familiar, the illustrious and sparkling Storm the book tells of!” He peered at the sleepy rainbow serpent around Harry’s neck. “Will you say hello to him for me?”

“He’s sleeping right now,” apologised Harry. “Snakes sleep with their eyes open. He’s stuffed full of egg and having a nap.”

“Later then. We have customers! Battles with the Basilisk is now available for sale!” he cried out loudly and cheerfully in French, waving a copy of Batailles avec le Basilic in the air as people started crowding in. “Get your book signed by young Harry Potter, one of the real-life heroes in the
Harry signed a number of copies of Lockhart’s book but was quietly thrilled to note that Mrs. Oyonne as the translator signed just as many as he did. Everyone was also much more interested in meeting and chatting about Harry’s exotic pet than about Harry himself, who clearly wasn’t as personally famous outside of Europe. One man was particularly delighted by the sight of Storm’s rainbow scales, as he had a vibrantly colourful flat lizard with rainbow scales perched on his own shoulder.

While Harry tried to wake Storm up to greet his fans a couple of times, he grumbled and went back to sleep immediately whenever Harry tried to rouse him. The combination of being a nocturnal reptile, the sleep-inducing warmth of the day, and his stuffed belly kept Storm napping for hours even with the distractions of the noisy crowd and the exotic scents of stews in the air.

Eventually they were done as the flood of customers slowed to a trickle, and free to browse the market once more.

Sirius was curious to try one of the magical stews and was initially going to try a ‘warrior stew’, until the brewer’s translated reassurances about the ingredients had the opposite effect from what was intended.

“It has amomum seeds, kota bark, njabi oil, and gourd seeds. There’s also plantain, fingernails, and rooster meat and blood. No brains,” Mrs. Oyonne reassured Sirius. “He says he doesn’t dabble in Dark magic. Just animals and plants in his stew. The fingernails are from living warriors – given freely.”

“You know what? I think I’ll try a different stew,” Sirius said, screwing up his mouth in a moue of distaste. As they wandered along Sirius’ attention was thoroughly caught by a ‘hunter’s stew’ that promised you luck in tracking and killing your prey.

Harry meanwhile was distracted by a different stall, selling caged animals. He lingered as the other two walked on, and nudged Storm awake.

“Look, they’re ssselling live sssnakess!” Harry hissed to Storm, who raised his head to peer curiously at the caged animals for sale on one seller’s mat.

“What?” Storm asked sleepily. “Is it time to meet my fanss yet?”

“You missed it – you ssslept through that.”

“You should have woken me.”

Harry sighed. He’d tried.

Storm stretched his head up slowly to look at the cages, ignoring the boring monkeys, lizards, and grey spotted cats, and the even more dull human selling a colourful bird to another customer. He focused solely on the more interesting serpents. “Any as ssspecial as me?” Storm hissed. Harry thought he could be wrong, but Storm sounded a little anxious. Perhaps he was getting jealous again, like he had of the snake in the Knockturn Alley bookshop.

“No sssnake could ever be as ssspecial as you,” Harry reassured. “Not even another Wonamenti. Not even Custoss. You’re the best sssnake in the world.”
Storm sank back down on his shoulders happily, showing no further interest in the snakes despite their hisses for Harry’s attention. “You are a very wise young Clever-man. You may talk to the others if you wish. But you cannot bring them to our burrow.”

“Of course not,” soothed Harry. “I already have you, I have no need to adopt another sssnake.”

“Ancestors guide my steps! Are you really able to talk to snakes, then?” cried Mrs. Oyonne, who’d doubled back to join him. Harry glanced around for Sirius and spotted him sitting a short distance away on a grass mat with a towel over his head to make an improvised tent, inhaling steam from a pot of stew on the ground in front of him.

Harry blinked. “Yes, I’m a Parselmouth. I guess you didn’t hear me chatting with Storm earlier because you were busy haggling for my eggs. But… you translated the book – shouldn’t you know about me being a Parselmouth already, ma’am?”

She seemed rather flustered by his question. “Well obviously, but I thought… That is, I’ve always enjoyed Mr. Lockhart’s books as entertainment. They’re fun novels, aren’t they? So, does this one actually tell a true tale?” She winced a little, looking embarrassed at her own words. “Sorry, I mean… is this particular aspect of the story true?”

“Oh, yes? I mean, it’s all based on real events,” he replied quietly, not wanting anyone to overhear them. “Perhaps a bit more… dramatic than it actually was. More colourful.”

“Sorry,” she said softly, matching his tone. “I didn’t mean to insult your patron.”

“It’s quite alright. I know there’s uh… some inaccuracies in his books,” Harry admitted, with a meaningful look. He didn’t want to outright slander him, but neither did he see any cause to go defending his reputation as being spotlessly heroic. The man had tried to Obliviate him and steal credit for the events in the Chamber of Secrets. He was no saint. And his books were mostly rubbish. “There really was a troublesome enchanted diary controlling people, and a Basilisk hiding in the Chamber of Secrets. She did petrify some students, and it was quite a battle to deal with her. Storm was a big help.”

“But what really happened?” Mrs. Oyonne asked, bright-eyed and curious. “I hope you’re not offended, but those last-minute revisions I had to translate made it blatantly obvious that at least some sections and elements were completely made up.”

“Well, it was all pretty much like in the book,” Harry dissembled. “Just a bit duller in real life.”

Mrs. Oyonne stared at him for a moment, then nodded slowly. “Alright. You’re… not in any trouble?”

“No, ma’am. Professor Lockhart and I have… a mutual understanding. But thanks for asking.”

In a casual tone, she said, “I did wonder why you were getting such a generous share of the profits.”

Harry shrugged. He hadn’t thought Mr. Sayre would tell anyone about that, but then, Mrs. Oyonne was getting a commission on sales, at least for copies she had a hand in promoting and selling. Maybe she needed to know.

She probably would’ve gone to Slytherin, he thought to himself. It was always good to know how best to manage people. An attitude that he internally conceded was more Slytherin than Gryffindor. Not that there was anything wrong with that. Knowing how best to keep people happy – and yourself safe – was just common sense.
Looking for a distraction from the awkward conversation, Harry chatted with a couple of the snakes in baskets, while Storm jealously hissed his claim on Harry to them, just in case. Harry was his Clever-man. The stall owner, a tall plump Gabonese man with a double-chin, caught Harry hissing in the sibilant language to his attentive serpentine listeners, and started babbling in excited rapid French about how he had two very beautiful daughters who were still single.

“Are you and your father looking for a wife for you? Or even two wives?”

“Uh no, and I’m too young for that!” Harry said, very shocked.

“Well you could wed when you’re older, of course. They are fine young girls, very pretty and hard-working I promise. Shall we discuss a possible arrangement? Is that your father over there?” he asked, pointing at Sirius.

Harry’s embarrassed demurral on every single point didn’t dissuade the father from pushing his daughters’ suit, and the man just switched to talking about how he’d give him a fine position in his business, and not even ask for a bride price at all.

“Such a talent would be a great gift to bring to any family,” the man urged, “but no family will value it as much as one such as ours, that specialises in trading live animals. Were your father or mother serpent-speakers also, when they lived? I would make your firstborn son my heir. Would you like to know about our estate? My family owns a lot of land. My wife turns an excellent profit on it.”

“I’m really not interested,” Harry protested weakly, as Mrs. Oyonne just listened in with amusement, completely unhelpful. “I honestly don’t want to get engaged at all, thank you. No matter how good an offer you make. I just wanted to say hello to the snakes, that’s all-”

Their incredibly awkward conversation was interrupted by shouts and screams nearby, and Harry spun around to see the crowd scattering in a panic as three dark-robed men with white masks shot spells at Sirius, who whipped his wand out to cast a shimmering magical shield in front of him. Streaks of potentially deadly light and the occasional concussive explosion hex hit Sirius’ shield, which was holding firm against the bombardment so far. The partial cover afforded by one of the stalls was being eroded bit by bit into splinters, however.

“Sirius!” yelled Harry, panicked at the sight of a couple of rays of deadly green light – one hit an overturned stall table Sirius had ducked behind, and another hit a hastily conjured wall of ochre earth Sirius called to rise up with a timely swish of his wand.

“Back to back!” yelled Sirius wildly, catching sight of him. “Like we drilled! Stay together!”

Harry had no idea what he was talking about but thought discretion might in fact be the better part of valour since they were outnumbered. He ignored Sirius’ instruction, and instead crouched down behind the cages of snakes to rummage in his bag for the Portkey that would take them both home to Grimmauld Place, if he could manage to grab Sirius.

“Death Eaters,” murmured Mrs. Oyonne fearfully, turning tail and running for it. “Stay safe, I’ll get help!” she yelled over her shoulder to Harry as she left.

A Severing Charm from one of the Death Eaters sliced through an unlucky bystander’s skin as she dashed through the line of fire in her panicked pursuit of a screaming child. She crumpled to the ground as a gout of blood gushed out of a wide slash on her leg in a spray of red onto the dry packed earth.
Sirius snarled and retaliated at his opponents with a blue ray that was reflected by one of them with a hastily-cast shield. It ricocheted and struck a man armed with a spear who’d been moving in to attack the Death Eaters. He dropped his weapon and clutched at his stomach with an agonised scream as the curse hit him.

Harry waited for the right moment to join Sirius and saw a chance when a couple of other bystanders moved in to help in the fight. A bald older Gabonese man raised a rifle to shoot at the masked men. Simultaneously, another younger man, whose hair was a short fuzz of tight tiny curls, transformed into a spotted leopard and leapt towards the Death Eaters with a short raspy growl, fanged mouth agape. The Animagus lithely dodged a spell on the way in and clawed one panicked Death Eater to the ground as he landed on the man’s back, making the man scream and thrash about as he tried to point his wand at the leopard without getting his throat torn out in the process. With his Portkey in one hand and his wand in the other, Harry used the very serendipitous distractions to dash in behind Sirius, who spun about with a wary snarl before he recognised Harry and lowered his wand.

“Sirius? I’ve got a Portkey, let’s go!”

“No, don’t! One of them might be Wormtail!” Sirius said, yanking his left hand out of the way as Harry tried to grab at him. “We can take them!”

Sirius spun back to the fight and shot off a quick Severing Charm at a stocky Death Eater who’d just knocked out or killed the rifleman who’d shot him. It ripped open the belly of the Death Eater’s black robe, going all the way through the fabric to slice into the pale skin of his soft gut in a thin red line, eliciting a pained cry as the man crumpled unconscious to the ground in a spreading pool of blood from his injuries. “Stop having a crisis of conscience and start hexing them, James!”

Oh.

With a pained snarl, the leopard leapt away from the Death Eater he’d downed and ran for it, blood running down his side as an oozing black slime conjured by a spell ate into his fur. Harry shot off a couple of spells as a distraction on the uninjured Death Eater to help the leopard Animagus escape, but his Stunning Spell missed as his target dodged at the last moment. He wasn’t giving up that easily though, and followed up with his favourite vicious emergency spell.

“Ossio Dispersimus!” he cried, but the Death Eater seemed to recognise the spell.

In an unfamiliar bass voice, the thin masked man interrupted Harry’s casting with a swift yell of “Avis!” near the end of Harry’s longer incantation. With a sound like a gunshot and a puff of smoke from his wand, a flock of yellow birds erupted into the air between them. One of the birds was the unlucky recipient of Harry’s Deboning Spell ray and plummeted from the sky to land twitching on the ground with a sad squelch. Another caught Harry’s follow-up Stunning Spell.

The man whom the leopard had attacked and dragged to the ground (before the Animagus had turned tail) was still fighting, though unable to stand due to some nasty wounds to his legs. He blasted off a quick series of softly muttered “Incendio” spells, and jets of red and orange flames from his wand set a few stalls alight and made a number of encroaching angry locals scatter in panic at the flames licking at their skin, though a determined few were still moving in with angry screams. One softly glowing middle-aged woman in a flowery blue dress dropped her woven basket of shopping carelessly as she spun to face the fight. Brown cassava roots spilled out onto the ground at her feet as she chanted repetitively and glowed more brightly, englobing herself with a halo of light like a golden bubble of mist – more mobile than the standard arc of a Shield Charm. The fallen Death Eater’s flames just washed off it harmlessly as she advanced on him slowly with an intense look of concentration on her face. She raised a thin cane she’d been walking with – not
seeming to truly need it as a support – and brandished it as a weapon. The witch grinned wickedly as she stalked towards her increasingly panicked target, her eyes wide in fierce delight at his terror. The Death Eater on the ground scrabbled backwards away from her in fear as he tried shooting a few other spells at the woman to no avail, bumping into the leaner Death Eater’s legs.

“Use the Killing Curse, troll-brain!” the lean man snarled in a deep voice at his conscious ally on the ground, busily shielding their group from a spray of bullets and a thrown spear with a circle of his wand triggering a clearly practiced wordless Shield Charm. He also cast a muttered Healing charm of some sort on their downed companion, who began to stir.

“I am not that good at it!” the Death Eater on the ground moaned pitifully, in a higher-pitched tenor. “I cannot concentrate with my legs like this!”

“Then get Black, idiot!” ordered the thin Death Eater.

The stocky Death Eater obediently shot an explosive hex in Harry and Sirius’ direction which Sirius shielded them both against, much to Harry’s relief.

The thinner Death Eater appeared to have changed his mind, for he suddenly grabbed at his companion’s wand arm, yelling, “Wait, don’t! Look!” He pointed in their direction, but the first shrugged him off.

“I see him,” the man snarled, and raised his wand again, ready to continue the attack on Sirius.

Harry didn’t want to wait around to find out what that was all about, and seized the opportunity afforded by their distraction. “Portus Grimmauld,” Harry said firmly, grabbing Sirius’ free arm.

With an instantaneous gut-wrenching, headache-inducing swirl of magic, the baking sunlight and the noise of battle in the crowded marketplace of Gabon gave way to the quiet and cooler clouded afternoon sky of England. Sirius looked around wildly as they appeared next to the park fence on Grimmauld Place. They were on the opposite side of the road from Black House, and a few doors down from number twelve as Harry had requested of Mr. Sayre earlier, to get around the Fidelius Charm on Sirius’ home. Harry gasped through the pain and nausea and tried to get himself under control without vomiting this time.

A single white car drove down the street, and Sirius spun to point his wand at it as he heard the approaching hum of the engine, then lowered it slowly. The Muggle driver didn’t react at all to the sight of a strangely dressed man threatening his car with a small stick – safely insulated not just from seeing the wizards, but also oblivious to the entire house and yard that were hidden by the layers of wards around Grimmauld Place.

His nausea not as bad as after the last trip, Harry smiled reassuringly at Sirius, and tried to calm his racing heart with slow breaths. He said as calmly as he could, “We’re safe. See? We’re at your home. I had a Portkey with me.”

“Oh,” said Sirius, breathing heavily in harsh, shuddering gasps. “I could’ve taken them. I almost had them, you know.” His hands clenched into fists at his sides, and his right hand clutched his wand so tightly Harry worried he would splinter the wood. As Harry watched he noticed Sirius’ fists start to tremble slightly. In fact, his whole body looked a bit shaky despite Sirius’ best efforts not to let it show.

“We’re back at Grimmauld Place,” Harry said slowly and carefully, “and I’m Harry. Not James.”

“Of course you are, Harry,” Sirius agreed with a brittle smile. “I know who you are. It was just a
slip of the tongue.” He tapped his wand on the silver snake doorknocker, and the door swung open at the touch.

“You’re alright now, aren’t you?” Harry asked as they went into the gloomy hall.

“Fine. I’m fine,” Sirius insisted, but he wouldn’t look Harry in the eye as he said it.

“I’m just going to… things to do upstairs…” Sirius started, then he trailed off with a lost look in his eyes and walked quickly away.

Once he’d gotten out of Harry’s sight up the first flight of stairs, Harry heard Sirius’ rapid thump of footsteps on the creaky stair treads pause for a moment, then change to the scratching of claws on wood. Harry gazed up through the stairwell and caught a glimpse of a shaggy black tail poking through the bannisters at one point during Padfoot’s hasty scampering up to the security of his bedroom.

Harry silently watched him leave, then called for Kreacher. “Make sure Sirius’ room is pleasantly warm and bright – open the curtains or light some candles if needed. And set out some bowls on the floor with fresh meat and water for him. I’m going out – I need to ring the Aurors.”

“Yes, young Master. Master Harold could use the Floo?” the wizened house-elf suggested hesitantly, looking rather uncomfortable.

Harry had intended to find a phone box but thought that was a good plan too. “Thank you, Kreacher, that’s a much better idea.” Kreacher looked much more content with Harry’s change of heart to something more appropriate for a wizard.

The Aurors were useless, however. Harry got a very brief follow-up report via the Floo later that evening, whilst he was in the middle of arguing with Dobby about who would be cooking dinner. Apparently, Portkeys to Gabon weren’t a popular item, and by the time they found one and arrived there the Death Eaters were long gone. The aggressive local guards had reportedly been touchy about foreigners butting into their business and bringing trouble, and the injured bystanders (no fatalities, thankfully) had been long since healed and hurried away home. Harry promised to have Sirius contact the Aurors for a statement after he “woke up”. Well, at least they weren’t cross at him for using his wand. In fact, he hadn’t even gotten a warning letter. So, either the Aurors had stopped that magically automated process in its tracks, or Africa was too far away for the Trace to work. Harry, not having much faith in the efficiency of Britain’s magical bureaucracy, rather suspected it was the latter reason.

Sirius spent all of Saturday hiding, curled up on top of his bed in his dog form. Harry crept into Sirius’ room to check on him a couple of times – it was a riot of red and gold banners everywhere on the walls, along with old, unmoving Muggle posters of various motorcycles and others of bikini-clad young women. The silvery wallpaper was almost entirely hidden, and the whole room practically screamed, “I’m a Gryffindor, and I like Muggles!” Sirius wagged his tail whenever Harry patted him and scratched behind his ears and told him everything was alright, and he was safe now, but he wouldn’t change back despite Harry’s repeated gentle encouragement to try.

Since Harry knew that chocolate was bad for dogs and he wasn’t sure how a Calming Potion would affect a transformed Animagus, Harry didn’t know what else to try apart from keeping Sirius’ bedroom warm. He looked through his small collection of books on transfiguration to see if there was anything on Animagi, and his books on healing for references to Athena’s Curse. He did find a spell to forcibly reverse the Animagus transformation, however, it was apparently a little
painful. There was also a risk that a miscast spell could mean the human form would retain some
animal characteristics, like pointed ears or clawed hands.

He decided not to risk it – especially not with a borrowed wand that wouldn’t suit him as well as
his own – and that he’d give it a day and see if Sirius changed back on his own. Remus would be
back soon and should hopefully be able to help. If he didn’t return on time, well, Harry would just
have to contact St. Mungo’s and ask them for help.

He spent Saturday directing Kreacher and Dobby in cleaning out the old Potions laboratory on the
first floor, and Harry scoured some cauldrons by hand until they gleamed. Kreacher wrung his
hands over Harry lowering himself to do menial work, but Dobby eventually persuaded him to
drop it.

“Master needs to do some work, or he will try and do the washing up,” warned Dobby. “Master
Harry likes to keep busy, just likes a good house-elf.”

“It is still not proper,” grumbled Kreacher, but grudgingly conceded the point. “Master Harold
could work in the garden. That is acceptable for Masters to do.”

“There’s a garden?” Harry asked in confusion. “It wasn’t part of the welcome tour. I saw some
trees and bushes from the window, but I thought that was on a neighbouring property. No wait, I
think he did mention it briefly, and he wrote about the garden here once. Isn’t it horribly
overgrown?”

Kreacher nodded then led him downstairs to the end of the ground floor corridor with Mrs. Black’s
portrait on the wall. She greeted him graciously as they rounded the bottom of the stairs and
headed to the door at the end of the hallway, directly opposite the front door.

Kreacher waved a hand at the door, while bowing very low. “The back garden, young Master.”

“I didn’t realise that led outside. I thought that was a cupboard. Sealed off because some horrible
pest was in there or something,” Harry said, rattling the doorknob. The door was locked.

“Yes, sealed off,” agreed Kreacher. “Kreacher can find the key when Master Harold is ready.
Young Master will need some sickles.”

“To what – pay an entry fee?” Harry’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “Surely not. Is it for an
offering to the household spirits? Wouldn’t they rather have some bread and wine instead of
Sickles? Or is it a very odd curse?”

Kreacher looked briefly amused or pleased, a genuine grin twisting his face for the first time Harry
had ever seen. “No, young Master. The other kind of sickle. For cutting plants, like a small scythe.
A silver sickle to cut any plants that may be too damaged by magic – like the fanged geraniums.
And perhaps a gold one for the ones that is the most delicate, or to be harvesting potions
ingredients.”

“Will I need anything else?” Harry asked.

“Mistress always wore dragonhide gloves when pruning the flowers, if not full gardening leathers.
And Kreacher thinks young Master should perhaps take a haunch of meat, to throw to the
Snargaluff tree. It is… rather overgrown,” Kreacher admitted reluctantly.

“I haven’t heard of that tree before?”

“Master Harold can read about it in Flesh-Eating Trees of the World. There is a copy in the library.
Master Phineas can be telling Master Harold where.”

“O…kay,” Harry said slowly, taking his hand off the doorknob very cautiously, as if the coiled-up snake it was shaped as might bite him. “I think perhaps I don’t want to garden after all, unless I have done my research and have my wand. And maybe some back-up.” If anything, Kreacher usually seemed prone to understating the level of mess and danger in the house.

“Kreacher thinks perhaps that is wise, young Master. Kreacher will get everything ready for young Master to be brewing his potions. Master Harold can be retiring to the library while Kreacher and Dobby is working.”

Harry gave in and headed for the book-filled study where he was delighted to have the opportunity to chat with a portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black on the library wall. The feeling was mutual, for life was rather dull for the former headmaster with the Dumbledore’s office at Hogwarts deserted during the summer holidays. Phineas caught up on a bit of family gossip as his first priority and was intrigued to hear that Sirius had named Harry the Heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black.

“You have my permission to address me as Phineas, or great-great-grandfather, since you’ve now been acknowledged as family by the current Head,” he declared grandly, with an air suggesting he was granting a great favour.

Harry swept into the deferential bow of gratitude appropriate to give one who outranked you. “Thank you, sir. Phineas. And please, call me Harold, or Harry. Whichever you prefer.”

“Harold? I was under the impression that your name was Harry – that is how the Headmaster usually addresses you, when you are not stridently insisting on him calling you ‘Potter’.”

“My friends and family call me Harry, and he really doesn’t fall into either category,” Harry said defensively. “A handful of students I’m less close to or more formal with use Harold, and Storm does too. He thinks it sounds more noble because it means ‘commander’. Officially, I’m Harold James Potter, Heir of the Noble House of Potter.”

“You will need to add ‘Heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black’, once that great-great-grandson of mine gets around to the paperwork and ceremony to grant you the Heir’s ring.”

“He… kind of just tossed it to me and said I was the Heir now?” Harry volunteered timidly. Phineas tutted in disapproval. “He never cared much for the Old Ways. Of course, you must also add ‘Heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Slytherin’ to your named titles.”

Harry shrugged noncommittally, which made Phineas put his fingertips to his forehead and wince like he had a sudden painful migraine.

“Child, I shan’t betray family secrets. And don’t shrug, it is impolite – you should respond vocally.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t, sir.” Harry said, more politely. “But I’m not the Heir of Slytherin.”

“Being a Parselmouth and finding the Chamber of Secrets was purely some bizarre coincidence, I am sure,” Phineas said sarcastically. “Keep your secrets for now, then. I can hardly force them from you being mere oil and canvas, can I? Now pray tell me, when are you planning to take on the Black surname?”

Harry blinked and stared at him. “Is that required? Sirius didn’t mention it. I’d rather keep my
parents’ name,” Harry said, not feeling very inclined to lose the connection to his family.

*What would happen to the Potter family vault? And wouldn’t it affect my magic if I changed my name?* he wondered.

“It is not mandatory, but ‘tis good manners to take on your new family’s name in place of your own. Some choose instead to add it as an additional cognomen – a surname – which would be quite acceptable in your case as you shall in due course become the Head of the Noble House of Potter. Quite a respectable family, and not one to lightly cast off. You should take the name Harold James Black Potter – that is the proper etiquette. Your new family name would come first, following the old Roman traditions. In addition to that, you could take on another nomen if you wished – a middle name that shows respect to the family you are linked to, such as James does for the House of Potter. You could just take on a nomen instead of a cognomen, but that is not really the done thing when you are being formally adopted. Your praenomen of Harold you would retain, of course.”

“I’m not being adopted!”

“Are you not?”

“No! Well, Sirius did mention it a while ago, but um… well I’m not so sure about it. I’m happy living with my aunt’s family,” Harry said, trying to feel it was true. Sometimes it was.

“That is a closer bond of blood,” Phineas conceded. “Still, mayhap ‘tis something to consider for your future. Our House is an old and prestigious one, after all. In any case, you do not have to consent to an adoption to have the onus to show respect to your familial obligations with a name change. I understand it is a weighty and significant thing to completely cast off one’s name for power or connections, but adding an additional name is still very common. Under the advice of a Master Arithmancer of course. Consider Dumbledore! He may only be a half-blood, and a Muggle sympathiser to boot, but even he follows the Old Ways in this.”

“Does he really?”

“Think, lad! You think his parents gave him that many names as a baby? Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore? Nay, he was naught but plain old Albus Dumbledore when he was a boy. I believe the ‘Percival’ name was taken on in grateful recognition of an inheritance from a young man from a branch of the Noble House of Prewett. While ‘Brian’ honours the now-extinct French wizarding House of Brienne, whose matriarch willed her goods to whomsoever defeated Grindelwald. The origin of ‘Wulfric’ I am uncertain of, but I know there was more than one family in Britain whom in the days after Grindelwald’s fall proudly granted their hero some special bequest, gift, or honorary recognition of a family connection.”

“Harold James Antares Black Potter,” mused Harry aloud. “Or Harold James Antares Potter. Or Harold James Black Potter which you say is more traditional. I think that last one sounds the best, and less like Dumbledore’s excessive list of middle names. Either way though it’s a bit of a mouthful. It would be even worse if I had to…” he trailed off.

“-Add ‘Slytherin’ to your list of cognomina?” Phineas finished, dark eyes glinting with relish at his own suggestion.

“-Add anything else in,” Harry dissembled. “Who knows how many families willed bequests to the Boy Who Lived, which I might gain on reaching my majority?”

Phineas inclined his head in a tiny respectful nod as if granting Harry a point for that rejoinder but
didn’t lose his smirk. “Antares is a good choice of name to take under consideration. Many Black family members are named after constellations, and we haven’t had an Antares in the family since my grandfather’s generation. I myself was named after King Phineus of Thrace, who traded his sight for Seer powers.”

“If I change my name at all, I think I’ll probably just stick with an extra cognomen. Were you a Seer when you were alive, sir?”

“Only a little. I was strongest in my visions during the quarter festivals. Such as at Samhain, when the barriers are lowest.”

Harry nodded understandingly, which made Phineas smirk again and stroke his beard slowly.

Despite Phineas being a bit prying and sneaky (he was a Slytherin, so it wasn’t like it was a shock to Harry), it was still nice to have company. Harry offered to move him to the potions room, so they could chat while he brewed, but the portrait demurred. “No thank you, Harold. The fumes and smoke are likely to be corrosive to my paints. Just come and visit me in the library again from time to time.”

“I will, Phineas.”

-000-

Remus returned on Sunday morning and on hearing the news about Sirius he immediately went upstairs, leaving Harry with instructions not to disturb either of them. He returned a half hour later with the good news that Sirius was back to human form.

“He’ll be down soon – he’s just having a bath and getting changed, as he’s pretty grimy still from the visit to Africa.”

“How did you do it?” asked Harry, who’d been dying of curiosity. “And what went wrong with him? I mean, apart from… you know, memories. Why did he get stuck like that?”

“I gave him a good talking-to and used the Verumorphus Charm to reverse his transformation. I imagine you haven’t come across that counter-spell yet–”

“The True Shape Charm? Yes, I have actually – I looked some things up when Sirius wouldn’t change back. The book said it was difficult to cast, and the potential side effects if I got it wrong were intimidating, so I didn’t want to try it. And well… the Trace was an issue, too.”

“Yes, that was wise – it is a rather tricky counter-spell. Don’t try the Homorphus Charm either – that’s slightly different, it’s the counter-spell for reversing shape-changing curses on someone. It also has horrific side-effects if you get it wrong. The crucial thing to remember when casting the True Shape Charm is that you’re not trying to force the body to change, you’re trying to force the soul to remember what shape the body should be. I’ve had a lot of practice with it. We all did – your father included. Three boys, all trying to learn how to be Animagi without anyone finding out? We had a lot of accidents along the way, let me tell you. If you ever decide to give it a try though, Sirius and I will help you out too, strictly off the record,” Lupin said with a friendly wink. “Sirius is sure you’d manage it, and he’s ever-so-curious to know what you’d turn into. We have a long-standing bet on it, actually.”

“I wouldn’t want to go to Azkaban,” fretted Harry.

Remus nodded knowingly. “Ahh yes, your Boggart. Well, you can register once you gain your Animagus form – all tidy and legal. You can defer your registration for up to three months after
your first transformation, to allow for practice so you can display the skill when registering.”

“I’ll think about it,” Harry prevaricated. He really wasn’t sure about turning into an animal, and potentially getting stuck like that. There were rumours floating around Hogwarts – unsubstantiated but popular gossip – that Filch’s cat Mrs. Norris was an Animagus who’d gotten stuck and never been able to change back to her witch form.

“What book did you find the charm in, by the way?” Lupin asked curiously.

“An old one of my dad’s, from Potter Cottage.”

Lupin laughed. “Yes, that would do it.”

“So… why didn’t Sirius change back? Did he not want to? Was he uh… lost in old memories?”

“I think it might have started as a way to feel safer and less drowned in emotions and memories, but that wasn’t really the problem. The real issue was that he just got a bit too lost in the animal’s mind and was having trouble changing back. He was thinking too much like Padfoot, and not enough like Sirius. You’ve got to really focus on your goal when you initially transform, including a plan for when you’ll change back. I think that’s where Peter went wrong, too. No sensible man – or even a traitorous coward – would really think it’s a superb plan to spend a decade as a pet rat living on scraps. I haven’t experienced it personally myself – not in the same way the others did – but apparently sometimes if things are too comfortable you just drift along with the animal’s instincts and desires until something shocks you into needing and wanting to go back to how you were.”

Harry said slowly, “So when I reassured Sirius that I was fine, and that he could change back when he was ready—”

“A nice idea, but it comforted him on an instinctual level that it was fine to stay as a dog. It’s my own fault, I did tell you to just leave him be if he transformed. Just… not for too long. It doesn’t usually last this long,” Lupin explained apologetically.

“When cast correctly, the Verumorphus Charm pushes the human mind to the forefront, yet it still requires motivation and willpower on the part of the subject to succeed. I told him off a bit,” Lupin admitted with a wry smile. “In Azkaban his motivation was an intense fear of the human guards catching him in his Animagus form, which would lose him his one defence against the Dementors. At Hogwarts it was a desire to be with friends as a wizard again, and his worries about us all getting caught romping around the Forbidden Forest in our animal forms. Changing back in time to get some sleep and get to classes, that sort of thing. They kept each other focused. An external focus generally works better for Sirius, doubly so these days.”

After their discussion of Animagi, Harry told Lupin all about the attack in Gabon by the unidentified Death Eaters. He was pretty sure that none of them were Bellatrix Lestrange, as they had all looked and sounded male. Being told about their voices and Harry’s vague descriptions of the Death Eaters’ builds didn’t spark any recognition for Lupin.

Lupin sighed, and said solemnly, “It’s not the first time Sirius has been attacked of late. There’s more than one reason he’s got the house warded as tight as Gringotts and is worried about you being out on your own. The media blackout about Voldemort’s return means nothing – we’re heading into dark times, Harry. The war is going to start again soon. For some of us – like Sirius – it has already begun.”

Harry shivered. He hoped his agreement of neutrality would continue to hold up. At least one of the
Death Eaters in Gabon had seemed fine with the idea of blasting him to pieces, though another had seemed a bit hesitant once he’d realised who they were fighting. It certainly wasn’t something he wanted to rely on. He gnawed at his lip worriedly. Maybe he should have demanded a proper written vow of neutrality on the family honour, instead of just vaguely agreeing to a truce and telling the Dark Lord to stop writing to him. It was an uncomfortable thought to ponder.

Chapter End Notes

Nganga – medicine man.
Nyemba – witchcraft/magical power.
Genet – a small African omnivore of cat-like appearance, it is hunted for its meat and fur. Gbahali – legendary reptile from Liberia, similar to a 30ft crocodile but with longer legs.
Impundulu – large mythical South African bird that summons storms and lightening, befriends spellcasters, and drinks its victims’ blood.
Inkanyamba – large mythical South African water-dwelling creature that causes storms, with a horse-like head and a scaly body like a serpent or eel.
Omar Bongo – the actual historical name of the former president of Gabon.
Praenomen – personal name.
Nomen – middle/clan name.
Cognomen (plural – cognomina) – surname.
Gabon – I have never been to Gabon, or indeed anywhere in Africa, so I must of course make do with what research and consultation I can manage online. I have done the best I can to craft a hopefully unique and culturally respectful portrayal of Gabon’s wizarding world. If by any chance I have any Gabonese or West African readers of this series, please feel most welcome to offer corrections, comments, or suggestions on my portrayal of magical Gabon and the local people and culture.
Zu Wang – thank you to my world-travelling beta for providing some insight into the feel and details of West African markets and the local people.
Guest – Yes, Kreacher’s magical abilities are deliberately written as being less impressive than Dobby’s. Having Harry as the Black family Heir for only a day or two isn’t enough to change that.
Guest (French) – Thanks for the names of potential extra French wizards/witches! Everyone, until the next fic in the series is completed, I’m taking suggestions for characters from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. Leave me a review with your ideas if you want to volunteer names and/or backgrounds for some students. Beauxbatons students will be drawn mostly from France and French-speaking countries in Europe and Africa (e.g. Belgium, Monaco, Algeria, Chad), while Durmstrang will have primarily students from Scandinavia (e.g. Norway, Sweden) and Germany, and countries where German is a relatively common language (e.g. Austria, Switzerland, Namibia). But some will also come from all across Europe. Obviously, I can’t/won’t use all ideas, but some may make it into the next fic. :)
Diagon Alley

Chapter Summary

At Grimmauld Place Harry helps Kreacher with the “rubbish”. Sirius takes Harry to Diagon Alley to do some banking and go shopping with friends. Storm is admired the way he knows he always should be.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

July 1994

After Sirius’ breakdown he seemed determined to act like nothing had happened at all and seemed quietly relieved that Harry didn’t press him about the matter. Harry had another week to spend at Grimmauld Place before he was due to visit Neville, and it passed quietly enough with plenty of time to study and a very relaxing lack of chores. There were only his self-imposed cooking duties – which he split with Dobby and Kreacher – and an occasional call from Sirius or Lupin to lend a hand cleaning out a room of magical pests or pernicious mould. In his shoes, someone spoiled like Draco or Dudley might whine about back-breaking constant labour but for Harry it was a relaxing break full of opportunities for quiet study.

Dobby was in his element, thrilled to have so much work to do plus leave to spend his free time knitting a jumper for Harry or doing any other projects his little heart desired. Kreacher, however, clearly found the spring-cleaning process much more traumatic. He approached Harry about it of his own initiative early one morning before breakfast, popping into Harry’s room with the lack of care for personal space that Harry had become accustomed to receiving from Dobby.

Kreacher edged into making his request by rambling nervously at the start. ‘Does young Master Harold need anything thrown out from Master Regulus’ old room? Mistress says Kreacher must be making sure the new Heir is happy with his room so Master Harold will stay.”

“No thank you,” Harry said politely. “The newspaper articles might be a problem, but they’re covered up, and that’s alright for now.”

“That is Master Regulus,” Kreacher said distractedly to Harry, pointing at the photo of a Slytherin Quidditch team on Harry’s wall. Regulus was the boy sitting in the middle of the front row. He had the same dark hair that Sirius did (and Harry had, for that matter), and Harry had seen Regulus’ haughty expression on Sirius’ own face occasionally – the resemblance was unmistakable. He was smaller, slighter, and a bit less handsome than Sirius, Harry thought.

Kreacher added, “He was Seeker on the Slytherin team.”

“I was Seeker for Gryffindor in First year, but I quit playing to focus on my studies,” commented Harry.

“Master Regulus was very proud of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black,” Kreacher said, watching Harry like a hawk, wringing his hands nervously. “Is Master Harold proud of the House he is joining?”
Harry hesitated, wanting to give an honest answer. “Some of it. I can’t approve of everything every family member has done. But I don’t hate it, or anything. It’s good to know where your family is from. And my grandmother was a Black, and I like Phineas, and Sirius of course.”

It didn’t seem quite the level of enthusiasm that Kreacher was hoping for, and he shifted about uncertainly for a moment before his complaint burst out of him regardless. “Master Sirius is throwing away Black family heirlooms!”

“Yes, I noticed. Cursed and Dark stuff, mostly. Don’t worry, the rings are still safe, and he promised to leave the family tree tapestry alone,” Harry soothed, but it failed to help quell the house-elf’s anxious tirade.

Kreacher shook his head with tiny frantic movements as tears welled in his eyes. “No! More things! Precious family heirlooms that should be saved! The music-box that helps the little Blacks sleep at night! Jewellery! Even the good crockery, just because it has the Black family crest on it! The books on curses! Photos and paintings! Master says it is all rubbish and orders Kreacher to throw it all in the dustbin! He let the nasty thief Fletcher steal the silver butter dish last fortnight and is just laughing when Kreacher tried to stop him! Kreacher has been trying to save things, but Master Sirius stops him. Please, Kreacher needs help, young Master,” he pleaded.

“Cursed crockery?” Harry checked carefully.

Kreacher shook his head. “Just crockery, Master Harold. It is not having any magic at all.”

“I’ll see what I can do – I’ll have a word with him. And uh, you have a standing order from me to stealthily take back anything ‘Fletcher’ or anyone else manages to steal from the house, if that helps,” he offered. “Definitely not counting freely given gifts. If Sirius gives something away or knowingly lets them take it on purpose, you can’t take it back of course, even if you think it should stay in the house.”

“Yes, Master Harold,” Kreacher said, bowing low in gratitude.

Over breakfast, Harry had a chat with Sirius, who looked very worn from a night of “bad dreams” as he curtly explained. But he wasn’t swayed by Harry’s gentle arguments in favour of saving more items.

“I’m not keeping photos of Death Eaters displayed proudly in the drawing room,” he said stubbornly. “What would your friend Longbottom think of seeing Bellatrix’s photo in pride of place, hmm?”

“He’d be pretty upset,” agreed Harry. “Those should go. But Kreacher is a bit traumatised by it all. Couldn’t you keep a few more things? Books are pretty useful, even the darker ones. You wouldn’t have to display them – just keep them in case you need them later. And there’s no reason to throw out the crockery.”

“I hate that old crockery, and I need the room in the buffet hutch for new stuff. The books go – I’m getting rid of everything Dark. Eventually I want this house looking so Light that the Malfoys would faint, and the Bones or Prewett families would be happy to visit here in their Sunday best before church.”

“But Kreacher–”

“No Harry, Kreacher will have to cope,” Sirius said sternly. “Merlin, haven’t you seen how considerate I’ve been of him?”
No, not really, Harry thought, before realising that yes, Sirius was at least cutting off an occasional insult before he got too far into a sentence. He was trying.

“Look, you have a word with him,” urged Sirius. “He likes you. See if you can get him to come around. I’m tired of having to yell at him to get him to throw anything out.”

Harry obediently tried. He took Kreacher up to his room for a private chat, but the little house-elf was distraught at Harry’s lack of success in intervening with Sirius. Harry called for Dobby, who popped in with a bottle of butter-beer for Kreacher, and some pats on the back and comforting murmurs about what a nice lot of house-cleaning work there was yet to do, to make his House proud.

“But the heirlooms!” wailed Kreacher.

Dobby turned to Harry with expectant pleading eyes, and asked, “Could perhaps the things Master Sirius doesn’t want – but Master Harry does – be packed away for later? Baby Blacks might want them one day, too. New Heirs.”

Harry slowly shook his head. “He said he just wanted it gone. But… I suppose that does give me a bit of an idea that might make everyone happy. Follow me to the attic.”

In a crowded corner of the attic Harry got the house-elves to help him lay out some empty boxes, carefully hidden behind a large pile of furniture including old beds and worn chests of drawers. He put small labels on each of boxes like “Bin for Books”, “Bin for Dark Items”, “Bin for Crockery”, and “Bin for Heirlooms”.

Kreacher’s eyes were lighting up happily as he discerned Harry’s plan.

“Now, I don’t want you to ignore all of Sirius’ instructions about what to throw out,” Harry said sternly. “He’s right about that Nundu head – it’s moth-eaten and horrible and you know it needs to go. Harvest some of the fur and whiskers and bottle them for potions ingredients, then throw the rest out – chuck it in the dustbin. If it’s something broken or tattered, or something so dangerous and cursed that I could get hurt just touching it, you throw it away for real – you don’t want to endanger the Black family, now do you? Or get the house raided by the Ministry?! And I don’t want you putting fish bones or other actual rubbish up here of course.”

Kreacher nodded eagerly.

“But if it’s just something Sirius is upset about just because it has a connection to the Black family, or maybe there’s some curses in a book but the book itself isn’t cursed and dangerous, you can store it up here, alright? I’ll look over things when I get a chance. I won’t promise I’ll keep it all, but if it’s an actual heirloom and I really don’t want it either, I’ll either give it to another Black descendant like Draco Malfoy or to the Tonks family, or I’ll sell it, so that it’s not just thrown out like rubbish. How does that sound?”

Kreacher nodded eagerly.

“Master Harold is very cunning,” Kreacher said admiringly. “Kreacher can do this and not be going against Master Sirius’ orders.”

“Now, if I tell you to ‘put something in the bin’ and it’s actually worth saving, I’m actually ordering you to bring it up here. If I say something’s worthless or I simply tell you to just throw something out, then I really want it gone for good, with no arguments. Try not to argue with Sirius, either.”

Kreacher nodded more reluctantly this time.
“Oh, and I don’t want photos of Death Eaters kept around any more than Sirius does,” Harry added. “If there’s just one or two that you’re desperate to keep, you can keep them hidden in your nest, Kreacher.”

Kreacher seemed less happy with Harry’s disdain for the photos. “Master Harold must have reasons for hiding his allegiances,” he muttered under his breath, “Kreacher will help him hide from Master Sirius.”

“I’m not allied with the Dark Lord.”

“Of course not, Master Harold,” Kreacher said loudly, before lapsing into muttering again. “Kreacher knows young Master is Dark and follows the Old Ways.”

“Don’t say that!” chided Dobby. “You’ll gets Master Harry in trouble! You must keep his secrets! And he isn’t a Dark wizard!”

Harry sighed. It was Kreacher’s tendency to think aloud that was most likely to ruin this plan and get them all in trouble. Luckily, Sirius had a great willingness to ignore his old house-elf’s ramblings, as proved in a cleaning session in the library later that day as they culled the books on the top shelves.

“Master Harold knows what is rubbish and what is not,” muttered Kreacher as he picked up an armful of books on curses and poisons Sirius told him to throw away, and Harry had ordered him to “put in the bin” with a meaningful look when the house-elf had hesitated. “Young Master is a clever Dark wizard. He helps Kreacher with the rubbish. Kreacher will put these in the bin where Dark books belong.”

He popped away with his dusty load of books, and Harry watched Sirius anxiously. “I’m just saying what’s necessary to get him to co-operate,” Harry said with his best reassuringly trustworthy smile. “So things get tidied, and you don’t have to worry about arguments. I’m not a Dark wizard, obviously. I didn’t even tell him that – he’s come up with that on his own.”

Phineas’ portrait silently listened into their discussion with keen interest.

“I know you’re not Harry. It’s all a big improvement, I suppose,” soothed Sirius to a nervous Harry, who let out a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding. “He is working phenomenally faster, and there is a lot less arguing about throwing things out, so thanks for helping out and talking to him. Even if it does mean he thinks you’re Dark, now. I suppose it cannot be helped, given the pet snake and everything else.”

Kreacher popped back in and started dusting the newly-empty shelf. “Young Master Harold doesn’t spurn the Black family like the filthy blood-traitor.”

“We’re working on the muttering,” said Harry, very embarrassed. “Just ignore him, alright? Kreacher, do please try and remember not to mutter.”

“Kreacher wasn’t. Kreacher won’t, young Master.” Kreacher promised loudly. Then he promptly added under his breath, “Too much Dark magic. It must be affecting young Master’s mind so he imagines things. Young Master Harold must be more careful.”

Harry shrugged helplessly with an apologetic look, and Sirius snorted in amusement.

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Harry’s supply list had arrived at last, shortly followed by a flurry of letters from various friends all
keen to all meet up for school shopping. Pansy bulldozed her way through organising the shopping expedition for everyone and wrote to Harry about the outcome.

*I have made plans for our outing on Friday the 29th of July. I have received acceptances from Millicent, Tracey, Luna, Hermione, and Neville so it should be a delightful gathering. Draco, Vincent, and Greg have completed their shopping already so won’t be attending. Anthony and Daphne cannot make it; she remains on holiday in Wales at Cantre’r Gwaelod still, and he pleads that he is busy. It behoves me to warn you that Theodore Nott is coming too. I know you are not eager to further your acquaintance with him, but he is a friend of Millicent’s so do try and be pleasant, cousin.*

Sirius didn’t seem to approve of the outing a great deal but grudgingly conceded that Harry could go (as if Harry needed his approval!) when he heard there would be multiple adults along to chaperone the group. “Just remember to Floo for the Aurors if there’s an emergency. Keep your wand with you, and if it comes to a fight, hex first and ask questions later.”

“I might call for Dobby-”

“Master called?” Dobby asked eagerly, popping into the library.

Harry laughed. “I was just demonstrating to Sirius that you’ll come when called. You can go back to your knitting, Dobby.”

Dobby popped away obediently.

“Anyway, the House-Elf-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is ready to help too – he can raise the alarm if necessary. It wouldn’t have done us any good in Gabon – they can’t pop more than a few hundred kil- couple of hundred miles at the most,” Harry said, correcting into Imperial measurements for Sirius. “My uncle always insisted on us using the metric system – they use it a lot at Grunnings.”

“I took Muggle Studies – I know all about kilometres, litres, and other new-fangled stuff like electricity and cars,” Sirius boasted proudly. “Lily helped me study for my NEWT, and I got an Outstanding!”

“That was nice of her – good for you! So anyway, about the shopping trip… I thought you might want to come along too?” Harry ventured, but Sirius shook his head.

“Not if I have to play nice with Dark families.”

“They weren’t Death Eaters, any of them,” objected Harry.

“They weren’t *proven* to be Death Eaters, which is a different thing. For instance, the Nott and Bulstrode families both voted in favour of mother’s cousin Araminta Meliflua’s ‘courageous’ Ministry Bill to make Muggle-hunting legal. I remember, because I was bored to tears with the anecdote over dinner more than once.”

“That’s horrible, but it must have been centuries ago surely,” argued Harry, “and has nothing to do with Millicent, or Nott. Who is Meliflua, anyway? I don’t remember her from the tapestry.”

“It was not as long ago as you might presume – it was back in early 1950’s, when there was this big conservative push for isolation, after the war with Grindelwald. She was Great-Aunt Cassiopeia’s daughter.”

Harry just looked confused as he hadn’t memorised the family tree enough to recognise that name either, and Sirius sighed and changed the topic. “Never mind, it’s still old rubbish and it didn’t
pass. I tell you what, I shall come with you to do a bit of banking at Gringotts. We need to sort out the maintenance costs for Potter Cottage, for instance. I’ll politely shake a couple of family member’s hands before I head on my merry way.

“I need to get out some money for someone’s birthday presents, too,” Sirius added, smiling at last. “I had a great new idea, and Remus has been helping. So, what kind of party do you want? I know I am rather remiss in organising things so tardily. But I’ll do my best to throw a rockin’ birthday party.”

“A party?” Harry asked, puzzled. “But I’ll be at Neville’s for that.”

“Oh yes. Well, what kind of birthday party is he having then? Anything? Are you sharing a party?”

“Uh, Neville wrote he’s going to have a honey cake, and asked if I want one for dessert on my birthday too because if I want an apple cake I’ll have to argue with his Gran about it myself. She doesn’t like messing with that tradition. So I think that’s it – honey cake for two days running.”

Sirius tutted disapprovingly. “That’s not much of a party, just having cake. I thought being raised by Muggles you’d love birthday parties. I always thought they sounded like a hoot.”

“Well, the Dursleys bought me a birthday cake a couple of times,” Harry said brightly, “and last year I got pancakes for breakfast, which actually was nicer than having a cake. I love pancakes!”

Sirius looked intently at him. “Is that what they do for Dudley, too?”

Harry suddenly found tidying up shelves of books an important activity to focus on and dusted the covers of a few of the older tomes attentively. “No,” he admitted, not making eye contact.

They worked together in reflective silence for a moment.

Sirius eventually broke the uncomfortable atmosphere with a question. “Has there ever been something that Dudley got to do for his birthday that you wished you could do for yours? Some special party or activity? We could do it too.”

Harry thought about it. One wistful old dream did spring to mind. “Well… there’s one thing. But, it’s… kind of childish. Half my friends would probably hate it. Or be a bit freaked out. Draco wouldn’t like it, I know. There’s not much point having a party that no-one wants to go to, right? But it would be kind of fun, if only because I never, ever got to do it, and I always wanted to.”

“Tell me,” Sirius ordered. Harry shyly whispered his old secret dream to him, and Sirius let out a bark of laughter when he heard it.

“Sounds like a blast! I’ll organise it all and send out the invitations post-haste. We’ll all meet there at luncheon time on your birthday. And since you want him there to suffer with you all I’ll even get the Malfoy boy to go too, just you watch,” he boasted. “I sat through enough boring etiquette lessons to know how to issue invitations that a snobby pure-blood can’t politely turn down. He’ll show, and if he blames anyone it’ll be me, and you’ll be free and clear.”

Harry laughed. “Sounds good to me.”

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Harry had a large backpack stuffed full of old clothes to sell in Diagon Alley in anticipation of the influx of new clothes for his wardrobe that would inevitably result from a shopping trip presided over by Pansy. Selling off old clothes wasn’t something Sirius had ever done himself, but he
seemed willing enough to indulge Harry’s thriftiness. They stopped off at The Junk Shop and Harry did his best to haggle the sale price up a little, with mixed success. They weren’t at all interested in Harry’s admittedly scruffy old Muggle-style clothes he’d outgrown, so Harry just binned those.

“Gringotts next for some spending money and boring paperwork,” Sirius announced, as Harry counted the meagre pile of coins he’d earnt, “and then I’ll drop you off at the Leaky Cauldron to meet your friends.”

On their way to Gringotts, Harry saw a couple of brown-robed Aurors looking alert as they patrolled the Alley. The latest issue of the Daily Prophet had assured the public that the Ministry was confident that the Azkaban escapees had fled to the Continent and Africa, and thus posed no threat to wizarding Britain, but the continued presence of Auror patrols suggested that at least some people in the bloated bureaucracy weren’t convinced of the party line.

Sirius and Harry waited in line to see a teller, and Harry worked hard not to laugh as Sirius tried – with increasing impatience – to deter the solicitousness of an older woman in a black robe who claimed she’d “always known” he was innocent.

“I knew you could never have betrayed the Potters,” she swore. “‘Twas such a dreadful miscarriage of justice for the scion of one of our finest old Houses!”

“Thank you so much for your support, Mrs. Burke,” said Sirius. “Your letters of comfort were a great solace to me during my incarceration in Azkaban. It was so heartening to know I had supporters out there working tirelessly to advocate for a trial and secure my freedom.”

She looked a little flustered at that, “Oh, well perhaps that was a relative of mine, alas it grieves me to say that I did not-”

“Indeed,” Sirius said, pointedly cutting.

“Ah. Well, I truly did-”

“Thank you again, madam.”

With an angry or embarrassed flush to her cheeks, she sidled out of her place in the line behind them, and shuffled away to choose another queue to wait in.

“Was that… She was just trying to be nice,” Harry chided gently.

“Fair weather friends like that I can well do without.”

“But lots of people suspected you. What about your good friend, ah…?” Harry asked leadingly in a quiet voice, thinking of Lupin but not wanting to name the alleged fugitive out in public.

Sirius sighed, and whispered, “My house-guest, you mean? We each suspected the other, back then. I thought him a traitor, too. I cannot accept his apologies without proffering my own. Each of us erred, to our mutual discredit.”

“Next!” a goblin barked out, and Sirius dropped two silver Sickles onto the counter with a tiny clatter. “Sirius Black to see the account managers for vaults 711 and 704.”

The teller scooped up the coins. “Room five,” he said brusquely.

Sirius and Harry went to one of the small rooms set aside for private meetings and waited for the goblins to come and meet them.
“Why did you pay him? They’ll meet with you for free.”

Sirius leant back in his chair, crossing his arms behind his head and looking a bit bored. “Too much work, and they must earn a little money somehow, so why not? If you play their games, you’ll get stuck arguing about every niggly detail and everything takes ten times as long. You want my advice about dealing with goblins?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said. Then at his rebuking glance added, “Sirius.”

“My advice is that you shouldn’t lower yourself to their level. They’ll turn everything into a fight if they can, and the more you buy into that the more they’ll try and trick you into things. A foolish wizard will end up a pauper if he haggles wrong or gets conned into a bad contract. It’s best to keep interactions brusque and business-like.”

“But isn’t that kind of rude? It’s their culture. And it’s more expensive that way if you let them charge fees for everything.”

“But it’s not our culture, so you don’t need to buy into their vocal duels. It’s just a bit of money – they want to make a profit like everyone else in this world. You have plenty of funds, and so do I. Don’t worry about it.”

Harry frowned. “Is that how you were raised? Is that more typical for pure-blood families? The Parkinsons flyte with them.”

“Some do…” Sirius started, but he didn’t have time to elaborate, as a goblin in a smart pinstripe suit entered the room and he and Sirius got straight down to business.

“Copy of a new will covering vault 711 – the Black family vault,” Sirius began abruptly, handing it over to the unknown goblin who took it with a scowl. “I also have a business contract to be witnessed, a withdrawal to make, and gold to transfer to vault 242.”

The goblin untied the red ribbon around the will scroll and skimmed through the document briefly. “Does the will allow for the entailment on the Black estate and the rules of legitima portio?”

“Of course. I would rather split it up more, but the will follows the law.”

“I understand that phrase means ‘legitimate portion’ or ‘rightful share’, but what precisely does it refer to, in practical terms?” Harry asked.

“Half-witted ignoramus,” muttered the goblin, his attention still on the document.

Harry bristled. “Well if it’s too hard a concept for you to comprehend sufficiently to be able to explain it to someone else, master goblin, I imagine the wizard here can help us both learn more about it.”

“Harry…” groaned Sirius tiredly, as the goblin looked up with a sharp-toothed grin and adjusted his glasses, distracted from his focus on paperwork.

“Who might you be, stripling?” the goblin asked.

“Harold James Potter, Heir of the Noble House of Potter, and ah… newly appointed Heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. The Boy Who Lived.”

“That’s all?” the goblin mocked. “Trying to make up for a lack of character by compensating with titles, are you? My name is Gornuk. I manage the Black, Carrow, and Lestrange accounts.”
“An eminently forgettable name,” drawled Harry, with amusement dancing in his eyes. “You’ll have to impress me with character, I see, since your name is obviously nothing to boast about. I wonder if you’re capable of doing that?”

Griphook wandered into the room while Harry was busy flying with Gornuk and took a seat next to him behind the large mahogany desk, quietly getting out some paperwork and grinning at their banter.

“Hello Griphook, you’re looking happy today,” greeted Harry. “Not that you deserve to. You’re a cunning rapscallion whose greed is matched only by your ability to concoct underhanded schemes. You should be ashamed of your base deceptions.” Harry had prepared those lines earlier, and thought they sounded like a fine mix of praise and insults.

Sirius buried his face in his hands. “Can we please just get on with it?” he pleaded.

Griphook snarled in mock anger but looked otherwise puffed up and proud at Harry’s words, and Gornuk watched on with interest.

“Good morning, Mr. Potter. Do tell me, what base deception would that be? A child such as yourself of course has so many things they are ignorant of.”

“You never told me I needed a will if I didn’t want the bank to try seizing my vaults if I die,” Harry accused.

Griphook grinned delightedly, and Gornuk smirked.

“It is not the responsibility of Gringotts bank to enlighten you on such matters. Your parents should take the time to instruct their Heir. Of course, in your case some foolish choices left that unavailable as an option,” taunted Griphook.

“In Merlin’s name, do shut up about that! You, here’s a Galleon,” growled Sirius, tossing a coin to Gornuk. “Get on with my paperwork while Harry amuses himself. File the will properly. Then deposit a thousand Galleons into Weasley vault 242, in exchange for a twenty per cent share of profits on an ongoing basis. Just witness and seal the business contract – I don’t have all day.”

Gornuk scowled but caught the tossed coin and got to work promptly, with a muttered aside to Griphook that Mr. Potter wanted to know about *legitima portio*.

Griphook explained to Harry, “The forced share or ‘legitime’ of a decedent’s estate is that portion from which one cannot disinherit one’s rightful heir without sufficient legal cause. It prevents a House’s vaults and estates being given to a spouse or friend, or from being divided amongst too many beneficiaries. It is a legal means to enforce the consolidation of wealth as a proper inheritance for the Heir.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. “So, I couldn’t will my vault and the Potter estate to a friend?” he asked, thinking of Neville.

“Not so easily as you might have expected, no. I would be willing to advise on proper phrasing of a will… for a price,” said Griphook, with an eager sharp-toothed grin.

“Harry,” Sirius interrupted, passing him a quill. “Sign here, and here. You might feel a sting, don’t worry about that.”

Harry glanced over the scrolls being put in front of him. Sirius’ will was fairly straightforward – in formal language it stated that he was leaving almost everything to Harry as his Heir with a notation
that at such time as Harry became the Head of House, or was adopted, he had the option of taking
on Black as a cognomen, or alternatively a family name as a nomen, should he so desire. There was
an instruction that Sirius was to be buried in the Godric’s Hollow graveyard, and not the Black
Barrow. Lastly, there was a significant bequest of money and some books for Lupin, and smaller
bequests of money for Andromeda (who was listed as the House’s Regent if it became necessary)
and Nymphadora Tonks, with token amounts of Galleons for Harry’s friends Hermione and Ron.

“Are you sure about this?” Harry checked.

“Yes.”

As Harry signed his full name in red ink, the back of his hand stung. “Why is it hurting when I
write?”

“The quill uses your blood as ink.”

“Seriously?” Harry rubbed at his aching hand. “Is that really necessary?”

Sirius just grinned at him. “Sign here next.”

Harry read over the next document while Sirius waited impatiently, foot tapping. It was a
document authorising Harry or his bound house-elves to make withdrawals from the Potter family
vault for “essential property maintenance and household expenses” of up to a hundred Galleons a
year. It was sufficient, rather than generous, for Harry knew that roof repairs, garden supplies, and
groceries for Dobby would use up a lot of that gold. It also had a clause Harry didn’t like.

“I’m not signing this,” he objected. “There’s a two Knut fee in here for each withdrawal!”

“It’s standard and miniscule, and you can easily afford it,” Sirius said tiredly. “What if I just give
you a few Galleons to cover it? From my own funds, of course.”

“I suppose that would be alright,” Harry grudgingly conceded.

“But I still want this changed,” Harry said to Griphook, tapping the relevant part of the parchment,
“to put a time limit on fees for withdrawals. It’s to apply only for the next three years, and only on
the Family vault 704, not Potter vaults in general.”

“I regret to say that only your Regent can authorise changes to the conditions on the Family vault,”
Griphook said insincerely, “and he has approved the payment.”

Great. “Whatever. I can change it anyway when I’m seventeen,” scowled Harry.

“Are you sure about that?” goaded Griphook. “Some changes to vault conditions can be
permanent, as the entailment on the Black estate demonstrates.”

Sirius snatched the document back and scribbled in Harry’s suggested amendment and tossed an
extra Galleon to the goblins. “There. Sign.”

Satisfied with the change, Harry did, and Griphook tucked away the Galleon and counter-signed
the alteration.

“Is that everything today, Messrs. Potter and Black?” Griphook asked.

“I hope you have been happy with our service to such esteemed wizards as yourselves,” Gornuk.

“Yes.”
“Well…” Harry started, and Sirius – who’d been starting to rise to leave – sat back down again with a soft thump. “I need to convert some Galleons into pounds to pay for some educational expenses.” His correspondence course fees for the next year were due, and he had more books to buy.

“Any teller can help you with that exchange, foolish boy.”

“I was hoping we could discuss a better rate of exchange,” said Harry. “If you’re not too scared of a little negotiation. The price of the raw gold of a Galleon in the Muggle world is far in excess of the measly five pounds you’re offering.”

“Going to melt it down to make a profit, are you?” asked Griphook slyly. “You are not the first wizard or witch to think yourself so clever. Go right ahead my good sir, try and damage a Galleon. Shave a bit of gold off the edge, the metal is soft enough.”

Griphook drew a bone-handled knife from a previously unnoticed sheath at his waist and offered it to Harry hilt first. “Here, you may even use my dagger if you like, free of charge. It is made of goblin-wrought silver and will cut through gold like a hot knife through butter.” The sharp-toothed expectant grin he wore made Harry extremely nervous about trying to damage a coin.


“Nooo…” Harry said slowly. “I think perhaps I’d better not.”


So that was that. Sirius had a teller fetch him a pouch of Galleons from his vault, for a small fee. Harry went in the cart to his vault himself and got out some gold for Hogwarts supplies, and was also given a few extra Galleons as a gift from Sirius. Harry also converted some money into pounds for his Oxford Home Schooling expenses, which Sirius chatted with him about curiously. Then Sirius chivvied him along to his meeting with friends at the Leaky Cauldron.

“Remember, don’t try melting Galleons down,” Sirius warned, after they were out of the bank. “Goblin coins are enchanted to resist magic and damage in general. Any spells on them rarely last a couple of minutes even for the most powerful caster, and even then, they’ll still be imprecise and temporary – you can’t duplicate coins to make a passable or lasting counterfeit, for instance, you just get plain metal discs. Merlin knows enough people have tried to mess about with faking Galleons, and their attempts have started more than a few duels and feuds, over the years, and even a war or two with the goblins.”

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The shopping expedition members all gathered in dribs and drabs at the Leaky Cauldron. Mr. Bulstrode, Mr. Nott, Neville’s grandmother, and Tracey’s mother Mrs. Davis were the four who had been arranged to remain as chaperones and guardians for the party. As they arrived one by one with their charges in tow, the four adults split off to sit together at a separate table, adjacent to the children. It gave the teenagers the illusion of independence while still allowing their guardians to keep a protective watch over them from a distance. The others – Sirius, the Grangers, Mr. Lovegood, and the Parkinsons – just dropped their children off and left after cursory polite greetings to the other parents.

Before he left to return to work, Mr. Lovegood reminded Harry of his promised interview with Storm, and they arranged to hold that over ice-cream sundaes at the end of their shopping trip. The
adults who’d remained with the group seemed to be getting along well enough and were enjoying a drink and a chat with each other while leaving their children to socialise.

Millicent had arrived shortly after Harry did, and after accepting a token kiss to her hand, she moved on to greet another of her favourites.

“How’s my favourite snake today?” Millicent asked, cooing at Storm who’d been gotten out of Harry’s bag and now lay draped over Harry’s shoulders. “Tell him I think he’s looking beautiful and fierce.”

“He’s asleep, sorry,” Harry apologised, after a quiet hissed query met with no response. “He’s nocturnal and really should be at home sleeping. He just didn’t want to be left out, and he really did want to see you and be fussed over. I’ll let you know if he wakes up later. Do you want to carry him? I brought my satchel in case he’s a bother – he doesn’t mind napping in there.”

“Tired,” Storm complained sleepily as he was transferred to Millicent’s shoulders, dropping back to sleep quickly.

“I am honoured to carry him,” Millicent promised, sneaking a proud look in her father’s direction, who nodded back approvingly. “It is no hardship at all to help.”

Hermione had arrived second-last, with Neville and his Gran showing up shortly after her, and as soon as her parents were out of sight she launched into a small grievance.

“You said we should all dress casual in your letter!” Hermione complained to Pansy. “Not even Harry’s dressed down! Now I feel even more out of place.” Harry looked over Hermione’s outfit – a pair of jeans, a yellow t-shirt, and trainers.

Pansy looked Harry over approvingly, clearly not seeing a problem with her cousin’s ensemble. He was wearing an outfit he’d bought in Lutetia with a few added accessories: black trousers, a white shirt with embroidered cuffs that he’d fastened with silver cufflinks shaped like little coiled-up snakes, and a dark purple silk cravat in a ‘Mathematical’ knot tied for him by Dobby. His new black waistcoat with swirling lines of purple embroidery had silver fob chains looping across from a buttonhole to tiny pockets on either side. Topping off the ensemble was a pointed black hat with a hawk feather tucked into the ribbon.

Pansy turned back to Hermione and with her brow wrinkled with confusion said, “He is dressed very casually. It’s wizarding casual day wear in the modern style. Do those look like formal robes to you? Also, he is wearing a coloured cravat. Surely you noticed he’s not even wearing a jacket or cloak, or gloves? It would look better with a tailcoat, but it’s still a very nice outfit, cousin.”

“You did say casual, and it’s a bit hot today for gloves or outerwear,” Harry objected, looking around to see how many wizards were wearing gloves. It was a bit mixed, and Harry was satisfied that he certainly wasn’t the only wizard going without. Nott wasn’t wearing any gloves either, but then, he was dressed in a grey casual robe rather than a suit, and unless you were wearing formal robes you could more acceptably leave the gloves off with that outfit choice. Neville had gloves on, however.

Pansy looked Hermione over with a thoughtful gaze. “I could help you select some new casual robes or dresses,” she suggested. “Something more fitting to be seen in.” Pansy herself was dressed in a stylish buttoned-up casual robe in green, with grey embroidery on the cuffs and hem, and a braided black leather belt.

“I don’t like dresses or robes; I only wear Hogwarts robes because it’s a uniform. It’s draughty, and
you can’t run properly. I’d rather wear trousers whenever possible – even something like Harry’s
outfit would be better than a dress.” Tracey – who was herself wearing a long purple dress – looked
a bit miffed at the criticism of dresses but didn’t say anything. Luna was also wearing a dress but
looked blithely unconcerned.

“Not trousers for a girl! No proper witch would consider doing such a thing, even the Muggle-
lovers!” Pansy cried. Millicent snickered, and Pansy turned on her in irritation. “Well maybe you
would rather wear trousers, but at least you have the good sense not to. You really should dress
properly Hermione – I can help you there.”

Hermione scowled. “Well count me as not being a proper witch, then. Because I think how I cast
spells is more important than how I dress, when it comes to determining if I’m a ‘real’ witch or
not!”

“Hermione, if you were inviting everyone to go out with you into the Muggle world, you’d want
them to listen to your advice about how to dress properly, wouldn’t you?” Pansy asked.

Hermione took a slow deep breath. “Yes. I suppose you’re right,” she grudgingly conceded.

Millicent said, “Well I agree with you, Hermione. It would be much more comfortable to wear
trousers, but I’d never hear the end of it from my family if I tried. Do you want my advice?”

“From you, the fashion expert,” sneered Pansy, looking with a touch of disdain at Millicent’s
admittedly ill-fitting dull black casual robe and her simple pointed hat with a plain green ribbon
accent.

“Yes please,” Hermione said to Millicent with pointed sweetness and a side-long glance at Pansy.

“Wear Muggle trousers, but dress in primarily green, purple, or black. You can get away with
trousers – being a Muggle-born – so I think you should enjoy it. But if you choose one of the
traditional colours of magic it will show your affiliation with wizarding society. You could get
away with a bit of red to show House pride. But blue and yellow together in a purely Muggle style
isn’t communicating any message except unconcern about fitting in. I mean, you are not even
wearing a hat! A pointed hat would help a lot, just on its own.”

Hermione looked thoughtful. “I could wear more purple, I suppose. And a hat. I need a new school
hat anyway.”

“Purple’s very pretty,” Luna encouraged, “however, so is your yellow shirt. I like yellow too. Gold
is a Gryffindor colour, so if you added a hat with a dyed red owl feather or ribbon, it would look
very nice, I think.”

Pansy abandoned the effort to reform Hermione’s attire to Millicent (with patchy assistance from
Luna, Tracey, and Nott), and focused instead on Harry, interrogating him as to what clothes he had
at home that were in decent condition and still fit well, and planning out with him what he’d need
to buy.

Their plans settled, they set out on their shopping expedition with the adults trailing after them at a
polite distance to give their youngsters a little privacy.

Pansy was merciless, Harry decided a little later. He’d gotten three new Hogwarts work robes, new
dragonhide gloves, and a new school hat from Madam Malkins. Then she’d dragged him to
Gladrags Wizardwear for new boots, another pair of black trousers, winter socks, and a black
tailcoat. She’d also coaxed him into buying a black waistcoat with red and green embroidery (after
he’d nixed the suggestion of one in Slytherin green and silver), despite his protests that Dobby was making him over some of his dad’s waistcoats and trousers.

“Not decade-old second-hand clothes, Harry,” she pleaded with large eyes. “This waistcoat is so flattering and fashionable, don’t you think?”

“If it’s that important to you,” he sighed. “But this is the last thing.”

She nodded, in swiftly undermined agreement. “Except for formal robes. They’re on the supply list, remember!”

“I have formal robes! Two sets in fact – one with the Potter crest, and the ones I got from the Malfoys for my last birthday.”

“Well you can’t tell me they fit you properly now. They are simply too old, and you keep growing like a Puffapod.”

Harry slumped in defeat. “They’re so expensive. I have to pay for everything myself out of my personal vault, remember? If we could just lengthen the sleeves a little…”

“No. They will fit even worse by Yule.”

“But surely magic—”

“No.”

“Fine. But they’re going to be cheap and plain. No amethysts or gold thread this time.”

Nott piped up, “Floo the Malfoys. I do not wish to spoil any birthday surprise, but I think it might help. He shall need formal robes for the Malfoys’ ball in any case, so sooner is better than later.”

Pansy relievedly pronounced Nott a “Patronus in the dark” (which he clearly took as a compliment), and successfully begged the free use of Twilfitt and Tatting’s Floo to discuss a “fashion emergency” with a friend.

“What ball?” Hermione asked with a frown.

“The one they’re throwing in August when I visit?” said Harry. “A dinner party with a little dancing. It’s in a fortnight. Weren’t you invited?”

“No. Typical. Is this a pure-blood thing?” she said, looking around vaguely for someone to demand answers of. “Is it Slytherins only?”

“I received an invitation. I haven’t replied yet, but I’m ah… unable to attend,” said Neville, looking a bit shifty.

“I’m invited too, so it’s not just for pure-bloods,” said Tracey.

“Father said I can go, so it’s not just for Slytherins,” Luna added. She patted Hermione comfortingly on the shoulder since she still looked rather put out.

“They have invited my family,” Nott said. “The Parkinsons too, and the Houses of Crabbe and Goyle. It’s more for close friends of the Malfoys than anything else, I think.”

Hermione muttered something under her breath to Luna about friendship and Muggle-borns that Harry didn’t quite catch. After that, she seemed to settle into quite a grumpy mood and was
mingling notably less with the Slytherins.

Pansy finished her Floo call and triumphantly reported that as the Malfoys had planned to present Harry with another gift certificate to the shop for his birthday, they’d be more than happy to grant his present a little early and cover the cost of some new dress robes. So, Harry ordered some robes in the same wide-sleeved style as last time but in saffron yellow with red embroidery on the yoke and sleeves, and garnet beads on the golden belt.

“Those are very Gryffindor colours,” Pansy said dubiously, as the tailor measured him up.

“Well it’s for a school event. So, I think a bit of House pride might be in order.”

“Green suits you better. It would match your eyes, and bring out the colour,” she wheedled.

“It’s a nice colour on you, Harry,” Millicent agreed.

Harry shrugged. “I have plenty of other things in green.” The Slytherins always seemed biased in favour of green, or occasionally purple.

Hermione had, so far, only bought some new Hogwarts uniforms at Madam Malkin’s, plus a hat with a red ribbon for casual wear that she’d put on right away. While a couple of the others also picked out some robes, Hermione either didn’t see anything she liked at Twilfitt and Tatting's or she didn’t like the prices, for she impatiently pronounced that she’d buy her formal robes some other time. “Can we move on to Flourish and Blotts now?” she asked grumpily.

“Oh yes, let’s!” agreed Harry, and the tide soon shifted to Pansy getting bored while the others browsed the teetering shelves for far longer than Pansy clearly felt such a dull shop deserved.

They gathered their textbooks (though there weren’t many new ones to buy this year) and while some went with Pansy to the counter right away to pay or to get their parents to do so, most of the others lingered to browse the shelves. Nott seized a chance to talk to Harry while they were on their own looking through the Defence Against the Dark Arts section.

“What are you looking for?” Nott asked companionably.

“Books on duelling,” Harry said, returning a copy of Defensive Magical Theory to the shelf with a huff of disappointment at the dull content. “Can you believe this year’s Defence textbook is the same one we had for first year? It was a good textbook, but I know all those spells off by heart. I don’t have high hopes for class this year, so I’m looking for something good for self-studying.”

“That is a great idea! I hope you’ll be running Potter Watch again this year?”

Harry shrugged. “I guess I will, so long as I can get helpers for again to lead the junior and senior groups. It was pretty popular.” He tucked Self-Defensive Spellwork and A Compendium of Common Curses and Their Counter-Actions into his wicker shopping basket as the most promising-looking spell books.

“Say, would you perchance like to come visit my house later in the summer, if you have time?” Nott said. “I love duelling too, and my father is skilled at tutoring – we could get some practice in. Or if you just feel like relaxing we could go for a swim – we have a small lake at the back of our property behind a pretty bit of wilderness.”

Nott was smiling in an open and friendly way, and it reminded Harry of Aunt Petunia’s expression when she was trying to ingratiate herself with a neighbour who was the target of everyone’s juicy gossip, in hopes of wheedling out more rumours for the mill. Harry was deeply suspicious of it.
“Look, Nott-”

“Please, you’d be welcome to call me Theodore, or Theo.”

Harry huffed in frustration. “-The thing you’re forgetting Nott is that I’m not an idiot,” he said with quiet intensity.

Theodore’s face closed off, smile dropping away.

“I appreciate you’re trying to make friends, but it’s never been a priority for you before,” Harry whispered quietly. “I don’t really like to talk about it, but I get a lot of letters to the ‘Heir of Slytherin’ as well as to ‘the Boy Who Lived’. Lately it’s increased. Now I have my suspicions about why that is – and I’m sure Lockhart’s book didn’t help – but in the end people’s reasons why don’t really matter. I might speak to snakes, but I’m not especially powerful. I’m not a Dark wizard. I might have a bit of family wealth and maybe one day a seat on the Wizengamot – but I can’t access any of that until I’m of age, so I can’t do much to help anyone with their problems right now. I don’t want to get mixed up in politics if I can help it. I’m not an Auror, nor a hero who can save anyone from the Dark Lord, or from Dark wizards on the run from Azkaban. I’m just me.

“I only want to be friends with people who want to get to know me – Harry Potter. A rather boring teenage boy who’d like to stay out of trouble, and one day become a Healer. If I’m going to be famous, I’d rather it was for innovative research in medicine that I did myself, not for some inherited talent, or a title, or for my parents’ deaths.”

Nott nodded slowly. “I see. That all sounds reasonable. So what can I do better, then? I am really trying here. I do want to be friends, honestly.”

“I know, I’m sorry I lost my temper. It’s not that you’re doing anything wrong, you’re a nice guy and I like you well enough. It’s just…” Harry trailed off, not sure how to explain it. Crabbe had been doing the same thing at the end of the last school year, and there was just this falseness to it. Like it turned out there had been with Flint. He didn’t want to be fooled again. Besides, he had enough friends to juggle already and it was hard keeping everyone happy.

“Perhaps I could offer future favours in return for your social acknowledgement or friendship, or a façade thereof?” Nott asked quietly.

Harry stared at him. “Haven’t you been listening to me at all?”

Nott winced, and whispered quietly, “Yes, truly I have. But… I have been ordered by my father to ingratiate myself and form a friendship or client relationship with you. I… I cannot fail at this. Or I shall be punished. Thus, it is my thought that mayhap we could come to some kind of arrangement. I know you associate with enough Slytherins and pure-bloows to understand how that game is played.”

“Oh.”

So that’s how it is, Harry thought. It’s coming from desperation. That’s why he’s been pushing more than anyone else.

“Why is it so important to your father? Which is it – ‘the Boy Who Lived’, ‘Heir of the Noble House of Potter’, or ‘Heir of Slytherin’?” Harry asked curiously.

“The last one,” Nott said, looking a bit cagey at the admission.

“Alright,” sighed Harry, who didn’t want to see Nott suffer. His father seemed like a smiling,
friendly sort of man. But Harry knew that meant nothing for what happened behind closed doors in one’s own home where there weren’t any witnesses. “We’ll talk terms.”

Nott bowed in gratitude. “You shan’t regret this, Potter.”

“Call me Harold.”

After gathering a large number of books, Hermione insisted on a visit to Eeylops Owl Emporium, as she wanted to pick up some food for her owl, Diana. She also nagged Harry into buying some proper treats to hand out to owls who visited him with letters.

“You can’t keep feeding them rubbish, Harry. I know you’ve fed Diana bacon in the past, and I won’t have it any longer. Would you want me to feed Storm bread?”

“That would make him sick!” Harry objected.

“Well, bacon makes owls sick. The same goes for any other cooked or preserved meat, for that matter.”

Harry hesitated, then nodded. “Fair enough. Sorry about that. I’ll buy some Owl Treats, then.”

“Those ‘Premium Owl Treats’ they sell aren’t as nutritious as they’re advertised to be. No, it’s day-old chicks cut into quarters or baby mice, if you want to feed Diana a snack.”

“Live mice? Storm likes his food still wiggling.”

“Dead is fine – she’s a good owl. She likes to eat them head first, by the way, so you hold the mice up by the tails.”

“You know what? I’m just going to wait outside,” said Neville, looking a bit green. He wasn’t the only one who skipped out on their conversation.

“I thought magical owls were tougher than the regular kind. Ron feeds the Weasley family owl bacon and bits of sausage,” Harry said conversationally, obediently buying a medium-sized box containing dead baby mice kept fresh with a preservation charm.

“And Errol looks very sick most of the time.”

“True, he’s like a moulting feather duster.”

The group of friends finished up their shopping trip with a trip to Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlour. The owner was manning the counter himself today and was delighted to see Harry Potter – “the Boy Who Lived!” – back at his store again. He gave Harry a free ice-cream sundae, and a small discount for all his young friends. The accompanying adults settled down at one table together with drinks or ice-creams, while the children picked a long table outside in the sun to eat their treats at, gossiping about their holidays and waiting for various parents to arrive to collect them.

Mr. Lovegood showed up very promptly, but instead of departing with Luna he settled down to talk with Storm and claim Harry’s translation assistance for the promised interview. Diagon Alley being what it was, Mr. Lovegood carrying around a live fish in a glass bowl hadn’t even warranted
Storm was happy to be roused to talk to the nice Clever-man who’d helped him eat fairies and had brought a small barramundi for him to devour. It took Harry a little while to settle into a pattern of smoothly translating Storm’s hisses without accidentally lapsing into Parseltongue himself as he usually didn’t relay more than a sentence or two to friends, but eventually he got the hang of it.

Mr. Lovegood asked a few questions about Storm himself first, like how he’d gotten his name, what he liked to eat, where Rainbow Serpents lived, and what their enemies in nature were. (Storm listed people, bunyips, drop-bears, and crocodiles as major threats his mother had particularly warned him against.) He was also curious to know what powers Storm had.

“I can summon lightning and mist and clouds and rain,” Harry translated, “but my lightning isn’t strong enough to kill anyone yet. It should be one day, so I will keep practising. And I can bite things – I’m very fast, and I crush my prey or swallow it whole. I can hold my breath and swim underwater and catch fish and frogs. I can swim under the earth too, but I can’t make mountains or valleys yet – I’m too small.”

Harry added, “He didn’t mention it, but he can also sense heat – like body heat. I don’t think he thought to list it any more than someone would list how they can see and hear things. And I think he’s able to sense magic in things at some level, from what he’s said in the past about songlines and ‘special things’.”

“Fascinating!” Mr. Lovegood said enthusiastically, while an enchanted quill scratched out some notes for him. “What are songlines?”

“They’re a bit like ley lines,” said Harry, answering on his own behalf without relaying the question to Storm, “and a bit like a path you follow, um, kind of a sung oral history of travels. I’ve talked about this with Storm before - Aboriginal wizards and some magical creatures can cultivate songlines, in his homeland of Australia. Singing and dancing helps, apparently. I think he’s too young to affect them, however.”

“Now tell me, what does magic feel like to him?”

Harry translated Storm’s answer. “Special. Tasty. It sings.”

Mr. Lovegood did a couple of tests of Storm’s magic-sensing ability, such as seeing if Storm could distinguish the difference between a handkerchief transfigured into a spoon, and a regular unenchanted spoon. It appeared to be a very patchy ability, and Storm didn’t always get it right.

“Tell him I can ssense it better in some prey and places,” Storm clarified. “But it is never as ssstrong as ssight or sssmell-taste.” Harry duly did so.

“Now, you mentioned his mother talked to him? I believe snakes usually don’t have any kind of parental care. Is his species exceptional?”

“I don’t know what other snakes do,” Harry translated. “Mother lay around us while we were in the shell, and told us stories while we grew, as is the tradition. After we had all hatched, she waited a sunrise or two and told us more stories. Then she saw us to the waterhole, and then she left. Later, Clever-men came and caught me and some of my siblings and took us away.”

“I can see Mr. Black has arrived to collect you, Harry, so let’s finish up with a couple of fun questions, shall we? Does Storm have a favourite Quidditch team? Gryffindor, perhaps? Will he be barracking for Ireland for the Quidditch World Cup?”
“He likes Slytherin,” Harry answered, with a rueful smile as his friends laughed.

“Aww, tell him he has excellent taste,” cooed Millicent.

Storm swayed happily at the relayed praise. “Tell her to help Ssslytherin triumph thiss year. The bird House won the ssspecial cup last year and that is not as good as the House of Sssnakess.”

All the Slytherins present were delighted by his encouragement and promised to do their best.

“It was nice that Ravenclaw won last year,” Luna reflected happily. “Everyone was very excited.”

“Not much House loyalty to Gryffindor there,” sighed Neville, looking at Storm.

“I’m afraid not,” apologised Harry. “He’s loyal to me, but after that it’s down to who brings him treats or likes snakes the best. He’s familiar with the stories about Salazar Slytherin being a Parselmouth, and his House’s mascot being a snake.”

“Final questions. Has he enjoyed being a celebrity, with the long-awaited release of Battles with the Basilisk?” asked Mr. Lovegood. “How did it feel to help fight a legendary snake many times his size?”

“We won, Custos and the cold ghost-man lost. I am glad I helped save Harold,” translated Harry. “She was smart, but I was smarter. Can I have my fish now?”

Mr. Lovegood uncovered the fish bowl with a laugh, and Storm struck with a splash at the fish inside and began the slow process of swallowing it whole. Mr. Lovegood also gave Harry a small handful of coins as payment for translating the interview. Harry peeked before putting them away – four Galleons. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected and had vaguely thought it might be more but decided in the end that any profit was good.

“Custos?” Mr. Lovegood asked curiously. “I don’t recall that from the book. Is that a Parseltongue word for ‘Basilisk’?”

Oops, thought Harry, I should have edited that out of the translation. It was true – Lockhart hadn’t named her in the book. While the revised version was a little kinder to her reputation, there were still more mentions of “her gaping fanged jaw” and how she was a “monstrous scaly appetite-made-flesh” than anything positive. She wasn’t actually named at any point.

“It’s her name, it’s from Latin and means ‘Guardian’. She said she was the ‘Guardian of Hogwarts’. As Lockhart says in his book, she didn’t mean to attack the students – she was being controlled.”

“A great pity she had to be killed,” Mr. Lovegood said gravely. “What a loss to the world.”

“Indeed,” agreed Harry.

“Those who love and care for you will always watch over you,” Luna pronounced, with an odd smile.

Chapter End Notes

Stargirl1061 – Thanks for the recommendation many months ago that Harry get the
goblins to release property maintenance funds from the main vault. He couldn’t do it on his own, but he could with authorisation from his Regent.

dewiswitch – Better owl treats for you. :)
Remus talks with Harry about how he escaped Azkaban. Harry visits Neville for his birthday, and they visit St. Mungo’s.

Saturday 30th July 1994

Lupin leant against the doorframe and watched as Harry packed up most of his belongings, with help from Dobby. “Are you leaving because of me?” he asked. “Or Sirius? Perhaps I shouldn’t say anything about it, but he’s worrying over it a bit.”

“No, it’s nothing personal, I swear. You’ve both been great! It’s simply that I promised ages ago that I’d visit Neville for his birthday and stay a while. I’m coming back afterwards.”

“I know I make you a bit nervous, being a werewolf,” Lupin said. “You’re being very polite about it – better than most – but I can tell I do. If there’s anything I can do or say to help you feel more at ease, just let me know.”

Harry chewed his lip, looking hesitant.

“Go on, ask. I promise not to get mad, no matter what you say,” encouraged Lupin. “It’s alright if you have questions.”

“It’s not just being a werewolf… that is… I was wondering…” Harry said, very slowly and hesitantly, “how exactly you escaped from Azkaban? I mean, the Death Eaters escaped at the same time as you did… and no-one exactly explained the real story. Sirius hinted, but he didn’t say precisely what happened. I mean, obviously you didn’t break out to lead a Dark reign of destruction and terror or to kill me, like the Daily Prophet said. I don’t believe the papers.”

Harry couldn’t think of a nice way to ask, “Are you a Death Eater now? Were you always one?” Hopefully Lupin would get the gist of what Harry was asking, without getting offended. Mr. Malfoy – Lucius – had coped well in the past with a bit of questioning of his motives, and he hoped Mr. Lupin would too. He was trying to be as subtle as he could be while still staying on topic.

Lupin sighed. “Ah. Well, you’re not the first to look askance at me over that, and I suppose it’s fair. The world knows me as a crazed Death Eater, and even my allies harbour suspicions.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean–”

Remus waved his apology away. “No, it’s alright, I’m not upset, honestly. It’s a reasonable question and you’ve got more reason to worry than most. Really, all things considered it’s remarkable you trust me to be in the same room as you!”

“I’m okay with being around you,” reassured Harry. “I’ve also been wondering, do you regret that you have to hide now? I mean, I’m not saying you should regret helping Sirius, as such. I mean do you regret that almost everyone thinks you’re a Death Eater? Do you wish you’d done something
“Yes and no. I don’t regret helping Sirius, and while I would have liked to have gotten out of Azkaban legally, I just couldn’t bear staying there any longer. What I do greatly regret is the impact it’s had on other werewolves. Not on the violent ones like Greyback, but on the peaceful people just trying to live their lives who now must cope with the Werewolf Registry being brought back in full force. The new strangleholds on employing werewolves thanks to Umbridge’s laws passing through the Wizengamot. That’s what I regret – hurting others by painting myself as the villain to the press.”

“How exactly did you get out of Azkaban?” Harry asked.

“That’s a long story when told properly. Come on. This could take a while and I think we’ll need a pot of tea.”

Lupin leant on the bannister as he limped all the way downstairs, and they settled down for tea at the kitchen table. While Dobby started the fire going, Kreacher fetched a copper kettle to boil water in, then started measuring out tea leaves into a silver teapot, with an odd little smile to himself.

“The first thing I suppose you should know – if you don’t already – is that werewolves aren’t like normal wolves.”

“I know a fair bit already,” Harry said, fetching some biscuits from a pottery jar and arranging them on a dainty little plate. “Like how they have a shorter snout, tufted tail, and are more aggressive than normal wolves. I did the werewolf assignment for Professor Snape while he was substituting for you last year. So I’ve read a bit about them, mostly with a focus on research for a cure, and transmission of the lycanthropy curse or disease. *Wanderings with Werewolves* wasn’t a lot of help of course, and Hermione hogged *Hairy Snout, Human Heart* for her own assignment so I never got around to reading that one in the end, which was a shame because a couple of other books referenced it a fair bit.”

Harry distractedly glanced over at Dobby and Kreacher where they were huddled in the corner. The two house-elves appeared to be arguing, judging by their hissed whispers and glares at each other. Dobby seemed to win, judging by his smugly triumphant air as he poured hot water from the kettle into a plain white ceramic teapot then delivered the teapot to their table, while Kreacher scowled and put the old silver teapot away.

Lupin sighed. “That is a shame, for it’s one of the better books on the topic. Well, it’s true that werewolves are more aggressive. Horribly so, in fact. Not when we’re human, just in wolf form – we lose the ability to recognise our human friends and will attack with minimal or no provocation. It’s what made the Wolfsbane Potion such a breakthrough. At its most perfectly brewed it lets the werewolf retain much of their own mind and the wolf’s instincts are dulled dramatically. It’s tricky to get right, but even an adequate potion makes the wolf sleepy and slow to anger. Without it… instincts rule. And the wolf hates to be caged.”

“Ah. So Azkaban made your wolf-self angry? Or frightened?”

Lupin nodded as he poured them both some tea. “Both. But viciousness and anger predominated – blood-lust is easily provoked in wolf form. Feeling trapped or cornered, hurt, and alone is one of the worst combinations of emotions in the world for a werewolf. I’d hoped to be swiftly released, but alas I hadn’t reckoned with the full extent of the prejudice against werewolves. So the day after my arrest I spent the night of the full moon in custody in the Ministry holding cells. It was bad. Lacking prey or a way to escape, the wolf turned on itself to slake its blood-lust.” He rolled up his
left shirt sleeve to show vicious red scars on his forearm. The lines of parallel and overlapping scars looked like claws had repeatedly slashed at his arm.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said guiltily. “I did try and explain to everyone what happened – to the Aurors too. I’m sorry about stabbing you with silver, I didn’t know… I thought you were working with Sirius. I mean, you were but I didn’t know exactly.”

“It’s alright, I don’t blame you for thinking the worst at first, and I know you that you tried to fix things. I haven’t forgotten how you stood up to Snape for me, for instance,” Lupin interrupted calmly, blowing on his tea to cool it before taking a sip. “It was appreciated. All things considered, you couldn’t have been expected to act any differently with the little information you had – calling for the Aurors was wise with that in mind. Sirius’ plan wasn’t the best thought through, but in his defence, he was still fresh out of a decade of hell in Azkaban, and not thinking clearly.”

“Oy! What was that?” said Sirius, wandering into the kitchen and pulling up a chair. “Slandering my good name are you, Moony?”

“You don’t have a good name,” Lupin retorted cheerfully. “I was explaining why your plan last year to tell Harry the truth about Wormtail was rubbish.”

Sirius winced. “Yes, I suppose it was. Sorry again, Harry. Well, I did the best I could at the time. So what are you going over all that for?”

“He asked how I got out of Azkaban – I’m giving context.”

“Ouch. Well, best get it over with.” Sirius turned in his chair to face Harry with an intent stare. “Be mindful that he is under an Unbreakable Vow. If he says he cannot speak of something you must respect his silence. You can ask me about any matters that arise that he is prohibited from discussing. But there’s actually very little to worry about – it mostly seems to be people’s identities and plans that he can’t talk about, so just steer clear of that.” Sirius nabbed a piece of rich buttery shortbread to munch on, settling back to listen to Lupin’s tale too.

Lupin coughed uncomfortably. “Well, as I was saying, the first full moon was bad enough. There were some mitigating factors that reduced its impact, however. The Aurors Stunned me into unconsciousness with a barrage of spells before I could do myself much damage, and they bandaged up my wounds at some point in the night. From a distance with a spell of course – no-one dared to come close enough to risk contaminating themselves. But if the Ministry cells were bad, Azkaban was worse. A month with Dementors sent to torment me with my worst memories as all my happiness and hope leached away,” he said, knuckles whitening as he clenched his teacup too hard, “and I was filled with despair and desolation so thick it strangled my voice to a moan as I rocked back and forth in my cell in a ball of misery. Then the next full moon came. And my wolf went mad.”

Lupin’s voice sounded choked up with emotion as he continued. “The Dementors practically went into a feeding frenzy, though I didn’t remember it until later. They swarmed outside the bars, gliding back and forth in a dark hungry mass like sharks scenting blood in the water.”

He rolled up his trousers to show off his left leg – great chunks of the calf muscle were missing, and what remained was a hard mass of livid scars. “The second night of the full moon when it was at its peak was the worst. I almost died. In my frenzy my wolf tried to gnaw its own leg off, and almost bled out.” Harry couldn’t help wincing, and Lupin covered up his mangled leg again. “They sent a Healer to me – they said that I couldn’t be allowed to die before my trial. But afterwards? The world would be ‘rid of one more half-breed abomination’.”
Lupin sighed heavily. “I still had another full moon to endure the next month before my trial at the start of May, and I doubted I would make it through that in one piece. Or at all. In there I was just a werewolf who’d helped kidnap a young pure-blood boy at the behest of his mass-murdering Death Eater friend. The guards were… not kind to me.”

“The Azkaban breakout was only a few days after the full moon during which he’d torn himself up,” Sirius added. “He was still pretty… ah…”

“Let’s just say I wasn’t at my best,” finished Lupin. “I’m sorry I wasn’t as strong as you were, Sirius! But I would have done anything to get out of there!”

“Shush. Don’t talk nonsense. There’s no-one stronger or braver than you,” Sirius soothed. “You know it was easier for me – being able to turn into an animal was a blessing for me, not a curse. Thank Merlin we all learnt how!”

“Except Peter. I wish he’d never mastered being an Animagus.”

“I’ll drink to that!” Sirius said, making Lupin glance nervously at a high kitchen cupboard. “Tea, Moony. I meant tea. It’s the morning.” Sirius poured himself a cup pointedly, stirring in some milk and sugar.

Lupin calmed a little and went on with his story. “So where was I, Harry? Yes, well, a few days later Peter showed up. I’m allowed to say that much. He wore the white mask of a Death Eater, but I knew that it was him. But at the same time… it wasn’t him. Peter almost always wrung his hands when he got really nervous – he didn’t do that once. He stood differently, too. Straighter. More confident, like he was used to giving orders and being listened to. Peter was never that sure of himself, and I doubt a decade as a pet rat would have changed him for the better in that respect.”

Harry asked hesitantly, “Was he possessed, do you think? By the… He-Who-Must-Not-Be Named?”

“I really couldn’t say,” Lupin said vaguely, while Sirius tutted disapprovingly at Harry. “I can tell you that he followed the orders of one of the other two men in black robes, however. The one who didn’t wear a mask, and instead kept his face magically shadowed.”

“He can’t tell you, but that person called himself Lord Voldemort,” Sirius added. “The other two deferred to him. It was a wizard, fairly thin and tall, and that’s all we know of his true identity. And the third person wore a mask too – he stuttered a little bit and was a bit timid and subservient, so we’re all pretty sure it was your erstwhile teacher, Quirinus Quirrell. We’re not entirely sure what was going on with Peter. If he was possessed by Voldemort, why would he have obeyed someone else? I think it just doesn’t fit.”

“Two Lord Voldemorts?” Harry suggested hesitantly.

“I know, it sounds crazy! Or three, if Quirrell is possessed too! As if one isn’t bad enough!” Sirius said. “It’s a theory. People are talking about the Philosopher’s Stone and what crazy experiments Quirrell might have done with it. Dumbledore isn’t sharing much. He has a second theory he won’t go into, but it involves the diary Lockhart says he destroyed over a year ago. He wants to talk to him about it, but while Tonks has raised the alarm that Lockhart is among the missing, no-one’s found him yet.”

Harry frowned. “The last time Lockhart wrote to me, he said he was in Africa fighting Fwoopers. But that was ages ago, and no-one has seen or heard from him much since. I know his publisher got a few letters after I did. I was honestly amazed he’d skip the book signings – it seems really odd.
To be honest, I’m a bit worried about him. I could be wrong, but I think Lockhart realised he might offend You-Know-Who by sharing too many secrets in his book. I think he got scared, and that’s why he changed things. I think he might have gone into hiding somewhere. Or someone might have threatened him… or worse.”

Sirius nodded in grave agreement. “Dumbledore wants to talk with you about the diary too Harry, as well as with Lockhart – if we can find him. He was wondering if you’d come to a meeting to discuss it in a couple of weeks.”

Harry thought about it. It sounded like it was time to come clean. Or a bit cleaner at least. He should plan for it and get his story ready to share. Lives could depend on it. It wasn’t like Voldemort would be able to find out he dobbed surely – their fragile truce should hold. Hopefully.

“Yes, I can do that. Who’s the meeting with? Aurors?”

“No. The Ministry was useless in the last war – too badly infiltrated. It’s heading that way this time as well – they won’t even admit Voldemort’s spirit survived, let alone acknowledge the rumours and signs that he’s back and gathering strength. There’s a group of people who oppose him – a sort of underground resistance. I was in the earlier version of it – along with your parents – back in the first war. We work against Voldemort and all his followers. That’s who the meeting would be with – probably here. I host some of the smaller meetings, though Headquarters is elsewhere.”

“I’m not in the Order any longer,” Lupin said bitterly. “I can’t be. The price of my freedom was an Unbreakable Vow to never actively fight or work against Lord Voldemort. Heat burns my arms as I dance around the limits of the Vow just talking about his Death Eaters. Peter claimed a Life Debt for setting me free, and that was the price. I don’t have to work for You-Know-Who, but I can’t work against him. Ever. So if there’s ever an attack, remember you can’t rely on me.”

Sirius bumped Lupin’s shoulder with his own as he said gruffly, “But you can rely on him as the bravest and most loyal friend who ever lived.”

Harry slunk away quietly to finish packing while the two men wallowed in self-recriminations and argued with emotion-choked voices about who had let who down the most.

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“So, do you always visit your parents on your birthday?” Harry asked Neville as they walked down St. Mungo’s bustling corridors, and up its rickety staircases. Neville’s grandmother was forging ahead of them, so they kept an eye out for her vulture-topped hat to keep track of her in the bustling crowd of patients and green-robed Healers.

“Yes. Every year. And at Christmas,” Neville said. “Other times too, when we can.”

Harry thought that sounded kind of depressing, and kind of nice. As they walked, Harry silently pondered the symbolism of a stuffed vulture or its feathers in millinery, trying to remember Daphne’s lectures on fashion. He remembered it was turtle dove feathers for love, pegasus for fame, eagle for wisdom or power, crow for war, raven for thought or memory, and hawk feathers for nobility. But he was pretty sure she hadn’t mentioned vultures. They were carrion eaters, so maybe it had to do with waiting for things to die, or they were a symbol of mourning. They were… eaters of death. It probably had some morbid meaning about waiting for her son to die, or a symbolic wish to kill Death Eaters. He shuddered a little.

“I am most grateful for your willingness to accompany me today, Harry,” Neville said stiffly, breaking the silence.
“Hey, I’m happy to support you – whatever you need. It’s your birthday. So, if this is how you celebrate it then count me in.”

“I h-hope…” Neville started hesitantly before clearing his throat and trying again. “I am hoping you might be able to give some insight into my p-parents’ malaise. The Healers have long since given up on them. Crucius exposure this bad is supposed to be incurable.”

Harry froze in his tracks with shock, meeting his friend’s pleading expression with wide eyes. “I’m not an expert, Neville! I’m not even a medical student, let alone a doctor! I’m only just starting to study human biology this year!” Harry said, panicked at the implicit trust Neville was putting in him. “I’m just going to let you down, I don’t know anything. It’s not like I’m a neurologist.”

“What’s a ‘newrolligist’?”

Harry went into lecture-mode, derailed from his looping anxious thoughts. “Oh, neurologists are doctors who specialise in disorders of the brain or nerves. Brain damage and tumours and that sort of thing. That stuff causes personality changes, trouble functioning and controlling the body, or remembering things. Like your parents do. Muggles don’t really… I mean lots of them believe in the soul, but if there’s a problem like with your parents, they’d examine the brain. Which usually helps. The brain is what makes you you.”

“See?” Neville said encouragingly. “You are helping already. I didn’t know any of that. Maybe the Healers don’t either. Gran doesn’t approve of ‘sawbones’, so Muggle doctors have never been brought in to see mum or dad.”

“I barely even know first aid!” Harry spluttered. At Neville’s enquiring look he added, “Muggle healing in emergencies – like bandaging wounds.”

“I don’t expect you to heal them, Harry.”

“You don’t?” Harry let out a relieved whoosh of breath.

“No, I know we are both young, and you aren’t even an Apprentice Healer yet. But maybe… maybe you’ll th-think of something. Something that can help them. Something new to try. Please… you’ll t-try won’t you?” Neville’s old stammer still crept out when he got especially stressed.

Harry couldn’t say no to his best friend’s wobbly-lipped face and eyes that brimmed with unshed tears. “I promise I’ll try. I’ll do my absolute best to think of something.”

Neville didn’t hug him but instead shook Harry’s hand fiercely in thanks, as an outlet for his excess of feelings on the matter.

Eventually they reached the fourth floor, where double doors marked the start of a corridor signposted as “Spell Damage”. Neville’s parents were in the Janus Thickey Ward for long-term residents, where the occupants were a diverse lot. A sallow-skinned, mournful-looking wizard lay in one bed muttering at the ceiling with a vacant stare, while a woman two beds along had fur covering her entire head and barked at them as they went past. Glancing at her, Harry thought Hermione should count her blessings that Madam Pomfrey had managed to cure her so completely from her Polyjuice mishap a couple of years ago.

At the end of the ward, flowery curtains had been drawn back from two beds. Mrs. Longbottom sat in a sofa chair drawn up next to her son’s bed.

“There you are, that took you long enough! Come along then, boys,” Mrs. Longbottom called.
Neville shuffled slowly forwards, glancing back occasionally at Harry with alternating expressions of embarrassment and hope.

“Hi mum, I brought you some flowers,” Neville said, putting a bouquet of roses and tiny white flowers in the empty waiting vase on his mother’s bedside table.

She looked older than Harry had expected – her face was thin and worn, and her hair was white and dead-looking. She didn’t seem able or willing to speak, but she made timid motions towards Neville, and passed him an empty Droobles Blowing Gum wrapper.

“Thanks mum,” Neville said quietly, slipping the wrapper into his robe pocket. His mother hummed to herself, seeming pleased.

Neville looked over at Harry with a nervous, pleading expression, and Harry moved up to join him.

“Hello, Mrs. Longbottom. I’m Harry Potter, a friend of your son’s. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said politely.

“Alas, you will not get a response from poor Alice,” Mrs. Longbottom pronounced. “Neither of them speaks much, and when they do there is not much sense to it. Surely you told your friend all about your parents? You should be proud Neville, that your parents – two fine Aurors – gave their health and sanity in the line of duty.”

Neville flinched, and said faintly, “I am not ashamed of them.”

“I know the generalities, ma’am. Just not the specifics,” Harry explained.

Harry stood by supportively while Neville talked in a low voice with his parents. Neville told them how he was fourteen now and chatted about what he’d been doing in the past fortnight with his greenhouse plants. He also mentioned that Harry was visiting for a week, and that they’d be going to Harry’s birthday party in the Muggle world tomorrow. While Neville spoke, his father Frank Longbottom’s absent-minded attention waved between gazing at the moth-eaten fox fur draped around old Mrs. Longbottom’s shoulders, and playing with the tasselled ends of the blanket on his bed. Neville’s mother meanwhile seemed occupied with a glass jar of sweets, trying to extricate a prize buried under the less appealing treats at the top.

“Would it be alright if I have a chat with their Healer about their case? With your permission?” Harry asked Mrs. Longbottom, after Neville’s one-sided conversation with his mother had trailed to an end. Neville had run out of things to talk about and was busy helping his mum retrieve her favourite sweet – some more bubble gum.

Mrs. Longbottom agreed to Harry’s request, and imperiously called over a plump-faced dark-skinned young Healer in a lime-green robe whose frizzy hair was tied up in a bun. “My grandson’s friend has a few questions about my son and daughter-in-law’s treatment, if you would be so kind as to answer his queries, thank you.”

“Of course, madam,” she said, with a polite short bow. “I am Healer Jordan, at your service.”

“Harry Potter. It’s a pleasure to-” Harry started.

“Merlin! It’s Harry Potter!” she exclaimed, glancing at his forehead. But her rush of excitement at meeting a wizarding celebrity was quickly squelched by a chiding pointed cough and a stern look from Mrs. Longbottom.

“Umm, I was wondering if it’s alright if I ask things about the Longbottoms in front of them, or
“Yes, proceed,” Mrs. Longbottom ordered. Neville silently nodded his acquiescence in the background.

“So, Healer Jordan, I was wondering if they were suffering from any conditions other than over-exposure to the Cruciatus Curse, and what their current prognosis and treatment regime is?” Harry asked.

“My word, Mr. Potter! What detailed questions! You are serious about being a Healer, aren’t you, young man? I have heard a little gossip about that, and I read an article last year which mentioned your ambition – it was the one about you attending the St. Mungo’s dinner.”

“Oh, yes. I would also like to study to become a Muggle doctor, too.”

She chuckled indulgently as if the idea was cute. “You should talk to Apprentice Healer Augustus Pye. He is interested in complementary medicine too – he did a ‘First Aid’ course with the Muggles. All very primitive of course, yet he is convinced there might be some merit in a few techniques.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I shall endeavour to do so if the opportunity arises,” Harry replied with stiff formality. “So, what exactly was the damage to the Longbottoms?”

The Healer cleared her throat and got back on track. “Well, the soul damage from the Cruciatus Curse was the most horrendous, of course. However, they did also have some additional spell and curse damage when they were first admitted,” she said. “Broken bones, some cuts, internal burn damage from a Blood-Boiling Curse, and a Withering Curse. There may have been others. I regret to say that I am not completely certain in my summation – I was not working here at that time. So I would have to talk to Healer Strout or consult their records to refresh my memory for the precise details. Those assorted additional spells have been long since countered of course, but the Withering Curse has left its permanent mark on their appearances.”

“That is why mum has white hair and dad is going bald, even though they are only in their thirties,” Neville added quietly. “That curse ages you. On the outside.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. “So, how are they being treated?”

“Well, there were counter-curses cast at the time for the various curses, and they underwent an intensive course of remedial potions. Currently they receive Appetite-Enhancing Potions with their meals, and Cheering Charms are cast as required to keep them content. Cleansing Charms of various sorts – that I don’t think we need to go into – are used a few times a day. They exercise at least twice daily with a guided walk around the hospital to help keep them in shape.”

“Right. And what is being done for rehabilitation to help them recover their memories?” Harry asked.

Healer Jordan stared at him and said slowly. “Your concern for the Longbottoms is laudable, but alas, there is nothing that can be done to cure such extensive Cruciatus damage, Mr. Potter. For immediate treatment strong Calming Draughts can be administered to relieve the shaking after recent exposure, while Cheering Charms assist to soothe the spirit. But that phase is long since over. We helped them over the worst, and now there is nothing more to be done. Their souls are – I am truly sorry to say – irretrievably damaged.”

Harry glanced worriedly at his companions. Mrs. Longbottom looked impassive like she’d heard
all this before, while Neville wore a determinedly brave face.

“Have you consulted a neurologist about their case or tried any Muggle medicine at all?” Harry asked.

“St. Mungo’s current Warlock, Healer Poke, is not very keen on… complementary medicine being practised in our hospital,” she replied, obviously with her best attempt at diplomacy. “So, no, I don’t believe so.”

Mrs. Longbottom walked slowly to keep pace with the boys as they departed, clearly not wanting them to lag behind her this time.

Neville was practically quivering with anticipation as he breathlessly asked, “What do you think, Harry?”

“Well,” Harry said slowly and carefully, “my biggest question is: why they are still in St. Mungo’s at all?”

Mrs. Longbottom stopped abruptly and gave him a glare. “They will not recover, Mr. Potter. They cannot. There is no counter-spell that can cure them. If there was, it would have been attempted long ago. Healers Strout and Jordan are very capable and trustworthy – there are no underhanded iatrogenic schemes or chicanery going on to maintain my son and his wife in their current state, I assure you!”

“Yes ma’am, I have no doubt of that,” he said, in the respectful tones she clearly preferred, very mindful of her angry glare. “As such, I feel they would be better cared for in your home. Some people with memory loss do better in familiar surroundings, and I see no reason that they couldn’t be cared for there. To their benefit, and perhaps to yours too? I can’t imagine that round-the-clock care at St. Mungo’s is an insignificant expense.”

“They do – as you said yourself – require constant attention, Mr. Potter. I am not a young witch any longer, and I also have other demands on my time such as attending Wizengamot meetings, and social obligations.”

“But you have two house-elves who could help you,” Harry pointed out. “Or if that’s not enough assistance, you could acquire an additional one, or hire a private nurse… a mediwitch or mediwizard. Or you could just have the Longbottoms’ health reviewed weekly, and give the daily care job to a Squib, as opportunities for them seem limited in society. I’m sure there’s someone who might be happy to administer potions, help with meals, and take Neville’s parents out walking in the grounds. It would have to be nicer for them to be at home, able to walk outside in the sunlight. It’s not healthy to be indoors all the time. They looked very pale, didn’t you think?”

“Do you really think it might help them remember… things? To be somewhere familiar?” Neville asked with optimistic wonder.

“I honestly don’t know. It might not make a difference,” Harry admitted with painful honesty. “But… maybe it will help a little. It certainly wouldn’t make things worse, and if it didn’t work out, they could just come back to hospital, right? The ward had a few empty beds. It’s not so crowded that you couldn’t change your mind.”

“Ordering quality potions in could be difficult,” Mrs. Longbottom mused aloud.

“Master Snape is probably available,” Harry suggested. “He’s gone into private potions research
and manufacture, I believe.”

“I shall think on the matter,” she pronounced grandly. “It seems a difficult proposition and will require much deliberation.”

“You could take them to a doctor, as well,” Harry ventured bravely. “He or she could refer them to a neurologist or a psychiatrist – they’re specialists in ah... illnesses of the mind and soul. There might be some medications and treatments that could help.”

“I won’t have a Muggle sawbones cutting into my son’s head!” Mrs. Longbottom cried shrilly.

“I’m sure they wouldn’t,” Harry soothed. “If they tried, you could simply refuse the treatment. They wouldn’t do something like that without asking, and they’d also insist you sign a lot of paperwork before they started – it wouldn’t be a surprise. Anyway, I’m talking about medicines and therapy, not surgery.”

She seemed much less open to his second idea no matter how he phrased it, especially after he’d explained how blood tests and injections worked – concepts which she found both novel and horrifying. She was very suspicious of them as being both unnatural and potentially Dark. Even Neville’s support for Harry’s suggestion didn’t sway her. They both stopped trying to coax her into changing her mind after she reprimanded them sternly about how they should listen to the wisdom of their elders and shush and know their place.

A little while later, after they’d Apparated back to Longbottom Manor and were unobserved, Neville made an eager promise to Harry. “I’ll take them when I am of age,” Neville vowed. “Once I turn seventeen, I can take them to a doctor and a neurologist myself – she will stop being the Regent and I shall be the Acting Head of the Noble House of Longbottom. That is only three years away now. In the meantime, she’s definitely going to bring them home!”

“I thought she seemed rather ambivalent about the idea,” Harry said dubiously. “At least she’s thinking about it, but I wouldn’t get too attached to it definitely happening…”

Neville laughed at that. “Merlin no, she was actually very keen. However, she needs to think it over and alter the plan a tad, until she feels like she can announce it as her own idea. Trust me.”

Harry grinned and shrugged. “Well, you know her best. So long as it all works out in the end, the details don’t matter.”

“Best birthday ever,” Neville sighed happily.

“No way!” Harry argued playfully. “That’s going to be my birthday tomorrow!”
Gifts

Chapter Summary

Harry’s friends enjoy – or suffer through – his dream birthday party.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

31 July 1994

Harry thought it was his best birthday ever. However, not all his friends agreed with him once they’d arrived at the crowded restaurant, full of plastic tables and chairs, that was positively seething with Muggles.

Some partygoers blended in without fuss – Harry, Hermione, Anthony, and Tracey were dressed very appropriately in casual Muggle clothes. So was Dudley of course. He’d been dropped off very perfunctorily by Uncle Vernon, who’d screeched away without risking mingling with ‘their sort’ just to give a birthday greeting to Harry.

Others were passable in their attire, including Neville, Ron, and Percy who all wore trousers and collared shirts. Despite her obvious effort to blend in, Luna looked very out-of-date and hippy again, but Millicent looked surprisingly normal and Muggle-like squeezed into a frilly vintage dress with a flowery print, if rather uncomfortable. Millicent didn’t seem accustomed to having her pale, plump, and slightly hairy legs on display (as both wizarding robes and old-fashioned dresses typically had ankle-length hems), and Hermione was clearly trying to soothe Millicent with a patter of compliments and reassurances about her appearance.

All the rest of Harry’s Slytherin friends – Pansy, Draco, Greg, Theodore (now on a formal first name basis), Peregrine, and Vincent Crabbe (invited thanks to Draco’s plea on his friend’s behalf) – looked lost and confused in their very fancy formal wear as they made their way through the crowd of customers to assemble in the party room. Daphne had interrupted her family holiday in Wales to visit for the party and seemed quite put out to have not matched the local fashion norms in her long satin formal gown, as she’d obviously expected. She seemed pleased by Dudley’s slack-jawed admiration of her dress, however.

“You’re a friend of Harry’s? Gosh, I thought you must be someone famous – like from the movies – with that dress and your jewellery!” he said in frank astonishment to find she was just a friend from Harry’s school. “Wow, you look amazing! I thought you were eighteen!” She found Harry’s “cousin on my mother’s side” worthier of her attention after his honest flattery, clearly upgrading him from “someone to ignore” to “someone to tolerate”. Dudley spent a while chatting to her, as well as with the Weasleys whom he’d already met and who were consistently polite to him.

Hermione took up a self-appointed post just inside the entrance, waiting to nag people into removing cravats, hats, and waistcoats as she spotted them arriving, and to hush them if they babbled anything about “magic” in their momentary surprise at the automatic doors opening. Vincent was the only one for whom she made an overly loud comment for the benefit of Muggle bystanders about how he “should have changed before coming here from the fancy dress party”, as he’d worn a cape and pointed hat (which he swiftly removed when he was instructed to, though he
Draco had barely managed the start of a greeting to Harry when his shallow façade of cosmopolitan acceptance of his Muggle surroundings shattered into pieces.

“Get it off me!” Draco cried out in panic, as a sticky and confused toddler ran up to him and clung to his legs briefly. “It’s touching me, Harry!”

The child looked up as Draco yelled, and was startled not to see his own dad’s face as expected. “Dada?” the boy cried out frantically, looking around worriedly before running off in relief towards an older blond man in business attire who looked passingly similar to Draco if you didn’t look too closely at their faces.

“I think he thought you were his father,” Harry said with a wide grin. “He was just looking at the black trousers and white shirt and got confused.”

Draco shuddered. “Dear Merlin, why did father abandon me here?! I’m completely defenceless! He said I couldn’t bring my… you know. ‘Golden arches’ sounded so refined, but it was an exceptionally misleading description. With a name like ‘McDonald’s’ I expected traditional Scottish cuisine, not chips and… whatever else that stuff is people are eating. Morning rolls with rissoles.”

“They’re hamburgers,” Harry explained, then let out a snicker. “Your father practically ran out the door the instant he saw inside, didn’t he? Sirius thought it was hilarious, when he spotted that while dropping off his gifts.”

“He would,” Draco said. “None of the adults are staying, right? It wasn’t just my father who left?”

“Just us kids here like I asked – Mrs. Longbottom left too. There’s a staff member who’ll be our party host. It’s not high class, but the food is supposed to be really tasty. Don’t worry, we’ll have a private room, so you won’t have to mingle with… the crowd. You should take your gloves off, by the way. To help you blend in. Besides, you’ll definitely have to take them off to eat, you know,” Harry warned.

Draco huffed at him. “Well obviously. I’m not some uncouth troll, you know. You don’t wear gloves while dining!”

Later Draco looked on aghast as people munched on their burgers and chips with their hands, just like the common Muggles in the rest of the restaurant. “Where is the cutlery? Where are the plates, for Merlin’s sake! This is appalling… vulgar. At least that other Muggle café had crockery! You should be receiving better service than this, having secured a private room. If you are reluctant to do so, I would be happy to complain to Mr. McDonald on your behalf.”

Anthony was drinking while Draco said that, and choked with laughter, barely managing not to snort lemonade all over the table. Draco sneered at him disdainfully.

“What other place?” Hermione asked, with a curious smile. “When did you go out amongst… ordinary people?”

“Not often,” Draco said vaguely. “Is this truly what you wanted for your natal celebration, Harry? Or did you lose some kind of bet?”

“Be polite!” Hermione chided. “It’s a very popular location for birthday parties. Just try and enjoy the brief experience for what it is. You haven’t even touched your food!”
Draco looked chastened at being told off by Hermione for his lapse in etiquette and nodded his head gravely to both Hermione and Harry. “My most sincere apologies for my rudeness. I hope you enjoy your celebration here, and I am truly honoured to have been invited. It is… a very unique locale. I simply find I ah… have a delicate stomach today. My mother has packed me a lunch with bland foods more suitable for… a convalescent.”

Draco glanced warily at the uniform-clad young woman who was their party host, who’d been ignoring his rant with a very fixed smile. He lent towards Harry to add in a confidential whisper, “I truly don’t mean to be rude about the food, but I am iron sensitive, you know, so I can’t eat it. They are cooking with iron here. It’s everywhere.”

“Just one meal won’t hurt you, honestly,” encouraged Harry.

Draco just shook his head and took some golden-brown pastries and an assortment of fruit out of a wicker basket tucked at his feet (Harry had assumed it was a birthday present). He arranged his meal with a wince on a couple of fastidiously arranged paper serviettes in lieu of a plate, then popped open a corked glass bottle of Butterbeer. Crabbe (“please call me Vincent”) – who hadn’t been eating either – looked over at him with a pleading expression. With a sigh Draco passed over a ham croissant and an orange, and then another share of the bounty to Greg who perked up happily when he saw Draco handing out treats. In the end Draco was left with just one lamb pasty and an apple for himself.

Anthony had talked to the staff member and special ordered a Filet-O-Fish and chips instead of the cheeseburgers, chicken nuggets, and chips that everyone else was having, and nonchalantly waved off Harry’s apology when Harry realised he’d forgotten to try to cater to his friend’s kosher diet.

Dudley had gotten a Diet Coke with his meal and only a small serving of fries, and acted like it was a Herculean undertaking to make such concessions to his diet. Theodore was eating his chips and burger slowly with a determined, long-suffering air, and Pansy was picking at her meal a little warily, but everyone else appeared to be enjoying their Happy Meals well enough. Ron was even eying the Slytherins’ neglected meals hungrily in search of seconds.

With Harry himself in high demand for socialising, Percy had sat down next to Peregrine (whom he knew moderately well through Potter Watch) and was boasting happily in Muggle-friendly vague terms about his job at the Ministry to an appreciative ear. Peregrine seemed keen on landing a plum role with the Ministry himself next year when he graduated, if his hopes for an illustrious “sporting career” fell through. Presumably he meant he was hoping for a professional Quidditch career as a Chaser.

“My Gran sent a honey cake for Harry to share with everyone for pudding,” Neville volunteered reassuringly, when he noticed some people avoiding the food. “It’s homemade by our… chef to a traditional recipe.” That news perked the more Muggle-wary party guests up nicely.

They listened with polite attentiveness as the Muggle-born and raised sang “Happy Birthday” and clapped along with everyone else as Harry blew out the candles on his cake. Despite their pure-blood backgrounds, Neville and Ron joined in the singing too, as they’d attended a few casual birthday parties in the Gryffindor Common Room over the years for Hermione and other Muggle-born friends.

After cake, Harry moved to open his pile of presents, before a couple of friends including Pansy warned him in hasty whispers not unwrap their gifts in public. So, his friends helped him pick over the pile for ‘safe’ presents to open with Muggles all about, and he made a little pile of the unwrapped gifts.
The safe gifts included a medical dictionary and a study planner from Hermione, a jar of homemade biscuits from the Weasleys, and a medical history book by Roy Porter that Tracey promised would be fascinating, entitled “Doctor of Society: Tom Beddoes and the Sick Trade in Late-Enlightenment England”. Derrick and his family gave Harry a collection of fine linen handkerchiefs embroidered in the corner with various different designs, including the Potter crest, the Slytherin crest (subtle!), and a tiny rainbow serpent.

Greg and Vincent had both gotten him tiny snake statuettes – one was a painted ceramic cobra with a flared hood, and the other a three-headed silver Runespoor. Greg embarrassingly rumbled that it had been Draco’s idea, when Harry thanked him.

“Draco thought you might want to start a collection,” he explained, “and Hermione agreed it was a good idea too.”

From the Dursleys there was a box of stationery and a generous twenty pounds even though they’d already given him money for new clothes during Hermione’s brief visit to Privet Drive. There was also a poster specifically from Dudley – “Identifying Britain’s Snakes” – with photos and information on it about the three indigenous British snake species plus a legless lizard that was often mistaken for a snake.

“I was going to get you this poster of a witch with a cauldron and a magic circle, but mum said no,” Dudley said with a faint air of apology. “It was really wicked. But it was like, a copy of a classy-looking old painting. Kind of like the ones the principal at Smeltings has on his office walls. Anyway, I hope you like the snake one?”

“I love it!” Harry reassured.

The party host checked in with them after the present opening had died down. “Would you like your faces painted? We don’t have a lot of entertainment options to suit your age group Harry, but face painting is usually still a hit.” There was a murmur of interest, so Harry happily agreed on the group’s behalf.

Pansy was eager to have her face painted first, and perched in a chair regally, head turned to one side as she gazed off into the distance.

“What would you like, dear? How about a butterfly? Or a rainbow?” the host said, sitting down next to her and passing her a plastic folder full of pictures. “Do you have a favourite animal? I could paint some whiskers and cat ears on you, if you like.”

“I thought you were going to take my likeness with a quick sketch or watercolour?!” Pansy said in shocked confusion, looking down at the pictures. “You’re going to paint on my face?”

The party host covered her mouth in a failed attempt to hide a snort of laughter. Hermione loudly cleared her throat and gave Pansy a little shake of her head and a meaningful wide-eyed look. Precisely what she was attempting to convey was unclear to Harry, but it seemed to mean something more to Pansy, who settled down immediately.

“Come to think of it, that sounds delightful,” Pansy said stiffly. “I have not had that done in quite some time.”

“Will it come off?” Luna asked their host, making Pansy’s eyes widen a little.

“Very easily,” the host reassured. “Soap, water, and a bit of scrubbing is usually all you need, or some make-up remover and a soft cloth. A little olive oil can help loosen any glitter. It’s all non-
toxic and suitable even for young kids. Just remember it will smear easily, so take it off before bed, okay?"

“That sounds fine then,” said Pansy, relaxing. “I should select something from your portfolio, correct?” She flipped though the book, with Daphne and Tracey moving up to peer curiously over her shoulders.

“Ooh! A unicorn. I did not know you knew… I would like that, thank you. But a baby unicorn, with a gold horn instead of white.”

“That sounds cute. I’ll do my best!” the host said cheerfully, getting to work.

When the various adults arrived to pick up their charges, they found them all the kids laughing at each other’s faces, and Hermione taking photos of everyone. Ron’s lion-mask and Percy’s owl face with a beak on his nose delighted their father, and Luna’s father promised to take a photograph of the colourful butterfly-mask around her eyes before they had to wash it off. Lucius seemed surprised but tolerant of the dragon on Draco’s cheek breathing fire on his nose, and Theodore’s smiling father found no fault with the show of House loyalty implicit in the long green serpent coiling around his son’s face. All the pure-blood wizards seemed startled by Dudley’s emphatic choice of a skull and crossbones motif for his cheek and gave him some odd looks.

The Dursleys picked Dudley up and departed quickly with only a brief token birthday greeting to Harry. Harry told himself he didn’t care – that he understood how wary they were of anything magical. That he understood how obviously they’d want to leave as quickly as possible, with some of the adult wizards and witches present watching the Dursleys’ every word and move with barely-concealed disdain. The contrast still hurt, however, watching his relatives coo over and chat animatedly with Dudley as they departed. He decided in the end that it was probably his own fault – he’d invited so many wizards and witches that naturally they would be nervous and uncomfortable. Otherwise they would’ve stayed longer. Probably.

Neville stood with Harry as he bade farewell to everyone, then the two of them waited on their own for Mrs. Longbottom to arrive to pick them up. Neville had a basket of presents of his own to take home, from some of their friends who’d decided to drop them off a day late rather than deliver them by owl.

“A rainbow serpent?” Neville asked conversationally, looking at the colourful painted serpent winding its way across Harry’s face. Neville had a leafy vine winding across his own face, dotted with tiny blobs of glittery purple flowers.

“Storm will think it’s funny. That might help him stop sulking about missing my party,” Harry explained. “Plus, I guess I like it? I started a trend. All the Slytherins wanted snakes after that, but only Millicent got a rainbow one like mine.

“Which reminds me Neville – we need to carry her present carefully and open it first when we get back to your place, because there’s something alive in there for Storm. The way to his heart is through his stomach, and she’s determined to bribe her way into his friendship at every opportunity!”

Neville nodded. “I’ll remember.”

Sirius stopped by near the end of the party to help Harry pack up before Mrs. Longbottom arrived – he’d brought a couple of large wicker baskets to transport his pile of gifts. “Your dad gave your mum a bouquet of flowers once for her birthday, before they were dating, Harry,” Sirius said, grinning in reminiscence as he worked. “It was supposed to just unshrink and pop out of the box all
neat and tidy for her to catch. But Charms wasn’t your dad’s strong point, and while the shrinking was fine, the unshrinking didn’t go so well! The flowers kind of exploded out in a blast of petals when she untied the ribbon. They flew straight at her face like they’d been thrown at her, then scattered all over the breakfast table.”

Harry glanced around to make sure no Muggles could overhear their conversation, but the three of them were luckily alone in the party room. “What did she do?”

“Well, I think she thought that it happened that way on purpose, though one look at James’ face should’ve told her differently. Hmm… mind you, he often tried to look innocent, so perhaps it was fair. She yelled at him just a wee bit, and both of them got points taken off Gryffindor due to their argument! He spent a fortnight apologising – every morning on his knees like she’d conquered his House – before she forgave him.”

Harry smiled. “They both sound rather stubborn.”

“That they were!” Sirius agreed.

Mrs. Longbottom appeared at last, thankfully sans vulture-topped hat as per Neville’s special request.

“Well, your Gran’s here at last, Neville,” observed Harry. “I’d better pay up before we have to go.”

“Well, your Gran’s here at last, Neville,” observed Harry. “I’d better pay up before we have to go.”

“That’s why I’m here – I already took care of that! What, did you think you’d have to pay for your own birthday party, Harry?” Sirius asked, a frown creasing his forehead. “Never mind, don’t answer that. It’s all settled, and here’s Frank’s mother at last.”

Harry snapped his mouth shut on his objection. There wasn’t much point saying anything if the bill was already paid.

“So, happy birthday, Harry,” continued Sirius. “I see you didn’t unwrap my gifts yet – there’s a couple from me in the baskets, and one from Remus,” Sirius said, moving very slowly to give Harry a cautious brief hug around the shoulders. “But the biggest gift isn’t something I can wrap, so be sure to read my letter. I hope you had fun today and traumatised your friends amusingly.”

“Yes, thank you,” grinned Harry. “It was marvellous, and I’m pretty sure they’ll all forgive me.”

“Even the Malfoy boy?”

“Eventually. It might take him a little longer,” admitted Harry, exchanging a small smile with Neville at the memory of Draco’s squeals and protests. Sirius grinned happily at that news.

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Harry unwrapped the rest of his gifts in his guest room at Longbottom Manor with Neville and Storm looking on curiously. Dobby had elected to stay at Grimmauld Place while Harry visited Neville, to help Kreacher with his duties. Harry thought Dobby felt a bit sorry for the old elf, even though most of Dobby’s stated reasoning focused on the amount of cleaning that needed doing. Harry suspected his own new status as the Heir of the Black family was motivating Dobby as well – Dobby regarded Grimmauld Place as a future possession of Harry’s and as such was more attached to repairing its dilapidated state.

“Millicent’s gift first, then yours next,” he said to Neville. “Since hers is alive.”

She’d given him a jar with two live beetles, and the accompanying letter identified them as
Egyptian scarab beetles – a magical variety beloved by the Pharaohs and their court magicians.

“The wing cases and eyes are useful for potions, and I thought Storm might want to eat the rest,” Millicent wrote.

Storm approved. “We should get her sssomething nice too on her ssspecial day. Like mice. Are they useful for Clever-men? Perhaps the tailss? Her cat could eat the bitss that aren’t useful. I know she won’t eat mice. I would like a mouse.”

Neville laughed at Harry’s translation of Storm’s suggestion. “Well now I feel particularly glad I got a terrarium for my birthday, given the other gift ideas proffered up for consideration. Thanks again, Harry. I’m going to take it back to Hogwarts with me.”

“You’re welcome. Now, time for your gift!” Harry said, eagerly unwrapping the large parcel from his best friend. Packed in a small wooden crate lined with straw were a number of glass jars, filled with various dried leaves, flowers, and shreds of bark and roots.

“Potions ingredients,” Neville explained. “For your brewing. All from my garden – I prepared everything myself. I wrote the moon phases and date they were harvested on the labels too.”

“Wow! This is awesome, thanks Nev!” Harry said, beaming happily.

“If you don’t mind me asking, where do you do your brewing these days?” Neville asked curiously. “I looked for you a couple of times last year in our old classroom, but you weren’t there.”

Harry hesitated for a moment, then decided to be truthful, like Neville deserved. “When I’m at Hogwarts? I do most of my studying and brewing down in the Chamber of Secrets.”

“Didn’t the headmaster ward the entrance?” Neville asked.

“He warded the entrance he knows about. There’s another one, well, two actually. There’s another entrance in Hogwarts, but the last one goes to the Forbidden Forest and isn’t really safe. No, that’s not clear enough. Um... it’s incredibly dangerous for anyone but me.”

Harry waited for a reaction, but Neville just nodded calmly.

“You don’t mind that I didn’t tell you earlier?” Harry checked.

“No, not really. There is no more point to being vexed with you for that than there would be for being aggrieved at Hermione borrowing all the good library books for herself when an assignment is due. It is just how you are. You have always kept secrets, Harry. I know you will share them with me if and when you are ready to. I won’t tell anyone else about the Chamber of Secrets. A good friend doesn’t push. You know... if you had been disinclined to tell me where you brewed your potions, I would have let the matter drop.”

“I know.”

“Now, open some more presents, Heir of Slytherin,” Neville said, smiling as he passed him a silver-wrapped gift.

“Not you too,” grumbled Harry good-naturedly. “Just because owls and snakes think I’m the Heir doesn’t make it so.”

“If post owls think you are the Heir, then so must you,” rebutted Neville. “They would not seek
“Yeah, I guess I believe it a bit,” conceded Harry, unwrapping his next gift. “I just hate people making a big deal of it.

“Oh! It’s some dragonhide boots, from Daphne. A little bigger than the ones I got at *Gladrag* for myself. She writes that these ones are specifically for winter – so they’re good in snow and puddles. Look! Fur lining.”

They worked their way through the pile, and Neville opened his smaller collection of late birthday gifts too. Harry was saving Sirius’ gifts for last as he anticipated something really special, given how Sirius had talked it up.

Pansy had sent a gold sickle, which Neville admiringly said would be good for harvesting a lot of magical plants, especially mistletoe for which it was critical. “Even gold-plated will do – it doesn’t have to be solid gold. You must catch the mistletoe sprigs in a white cloth, and never let them touch the ground or their elemental affiliation with air will be ruined and your potions will all go awry.”

“You sound like you’ve been reading up on potions ingredients! Are you going to be a Potions Master, now?”

“Potions was so much easier last year after Professor Slughorn took over,” Neville enthused. “Isn’t he great? He recommended some books to me after class one day. I hope I will be invited to join his Slug Club if I can bring my grade up! I still love Herbology best, of course, but knowing about potions will make me a better Master Herbologist.”

Lupin had given Harry the first book in a series entitled *Practical Defensive Magic and its Use Against the Dark Arts*, which had superb, moving colour illustrations of all the counter-curses, jinxes and hexes it described.

There were a couple more books as gifts – you’d think everyone believed Harry was a Ravenclaw. Anthony had given him a history book about the giants of Britain, and his card noted with gushing enthusiasm that it had been published only ten years ago and had more recent information than Professor Binns discussed in class.

Snape had sent a book as a gift too, much to Neville’s surprise.

“Professor Snape sends you birthday presents?” he asked, jaw agape. “I mean, I knew you were a favourite of his-”

“Draco’s a favourite too,” Harry mumbled defensively. “Snape was best friends with my mum. When they were in school. Not with my dad, though. Snape sent me a photo of her, one Christmas. On my last birthday he sent a potions recipe she’d made up – a Burn-healing Paste. That’s about it – it’s not like he does this all the time.”

“Oh,” Neville said, his look of shock changing to one of sympathy. “That was thoughtful of him. Nice, even. Nice… from Professor Snape.” He shook his head as if hardly able to believe the words coming out of his mouth. “What did he send this year?”

“A book on Occlumency. It’s a copy of one I’ve been borrowing from Draco. There’s a letter, too. I’ll read it aloud, so you can listen to his sentimental gushing,” Harry said with a teasing grin.

*To Mr. Harry James Potter, Heir Etc.*, 

you out, otherwise.”
My felicitations on your birthday, I hope you find the day a pleasant one.

I understand that a copy of this book to keep for your own growing library would be useful to you in your studies.

Yours sincerely,

Master Severus Snape,

Master of The Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers

“Positively honey-sweet,” drawled Neville, then laughed. “Is it just my imagination, or is he carefully dancing around your titles? I mean, you can abbreviate a salutation like that, but it still sounds a little odd when he used the full form for his own titles. Except that he left out his House which is a little odd.

“Anyway, it sounds like he wanted to be formal, but then quailed at the thought of calling you the Heir of Slytherin, maybe. Or didn’t want to offend you by putting it in... or leaving it out.”

“It sounds a little odd to me, too,” Harry agreed. “It’s either that, or he just didn’t want to refer to the Potter family more than he had to. He really didn’t like my dad. He’s left out titles before.”

Theodore’s gift was an awesome one that evoked a low, impressed whistle from Neville. It looked like a fairly ordinary black dragonhide leather bag with a pair of little curved handles to Harry, but his friend clearly recognised it instantly as something special.

“That’s a proper Healer’s bag,” Neville explained, as Harry peeked inside the bag. “You can tell because it’s got the Rod of Asclepius with the snake wound around it embossed on the leather – there it is on the side. The bag should have an Extension Charm on it.”

Harry stuck his arm in it up to the shoulder. “I’d say so!” he laughed. “Plenty of room there. Do you think it’s safe to carry Storm in? How far down would it go?”

“Well, they call them bottomless, but that is just the sales pitch. Storm should be fine – Healers carry leeches in their bags sometimes and they don’t die. And you can stick your head in it safely. Don’t put another item with an Expansion Charm inside it, though. Or vice versa – don’t put it in your trunk.”

“I won’t!” Harry promised.

Awesome though the Healer’s bag was, Sirius’ gifts were definitely the winner. While Harry and Neville both liked them, Storm wasn’t impressed at the new black formal robes with red trim with a row of buttons all down the front, so they could open to display the matching waistcoat and trousers you could wear underneath. But he did love the other new gift, after it was unshrunk by a house-elf for them.

“A new tank!” he hissed happily, slithering in from Harry’s lowered arm to explore it. “Much bigger than my old one. I like it. It will be good for sssleeping. Fill the pond, Harold.”

“Is he a new favourite now?” Harry teased.

“Millicent is my favourite,” Storm said. “And the girl who sssendss me picturess. They have sssent lotss of giftss. Dog-man is acceptable now he poses no threat to you, and he may be a favourite with more giftss. Thiss is a fine present.”
The letter held news of the big promised surprise.

Harry’s smile slowly grew to a delighted grin as he read through it. “Sirius has rented a small house for the year in Grantown-on-Spey,” he told Neville. “He and Lupin have had one of the rooms outfitted as a laboratory – a bit like a potions room but with everything I’ll need for studying Muggle chemistry. He told Oxford Home Schooling he was one of my uncles and needed details to help my grandmother set everything up. He’ll stay there occasionally, whenever there’s a Hogsmeade weekend or I let him know I can sneak away.”

“Your grandmother?” Neville asked, looking confused.

“For the paperwork for my correspondence school, I pretend I live with my grandmother Dorea Potter, doing home-schooling on a remote, isolated farm in Scotland with no telephone. I have to explain to Muggles why it’s hard to contact me while I’m away at Hogwarts,” Harry explained, as he finished reading the letter.

“Oh. Oops,” Harry added. “Sirius says at the end of the letter not to tell anyone about it, especially not ‘the Malfoy boy’. Um, you can keep it a secret, right Neville?”

“Absolutely. My tongue is tied,” he promised, and mimed waving a wand at his mouth.

With all his friends’ gifts opened, Harry moved on to unwrapping a few presents sent by owl from assorted random admirers. A couple of little snake ornaments got added to his apparently mandatory new collection, making him wonder at the spread of the Slytherin gossip network. Ernie had sent him some Sugar Quills which got added to a pile of other sweets from various people, to tuck away into his trunk as emergency snacks. In addition to the edible kind there were also a couple of less tasty, more feathery quills, and another pair of thin cotton gloves. Harry hardly ever wore gloves except in winter, but he appreciated the thought all the same.

A couple of new fans he’d met on his book signing tour had sent gifts. Guildmaster Catherine Monvoisin had sent a small booklet – in French – which talked all about France’s Corps des Fabricants de Potions and alluded to its superiority to all its international rivals. She’d also included information about how to apply for a Potions Apprenticeship after graduation. Mr. Ovid Mortalem had sent a book on hexes, Basic Hexes for the Busy and Vexed, and a letter thanking Harry again for signing his copy of Battles with the Basilisk. The vampire Sanguini hadn’t sent a gift, but there was a long-winded and courteous letter thanking him for his gift of unguents to treat sunlight burns and wishing him a happy birthday.

Neville yawned as the evening wore on and Jipley fetched the boys some hot cocoa to fortify them. Harry continued making his notes on who had sent what (to make writing thank you letters easier later on) as he opened the last few letters and gifts. He was pleased to unwrap another intriguing book to add to his growing personal library, entitled Magical Snakes of the Middle Kingdom and the Far East. A letter accompanied it, addressed on the outside to “My Gryffindor Knight”.

Oh no, Harry thought with rising panic, clutching the letter with white-knuckled hands. It’s another letter from Voldemort. What does he want now?

Before he opened the letter, Harry shooed Neville off to his own bedroom. As it was getting late and Harry had opened practically all his letters and gifts, the dismissal went unremarked.

With trembling fingers Harry opened the letter.

Dear Boy Who Lived, Heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Slytherin,
Firstly, a reminder to you that it would be unwise to let anyone else read our correspondence, lest it be destroyed and harm you in the process. Not to mention the tatters it would leave your ‘Light’ reputation in. Now, on to more pleasant matters.

Happy birthday, Mr. Potter! I trust it has been a pleasant day for you, and I hope you enjoy the enclosed book, which is a favourite of mine. The Asian Hoop Snake, the Tsuchinoko, is one of my favourite serpents. You will find some centuries-old anecdotes in the book about how most Japanese wizards hear its vocalisations as that of a squeaking noise like a mouse, but to a lucky few the plump little serpent is quite comprehensible; able to talk, lie, and bargain for gifts of alcohol. It is more proof that our shared Parselmouth talent spreads very far across the world. However, it is an extremely rare gift among those of European extraction – I know of no others living apart from the two of us. I believe our gift is most common amongst the natives of India and Australia.

It wasn’t fair that Voldemort always sent interesting books!

It has been some time since we last corresponded, has it not? You accepted a proposed truce, yet you called for a cessation of our correspondence without waiting for confirmation of said truce. It is also traditional for formerly warring Houses to hammer out terms in the case of a cessation of a feud, in such cases as ours. A breach of etiquette which I deigned to overlook at the time, in respect of your youth and inexperience.

Harry grudgingly conceded to himself that he probably should’ve gotten some better confirmation.

You agreed to a truce in February, yet I believe not more than a month had elapsed before you ran to the Minister with claims that I was possessing Quirinus. You do understand, I would hope, that that is not how a truce of neutrality works. One cannot swear non-interference yet work behind the other House’s back to betray them to an enemy.

Harry’s blood ran cold. He knew. How did he know? Only the Minister, Madam Bones, and some Aurors should know about it. Oh, and Neville and Hermione. Dumbledore. Snape, too, since the Aurors had interviewed him. Harry winced at the direction of his thoughts. Alright, perhaps it had been foolish to expect that reports of his actions wouldn’t leak back to the Dark Lord. A secret only stayed a secret when you kept it to yourself. He’d hoped something would come of it that would prove worth the risk, but he’d gained nothing.

I am prepared to consider overlooking your transgressions – including your unprovoked attack on my people in Africa – while we reopen a negotiation of terms. Should you choose the honourable path of a formal truce, or even an alliance, that is. Should you not... well, you shall have until the first of September to declare your enmity and we shall formally begin a feud. The latter path is one I would personally prefer to avoid. I respect you as an intelligent and promising young wizard and see no call to make war on a child. Nor do I imagine you so foolish as to prefer that I view you as an implacable enemy.

Think well upon my offer, and do not repeat your mistake of treating my overtures of friendship lightly, and thus bring dishonour upon your Houses. You have one month to decide and to open negotiations upon your own cognisance. While etiquette would dictate such a task should be overseen by your Regent, I would advise against it for reasons that would swiftly become painfully apparent should you elicit his opinions in regards myself and my cause.

With sincere wishes for your future health and happiness,

Lord Voldemort
Harry sighed. Well, it could have been worse, he guessed. Now what am I going to do?

He talked it over with Storm, reading out the letter in Parseltongue and unburdening his heart. He shared his hope for peaceful co-existence, and his fear of war. He spoke of how frightening the attack in Gabon had been. He talked about his feelings of guilt over not hating the murderer of his parents like he thought he should, and his confusion as to what the war was even about. He shared his worry about Lockhart revealing Tom’s secrets in his book and subsequently going missing, and what that might mean for Lockhart’s fate. He quietly feared that perhaps it was something like the terrible fate that had befallen his or Neville’s parents for going against the Dark Lord. He knew he shouldn’t agree to a truce, not really. He probably shouldn’t have last time, either. A brave man would refuse, but Harry didn’t feel he was brave like a real Gryffindor would be – he didn’t want to die in a war, not for either side. He just wanted to stay out of it, even though he felt guilty about what his long-lost parents might have thought of that preference. It was just… loudly declaring he would fight a skilled and experienced terrorist leader didn’t feel like a brave thing to do to Harry, it just sounded stupid. He wasn’t that good at magic – he would lose.

Storm listened with patient attentiveness, interjecting a couple of questions as Harry rambled. And at the end of it all Storm shared his best wisdom and insight on the matter.

“He likes snakes. So, I think you should be friends and not hunt each other. Ask him to send me a few nice treats, like Millicent does, and I will be friends with him too. You are both Speakers. That is special.”

“He killed my parents!” Harry hissed, his voice thick with guilt and anger. “He tried to kill me!”

“Well they are long dead so there is no need to think about them,” Storm said pragmatically. “It is done. They are long eaten-

“He didn’t eat them-” Harry interjected, but Storm kept talking over the top of him.

“-And I think if he is not going to kill you, and you will not kill him, that is good. If he is a danger, and you fear you cannot defeat or escape him, do not make yourself prey. You do not climb a tree to bite a sleeping drop bear that is bigger than your head. It is foolish to invite such peril.”

“He wants to negotiate terms for a truce. I don’t know what to do,” whined Harry.

“I thought you did that already? Continue to agree not to hunt each other. And ask for some fairies or their eggs. I liked those a lot,” suggested Storm. “And a fish every new moon. Two fish.”

“Thanks Sstorm, I appreciate your help,” Harry said tiredly.

“Any time, Harold.”

A snake, no matter how caring and loyal, really couldn’t be expected to understand his dilemma. He wished he had someone else he could trust with all the details, to talk things over properly with. Someone more like what parents were supposed to be. It felt kind of depressing that his most trusted confidants were a snake and a mosaic of a dead wizard (no matter how famous and wise he might be). He could trust Neville with a lot of things, but not with the details of his correspondence with the Dark Lord.

In the end, after a couple of drafts, Harry wrote a brief note to send back with the waiting owl. It politely stated that he appreciated the gift of time to respond as he would need to research truces and feuds and would have a proper reply for Lord Voldemort by the first of September.
Harry would put off thinking about it and making a decision as long as he could.

Chapter End Notes

Harry’s poster from Dudley is available to download free online from the ARC (Amphibian and Reptile Conservation) website.
Gwendolyn McCormick – Thanks for pointing out my world-setting continuity error. Chapters 7 and 10 have been updated, and Remus is now no longer consuming food or drink contaminated by silver (at least, not when he’s paying attention).
Offerings

Chapter Summary

Harry celebrates Lughnasadh, with a little help.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

1 August 1994

On the morning of the first of August, Harry invited Neville to join him for a private celebration of Lughnasadh at Potter Manor, but Neville declined as politely as he could.

“No, I… I really don’t want to. Sorry, Harry. I mean, Gran is kind of traditional if not very keen on the rituals, but the Longbottoms are Light wizards. My dad went to church at Christmas, and everything. I want to believe my parents would be proud of me, Harry. Some of the rituals get really Dark. With blood sacrifices, and curses. I mean, not always,” Neville hastened to add, as Harry looked mulish at the accusation. “I am sure you will stay away from that kind of thing. Please don’t be mad? I don’t think you’re a bad person, you know.”

“I understand. I just… well I’d like to share it with you,” said Harry.

“I tried the Old Ways for you already, Harry.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true – thanks for that. It’s just… it’ll look odd if I go off on the Knight Bus on my own when I just got here.”

“Oh,” Neville said.

They sat in silence together for a while before Neville sighed and said, “I can’t think of anything. Another problem is that Gran has promised Mr. Black not to let you go off on your own anywhere. She has to Floo someone to arrange an escort.”

Harry scowled, and Neville patted him tentatively on the shoulder. “I am not allowed out on my own, either. Not with D-Death Eaters on the loose. Even Ron was complaining at your party about how his mum makes him and his siblings go about everywhere in groups, now.”

Straightening up in his seat, Harry said, “I know. I’ll ask Master Snape to be my guard. He’s one of the people Dumbledore has had watching me, on and off, I’m sure of it. He won’t tell.”

“He follows the Old Ways? Why am I not surprised,” Neville said darkly. “I wonder though – can you trust him? People are saying he has run off to join You-Know-Who, just like old times. Are you sure you’ll be safe with him?”

“He just got a new potions job, Neville. It’s probably for the best, don’t you think? Given how he hates teaching. I doubt I’ll be in any danger. He could’ve kidnapped or killed me any time. Who’s saying that about him, anyway? It’s certainly not the Prophet. They’re not even admitting You-Know-Who is back. No-one listened to me about Quirrell or the diary.”
“A couple of people. Ron says he heard his parents worrying about it. People say the Headmaster trusts him, but I am personally not convinced, Harry. Are you sure he’s not Dark?”

Harry hesitated. “No. Not completely sure. I mean, we know he used to be a Death Eater. But people say he also used to be a spy – I don’t think he’s a danger to me. He’s more like the Malfoys, or Lupin – they might have some sympathies in that direction, but they’re friends of mine. Sometimes… sometimes you have to try trusting people. A little.” Harry winced. Trusting was hard. Part of him knew that Snape couldn’t be completely trusted, that his current allegiances were suspect, and his history Dark. On the other hand, there had been many opportunities for Snape to have hurt Harry or betrayed his secrets, and he hadn’t ever done so. Unless you counted Snape harassing him into getting better grades at school. Really, as evil deeds went, that wasn’t so bad. For now, he’d trust Snape. Cautiously.

Neville sighed. “Well, I hope you are right to do so in this case, Harry. I have read a lot about the war, and before Auror Crouch tightened up the trials a lot of people claimed to be spies, or innocent dupes, after You-Know-Who died. However, they had to prove their loyalty to become a Death Eater, and that required more than just flattering words to their Lord – it meant killing, or torturing, or selling people out. The transcripts show that Snape admitted that he hurt a lot of people – poisoning with noxious potions or dosing people up for information, mostly. He didn’t get to be a Death Eater by hugging puppies and refusing to curse anyone.”

Neville’s face steeled with determination as he added, “Harry, just so you know, if you are late coming home I shall tell Gran to Floo the Aurors. I know his behaviour was acceptable at school – to you at least – so I shan’t succumb to panic over your plan for him to accompany you on your outing or try to stop you. You must promise me you will be careful, but I do think you will most likely be fine. However, I think Snape liking you shall afford you a better shield than your… optimistic hope that he isn’t secretly serving You-Know-Who.”

Harry smiled. “I promise I’ll be careful. And your plan is fine by me, I don’t mind emergency back-up plans.”

Neville’s grandmother’s barn owl was discreetly dispatched with a message for Professor Snape which hinted that Harry had a recent tradition of visiting the grounds of Potter Manor on his birthday or the day after, and if Snape was free to accompany him he’d appreciate his assistance.

When Neville’s grandmother Flooed Dumbledore a couple of hours later to ask for an escort for Harry’s sentimental private birthday visit to his ancestral home, Snape was coincidentally present in Dumbledore’s living room. Dumbledore’s face in the flickering green flames twinkled with a smile as he said that while he was busy himself, he’d managed to coax Professor Snape into breaking his visit with him to instead accompany Harry on his outing, with Dumbledore’s promise that it wouldn’t take more than a few hours. Harry admired the suspected manipulation there – someone was definitely being manipulated, but he didn’t think it was his former professor.

Snape stepped through the green flames to Longbottom Manor, and a quick cleaning spell removed the soot from his robes with a silent flick of his wand.

“Greetings, Madam Longbottom,” he said curtly, before turning to Harry and nodding at him briefly.

“Well Mr. Potter, don’t stand about all day,” he snapped at Harry. “Make sure you have gathered anything you need, for I shall not be taking you back and forth if you grow hungry or you realise you left your cloak with your brains.”

“Yes, Master Snape,” said Harry, darting off to get his leather satchel packed with food, his new
golden sickle, a square of cloth Dobby had hemmed for him, a candle and matches, and his sleepy snake.

They travelled via Side-Along-Apparition to Potter Manor – or more precisely to just outside the grounds on the cobblestone driveway – since the manor was still just a few remnants of rubble. Storm awoke with a hissing complaint about being jostled, poking his snout out of the bag crossly.

“Shh, we’re visiting Potter Manor for Lughnasadh. Remember the ssspecial rockss? Where you found the sharp ssstone for me last year?”

“Yess. Wake me when we’re there,” Storm said sleepily, coiling back up again. “It is too early to be awake.”

“Now, Mr. Potter,” Snape said, after their sibilant conversation subsided, “I inferred from your letter that you wished some privacy to celebrate Lughnasadh, correct?” He poked at the stone walls edging the shattered debris of the gate, picking off a few bits of lichen to expose some runes carved into the rock.

“Yes, sir.”

“These seem to be waning, I think,” Snape said conversationally, with a frown at the runes. “Notice-Me-Not and Muggle Repellent runes, at a guess. But it’s not my area of expertise. You may want to have a professional look over them – it would run from a few hundred to a couple of thousand Galleons, depending on if you hire an Apprentice or a Master Warder. Or if you add a little blood, they might hold for another dozen years. Illegal, of course.” He looked expectantly at Harry, as if waiting for a reaction.

“I’m not going to do anything illegal with you standing right there. Besides, Professor Babbling says that saliva works just as well to renew runes if the touch of your magic alone isn’t enough.” Harry licked a fingertip and traced over the runes, pushing his magical intent into his hand as best he could as he did so. You couldn’t re-carve or change runes, but you could boost the power of their initial intent somewhat with regular maintenance. This was just a patch job, however, especially with Ministry restrictions that meant he wasn’t able to use his wand out of school.

After Harry was finished, Snape leant over and tapped the runes with his wand to seal them with a touch of magic. “Professor Babbling spouts the Ministry-approved line. Saliva is weaker than blood, which is weaker than a sacrifice. The power fades very quickly with just saliva. Also, do try and keep in mind that I am about to witness you celebrating Lughnasadh, so any concerns you have about the risk of me witnessing you doing something illegal are farcical at this point.”

“I don’t even understand why it’s illegal,” Harry said, ignoring the criticism. “Lughnasadh, that is. I mean, I get that people worry about the sacrifices. But the Old Ways aren’t all like that, and we kill animals all the time to eat anyway. Can’t the Ministry just make any really bad stuff illegal and leave the rest of it alone? And since it’s mostly pure-bloods who celebrate it, and there’s lots of them in the Ministry, why isn’t the Ministry in favour of the old Druidic traditions?”

They wandered down the drive, and Harry detoured to a bramble patch to harvest some ripe blackberries while Snape watched and waited.

“Good questions. Technically celebrating the quarter-festivals isn’t illegal but most of the traditions associated with them are. No sacrifices, no offerings – not even fruit or grain offerings are permitted. One may not empower any Circles that have magic on them that might be harmful to Muggles or indeed to anyone else. No-one may worship Magic as any kind of sentient or semi-sentient force. Propitiation of spirits or ghosts, no matter how innocuous they might be, is of course
strictly forbidden. Nothing to induce trances. I think that is all. Oh, and most of our songs are banned.”

“It doesn’t sound like that leaves much out. Ouch!” Harry cried, as he scratched his hand on some thorns while reaching for a clump of particularly tasty-looking glossy dark berries.

“You are legally restricted to bonfires, dancing, and feasting, mostly,” Snape admitted, casually casting a wordless Episkey to heal Harry’s scratches. “If you are ever caught, be sure to limit your story to your gathering being some kind of ‘outdoor party’, and that you are shocked to hear it has coincidentally fallen on a special date.

“Now, as to why our traditions are so comprehensively banned in the first place. It has, of course, to do with a clash of religious beliefs first and foremost. The influence of Muggles and Muggle-borns is notable in that respect, through their centuries of Christian evangelism in our society. Some would have you blame it entirely on them, pointing to their ever-increasingly numbers immigrating into our society, pushing their Muggle ways on the world with an air of righteous superiority. However, that would be neither fair nor accurate. For there are also many ‘Light’ pure-blood families that have been Christian for generations, wielding their influence against blood-loving Druidic believers at every opportunity.

“Political beliefs also play a strong role – you also have to keep in mind that many wizards are monarchists at heart. Most people bow to the Queen’s right to rule even when they may disagree with her decisions. It’s a tradition of respect dating back to King Arthur.”

Harry interrupted to ask, “But we elect the Minister democratically, right? They’re not appointed by the Queen, we vote them in – well, everyone who has the right to vote does. Don’t a lot of people favour a Roman-style republic – is our government more like that?”

Snape looked at him curiously. “There is a veneer of democracy to placate the Muggle government and the hoi polloi. The Wizengamot works much like the House of Lords and has done so for centuries. Or perhaps a more powerful version thereof, as it wields both legislative and parliamentary power in our society. Active members act as a jury for trials of major crimes, with the Chief Warlock as the judge. As an institution it is an oligarchy stuffed with the Heads of Houses, with only a few token positions left for others. The Minister is appointed by popular vote from cives class citizens, but the candidates for elections are put forward by the Wizengamot. Once elected, he or she is officially a Minister of the Queen and reports to her on our bloated Ministry’s continuing efforts to maintain the Statute of Secrecy, however, the Muggles delegated that task away from her to the Prime Minister some decades ago.

“While a fair number of the more Traditionalist families are monarchists, the Light and unaligned families almost always are. Many see Queen Elizabeth as the descendant of King Arthur. Some wizards and witches love her, while others hate her, for being a good, Christian queen. She is at least a less active meddler than her forebears, and thanks to... various influences, the past fifty years have seen a great reduction in direct royal and Muggle governmental influence on our society.

“Her great-great-grandmother Queen Victoria was a notorious inveterate meddler, and most insistent about the suppression of the evil Dark traditions in favour of Christian ethics, and more pandering to the Muggle-born joining our society. Of course, historically some monarchs were even more oppressive, such as Charles the First.”

“Are many wizards and witches Christian? I hadn’t really noticed anyone being especially religious?”
“The Christmas tree at Hogwarts wasn’t a hint for you?” Snape asked with raised eyebrows. “The Dumbledore family all is, of course. McGonagall, Flitwick, Burbage – many of your teachers. In the Ministry and Wizengamot there are the Light families like the Houses of Fudge, Abbott, Bones, Prewett, Smith, Weasley, Moody, and Jones.”

“I once asked Percy what he believed in – he’s always seemed very traditional with etiquette and stuff, so I was trying to discreetly find out if he was a Traditionalist. He told me that he doesn’t believe in anything much. His family used to go to church when he was very young, but when his uncles were killed in the war his mother was angry at God and had a crisis of faith.”

Snape just nodded at that and looked broody.

As they meandered through the grounds, Harry pulled out his new golden sickle to cut a piece of ivy vine, since he’d included it successfully in his last offering.

“Is that for an offering?” Snape asked. “Ivy isn’t very traditional, though I don’t see any harm in it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Snape nodded. “Do you have the other necessary supplies? Bread, wine, fruits, wheat stalks? What are your preferred traditions?”

“I do a circling ritual around a lesser Circle on the grounds – it’s based off things I read in The Decline of Pagan Magic and some talks with Pansy. I also chant a song from The Knights of Walpurgis. Then I make a harvest offering, again that’s based off Bagshot’s book, plus some advice from uh… someone. I’m open to suggestions of new things, but that all worked well for me last year, so I was planning on keeping things the same.”

Ambrosius had talked with Harry about the Old traditional offerings to make for various celebrations. Lughnasadh ideally should be an offering of bread you’d baked yourself, but any bread or grain-based food would do in a pinch, plus vegetables, herbs, or ripe fruit harvested from your own lands. Something that celebrated the bounty of the earth you cared for. The blackberries would make up his main offering, and Dobby had baked him a bread roll at Potter Cottage and popped it over to Longbottom Manor that morning for Harry to use in his ritual. Harry would have liked to have baked something himself, but he wasn’t allowed in the manor’s kitchen by the passive-aggressive orders of the Longbottom house-elves, and he didn’t want to upset them.

“Where did you obtain a copy of The Knights of Walpurgis? I was not aware you owned that book. You certainly didn’t find that in the Hogwarts library.”

“The Malfoys – it was a birthday gift last year. Is it restricted?”

“Very much so. Lucius took a great risk there.”

Harry stopped dead in his tracks in the middle of the woods and turned to his former teacher. “What am I missing? It has a few traditions listed, and it’s very critical of the government. Is that enough to see it banned?”

Snape gave a twisted smile. “It’s the author. Didn’t you know? No, of course you didn’t.”

“The author’s anonymous…” Harry trailed off, a worried frown creasing his face as he thought of the very limited possibilities for a contentious author. Unless it was by Grindelwald, there really was only one other likely candidate.
“The author is the Dark Lord,” Snape said, confirming Harry’s unspoken guess. “He called his followers the ‘The Knights of Walpurgis’ for a while as a young man in the fifties, before changing the name to ‘Death Eaters’ in later years when political machinations didn’t yield all the results he’d wanted, and his campaign became more overt and violent.”

Harry let out a loud huff of breath. Just what he’d thought. “Great. Just great.” He resumed walking, with a lot more stomping and crunching through the underbrush this time. “Geez. I just can’t get a break. Lucius is giving me recruitment literature.”

“Unwise of him, one might think. What shall you do, now that you know?” Snape asked carefully.

“I don’t know,” grumped Harry. “Nothing, I guess.”

“Even despite… his allegiances?”

Harry sighed. “Everyone already knows he was a Death Eater once, and his defence otherwise is already doubted – how would my accusation make a difference? I can’t accuse him of anything bad except giving me a book, and that’s not illegal. Is it?”

“It is, actually. Or at least it was… perhaps it is not any longer, if the laws have been quietly changed, though I think they have not. For until recently Dumbledore presided as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and he would not have approved such a change. During the last war it was illegal to try and recruit for the Dark Lord. You could make a case against Lucius, should you wish to, Potter. An accusation from a minor wouldn’t carry much weight, but with your name and your of-age allies you could see it pushed through to the Wizengamot for a formal trial overseen by Chief Warlock Thicknesse. Lucius’ vaults and influence would probably get him off, however,” Snape explained, “unless you have credible witnesses who saw him handing you the book, or talking to you about the Dark Lord’s cause, or you’re prepared to testify under Veritaserum about your gift. Ideally some combination of those would be required for a comfortable expectation of success.”

Harry shook his head. “I think technically the gift was from Draco. It was owl-delivered at night, so no witnesses. Draco wrote that his father thought I might like to read it.”

Snape nodded. “Cunning. Young Mr. Malfoy might get in more trouble than his father should you try to make something of it, and Lucius can plead ignorance of the gift, or shock at his words being so misinterpreted when he really was doing was just musing aloud that you might want to study the works of your family’s enemy, one day. To better understand your parents’ noble fight.”

Harry scowled. “I thought Draco’s dad cared about him.”

Snape blinked. “He does – a great deal in fact. I doubt he would actually sacrifice his son for his own self-interest. I was simply outlining a couple of possibilities and pointing out that with enough bribes and his silver tongue spreading around blame to a minor who can’t be charged for an ‘honest mistake’, he could make the charge against himself disappear.”

“Oh.”

Thoughts awhirl, Harry suddenly realised why Quirrell – Voldemort – had always liked to call him his ‘Gryffindor Knight’. He was still worrying over what the Dark Lord must think of him as they arrived at the small Circle of standing stones.

“Wake up Ssstorm, we’re here,” he hissed, reaching in to his satchel to withdraw his sleepy pet. Though from Storm’s point of view perhaps it was he who was the pet. Or perhaps some kind of combination of servant and friend. The fetcher of meals and the reliever of boredom.
“Do you think Lucius is a Death Eater again? Is he a danger to me?” He also wanted to ask the same of Snape but didn’t dare.

Snape gave Harry a sharp glance, and Harry avoided eye contact, just in case of any attempts at Legilimency. “For the first part, I really couldn’t say. However, for what it is worth, I honestly do not believe he poses any risk to you at the moment. Quite the opposite, as I believe he holds you in some esteem.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said, with a nod of gratitude for the advice.

“I don’t know what to do, now. About my planned ritual,” Harry admitted to Snape. “It feels all… ruined. Tainted.”

Snape hesitated a moment, then said, “If it is of any comfort, remember that the traditions the Dark Lord wrote down predated him by centuries. He merely recorded them, without imposing any significant alterations.”

Harry smiled. “It helps a lot, actually. Thank you again. What are your own traditions?”

“Very similar to yours, I think. I circle around an offering of bread, wine, and fruit on an altar on the earth. I also weave a sunwheel to offer on the altar – a tradition which you seem unfamiliar with – while last year’s sunwheel is buried in the earth. I sing the ‘Wheel of the Year’ song-”

“I know the words, but not the tune,” Harry interjected. “What’s a sunwheel?”

“I would be happy to teach the tune to you, if you wish. A sunwheel is a wreath fashioned of some natural material such as stalks of wheat or grapevines, often with a star woven inside its circumference. It calls us to remember the cycle of life – the turning of the seasons and the unending circle of celebrations that mark them. It evokes the sun that nurtures, and the bounty and magic of the earth. When a House celebrates both masculine and feminine aspects of life in a ceremony led by a priest and priestess, the sunwheel represents the masculine while a corn dollies represents the feminine. It is a very ancient practice – decorative corn dollies have been found in Egyptian tombs.”

Snape spent a moment teaching Harry the tune to go with the lyrics he’d already memorised, then the two of them worked together weeding the Circle. Snape seemed surprised Harry was using a golden sickle for such a relatively mundane task but aside from advising him on proper cleaning methods for gold implements, he didn’t offer any overt criticism of its employment. Instead, he made small talk, asking about Harry’s plans for his studies in the coming year. Snape seemed pleased when Harry promised he’d be aiming to do the best he could in almost everything, with the exceptions of History of Magic (which Harry regarded as pointless under Professor Binns) and Astronomy. He would be aiming to get Exceeds Expectations in both those classes. Snape encouraged Harry to try for a top grade in Astronomy too, and Harry agreed to think about it, even though it would be a big jump up from his consistent Acceptable grade.

“Am I invited to join your Circle today?” Snape asked as they continued working side by side. Snape didn’t seem to have come well-prepared for gardening but had a small silver knife he was using to trim back some weeds.

“I’m not sure. What does that mean?” Harry checked cautiously. “What would the consequences be?”

Snape tutted disapprovingly at his ignorance. “You should already know this, Potter. I’m asking whether as the host – for despite your youth and inexperience that is what you are – you are
wanting me to be a participant today, or an observer. It carries no obligation or ramifications beyond that. Perhaps a certain non-binding social expectation that on any future visits I would most likely be treated similarly – that is all.”

Harry thought for a moment. “Participant, I think.” He trusted Snape, but there was no reason to be silly about it. If Snape participated, he wouldn’t have any grounds to later try and blackmail Harry over anything he witnessed, for he’d be just as guilty as Harry.

“Be thou welcome in this Circle,” prompted Snape, and Harry obediently echoed him.

Storm burrowed into the earth in search of an interesting rock to contribute to the altar, while Harry and Snape laid out their offerings on a cloth in the middle of the Circle. Harry’s beeswax candle from Longbottom manor took pride of place in the centre of the arrangement.

Storm returned after a little digging with a rough pebble of dull white quartz pushed ahead of him out of the ground with his snout, and his apology that he couldn’t find anything better. “It is not as sspecial as the last rock I found, but it is a very nice white rock,” he said. His words sounded confident, but his uncertainty leaked through in his tone.

“It’s a lovely rock, what a good choice!” Harry reassured, picking Storm up to place him atop one of the sunnier boulders in the ring. “Thank you so much, Sstorm. It’s a wonderful offering.”

Returning to speaking English, he said to Snape, “Time to circle, I think. I travel deasil and touch each of the menhirs as I go to offer them some of my magic. Then I kneel in front of the altar with my hands on the ground as I chant.”

“Obviously,” Snape said, with a note of impatience in his voice.

Little fairies emerged from the trees to alight on the stones, chittering happily as the two wizards circled the ring of stones. Storm optimistically snapped at one fairy that tried to land on ‘his’ rock (but missed it), and it wisely chose a different rock to bask on. As Storm had eaten only a day ago, he wasn’t hungry enough to exert himself in pursuit of the fairies.

At the end of their procession, Snape – not having any restrictions on wand use – lit Harry’s candle with a silent flick of his wand. Harry knelt on the ground and Snape joined him more gracefully, with a careful flick of his robes to ensure they lay tidily that spoke of long practice.

Harry put his hands on the earth in front of the cloth altar with their combined offerings and sent his magic into the earth as they sang together:

“The Wheel of the Year turns,

Dark to light, light to dark, the seasons turn,

And the time of harvest is upon us again.

With food am I blessed, with food do I flourish,

The bounty of the earth.

Food I offer, grown, harvested, and prepared with my own hands,

The bounty of the earth.

Blessed be the earth,
Blessed be the sun that warms it,
Blessed be the magic that empowers it.

On Lughnasadh, this day of earth, may Magic accept my offering,
May Magic bring blessings to my household, land, and crops.”

He watched with expectant focus and the candle tipped over just like last year to burn up their offerings, which seemed to startle Snape slightly.

“That was lucky,” Snape murmured. “Usually you only get that effect with a larger gathering or more… experienced participants.”

“It happened last year too,” Harry said, with a look of slightly smug satisfaction.

“Perhaps it is the location,” mused Snape. “We are on your ancestral lands tied to your name for generations, and inside a small Circle. That surely helps – magic will flow strongly here. You might not get the same responsiveness from a ritual performed elsewhere.”

Harry nodded. That made sense.

“Any other business or questions before we depart?” Snape asked. “I suppose you must not have many opportunities to ask questions of a senior druid.”

“No, you mention it, yeah-”

“Yes,” corrected Snape.

“-Yes please, I do have some questions,” finished Harry. “Why do some people talk about druids or priestesses, or the ‘Old Ways’ or ‘Traditionalists’? Why do the names change for everything, and why are there so many different rituals?”

“Well, one could blame it on our ways being driven underground, but in truth the practices and names for them have always varied since time immemorial. Take Lughnasadh, for instance, which has an Irish origin and references the wizarding hero Lugh. Almost everyone celebrates a harvest festival around this time of year, but the details vary, and it isn’t always called by that name. Some call it Lammas, and for them it marks the end of the hay harvest. Adherents in those traditions will often have a strong focus on making offerings of bread and weaving sunwheels and corn dollies. Meanwhile, those pure-bloods of Welsh ancestry are more likely to celebrate Calan Awst, and there’s a rather amusing tradition of chasing a sheep or lamb around a paddock – the one who catches it is regarded as being destined for a particularly lucky year. They also get to keep the sheep.”

Harry snorted with laughter, as he imagined the dignified Lucius Malfoy dashing across a muddy paddock in his fancy white robe, trying to catch a recalcitrant sheep.

“Others may skip the quarter festivals entirely, in favour of recognising only the solstices and equinoxes. The Malfoys celebrate all of them, you may have noticed. Also, those Ancient families who lay claim to Ancient Roman origins are more likely to practice animal sacrifices as part of any celebration, and practice haruspicy.”

Harry nodded. “And it’s all an offering to Magic basically, isn’t it?”

“That is more or less correct. One makes offerings to Magic, to the land. To enchant the land we
live on and make it a fertile place for magic to flourish. To enrich the ley lines – the currents of magic in the earth. It is to enhance ourselves, too. Some say wizards and witches are inherently superior magical beings – for while the lesser magical creatures and beings are dependent on magic for survival, we can live without it. Others argue that we don’t flourish as well in its absence and are thus no different in that respect than magical beasts. That it is simply a matter of respective degrees of resilience, not an inherent difference in our natures.”

“What do you think, sir?”

Snape hesitated a moment. “I think we need it. I think we feel less than our fullest, best selves when away from magic. To give magic back to the land, which empowers us too – it’s a circle, do you understand? One we must play our part in supporting. Some of us believe it has weakened us as a people, to deny the earth and our protective spirits their rightful due of magic and sacrifice. Rumour has it that the Chinese are often the longest-lived and most naturally talented of all the magical peoples of the world, and that it’s because they never stopped their offerings to the land and to ancestral spirits, or their cycle of lunar festivals at sacred sites. The Emperor demands it of every citizen of the secluded Divine Land of the Middle Kingdom.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. “Storm doesn’t like it in Muggle areas. He says it’s… cold, and dull. He likes to bask wherever the magic is strongest – he loves the stones here.” He pointed over at where his happy pet was still lazily coiled on top of a sunlit standing stone. “I don’t really notice a difference, to be honest, though I do like being at Hogwarts.”

Harry thought that the Chamber of Secrets was one of his favourite places, but that might be more about it being his super-secret safe retreat, rather than any inherently high magic in the area.

“Storm is wiser than many humans, and you may tell him I said so.”

Harry dutifully did so.

“He is a wise Clever-man,” Storm said. “Ask him if he likess sssnakess.”

“He’s the former Head of Ssslytherin House, if that helpss establish his good character,” Harry said, amused. “But he’s left the school now.”

“Then I like him.”

“He says he thinks you’re wise too, and he likes you because you were the Head of Slytherin. He wants to know if you like snakes.”

“Ahh, the loyalty of serpents,” Snape said, with a small smile. “Yes, I like snakes. They know how to look out for themselves. I read Storm’s interview in The Quibbler. It was nice to hear he favoured my House over Gryffindor for the Cup. He must be a good influence on you in quelling some of your more unwise leonine impulses.”

“You read The Quibbler?” Harry asked in amazement. He liked Luna and her father, but their magazine was a rather strange jumble of dubious articles on cryptozoology, unsubstantiated wild gossip, and crazy conspiracy theories.

“Only idiots read the Prophet for anything other than entertainment value or to stay informed as to what the latest propaganda is saying.”

“Hermione and Sirius both read the Daily Prophet every morn…” Harry trailed off at the smirk on Snape’s face, and scowled. “They’re not idiots! The Malfoys read it too, you know. It’s got better news than The Quibbler!”
“Come,” said Snape, ignoring his objections. “It is time to go.”

Chapter End Notes

Guestramita1996 – A tiny snippet here briefly looking at why Neville’s not keen on the Old Ways.
EssayofThoughts, Twyla, and the Accuracy in Fiction FB group – Thanks for the information and brainstorming about various Welsh and pagan traditions.
kuonji – Thanks for spot-checking the information about China.
Quidditch at Malfoy Manor

Chapter Summary

Harry visits Malfoy Manor, and enjoys a game of Quidditch with Malfoy-approved friends.

August 1994

“You only just came back from Longbottoms’, and you’re leaving again?” Sirius whined. It wasn’t the most mature-sounding complaint Harry had ever heard. He doubted the wizard would appreciate the comparison, but Harry thought he sounded a lot like Draco when he was in one of his rare but dramatic snits.

“Just for a couple of days,” Harry apologised. “Draco was so hurt and offended I was staying with Neville but not with him. The Malfoys have planned a dinner party with dancing for my stay, so I have to go. As it is, I had to argue them down from a week – they wanted me to stay longer.”

Sirius sighed. “Yes, cousin Narcissa even sent me an invite for the dinner party. But there are going to be too many ‘falsely accused’ Death Eaters there for my taste, Harry,” Sirius said apologetically, making air quotes with his fingers to show his scepticism about the allegiances of those accused of being the Dark Lord’s former followers. “I really don’t want to go, and I don’t think you should either, but I don’t want to overrule you on this. I know you’ve gone to Malfoy Manor safely before. If you do go to that ball Snape will keep an eye out for you, so if there’s trouble – like the Azkaban Death Eaters showing up – either get out of there if you can or stick close to him and do what he says. And keep your wand handy at all times.”

Harry cocked his head to one side as Sirius’ words sounded almost like an implicit compliment. “I thought you and Master Snape didn’t get along?”

Sirius made a face like he’d smelled something disgusting. “We certainly do not. But it is clear that he likes you, Harry, so I trust him to protect you, I suppose. I guess it’s not surprising if you think about it, what with you being Lily’s son. Not everyone can tell – he insults you when the topic comes up in meetings. But I know him, I guess. He was the same way with Lily – no-one was allowed to insult her but him. He’ll say these really cutting things if anyone else is rude about you. Like how only a blithering imbecile with the brains of a Flobberworm would think that Harry Potter was Dark.”

Harry’s heart sank. “People think I’m Dark?”

“No, no,” Sirius hastened to assure him. “It was just some idiot who’s been listening to stupid rumours about you being a Parselmouth, I guess. Some people think snakes are evil, after all. We set him straight though, it’s fine. My point was that Snape is protective of you.

“I can’t believe I’m defending Snape,” Sirius finished with an incredulous mutter. “He’s still a total slimy git.”

“I wish you would come to the party too, Sirius” Harry said. “I do understand, though. Neville’s not going either. I know not everyone likes the Malfoys, even if they’re willing to be polite to their
faces if they have to. At least Neville’s got the excuse of settling his parents in at home – that should satisfy the demands of propriety.”

“Poor Frank and Alice,” Sirius said sadly. “I hope the change does them good.”

Harry nodded. He hoped so too, though not as fervently as Neville, no doubt. And even if it didn’t do them any good, it wouldn’t do any harm.

“You’ll leave Dobby here again while you’re gone, won’t you?” Sirius asked plaintively. “You know, he said to me that since ‘Master Harry’ is my Heir, he’s happy to clean up a house that will be yours one day. He’s so much nicer and more helpful than Kreacher.”

“I think they’re both fine house-elves,” Harry said warily, knowing that they listened in from a distance whenever you said their name, in case you were calling for them.

“In any case, I can’t take Dobby to visit the Malfoys,” Harry said emphatically, and then Sirius wouldn’t rest until he found out why. He was highly amused at Harry’s tales of the little house-elf’s efforts a year ago to ‘save’ Harry, and the roundabout way Harry had secured his release from serving the Malfoy family.

Draco was thrilled to have Harry show up for a visit. He had a Malfoy house-elf pop away with Harry’s trunk, then started talking non-stop about the upcoming dinner party his mother had been planning, and his new green dress robes.

Sirius threw out pointed barbed comments to Lucius about how he expected Harry back in the best of health in three days’ time after Saturday’s dinner party, dropping hints about how Aurors from the Ministry would be watching the Manor.

Lucius in turn sniped about how he was sure the Aurors would be on the lookout for any dangerous threats, such as the wanted criminal Remus Lupin.

They looked ready to draw wands when Narcissa intervened with an apology. “I am so sorry we won’t be able to host you for morning tea today, cousin. But we really must get Harry settled in, and Draco has some activities planned for this morning. I do hope we’ll see you again soon, even though you had other commitments for Saturday.” She stepped in between the two men and held out her hand for a polite farewell kiss.

“Yes,” Sirius ground out, taking her hand and pecking the air above it in a token kiss, “it’s such a shame. See you later, Harry.” He Apparated away abruptly, which was somewhat of a relief to all present.

After a round of polite greetings, Harry and Draco were free to wander inside towards his room.

“I am so glad you have arrived at last,” Draco said. “This summer has been interminably dull. We’ve gone nowhere and done nothing – the most exciting thing I’ve done all summer so far was going fishing with Vincent and Greg. There was your birthday party too, of course,” he added politely.

“Of course,” Harry said with a sly grin. “We’ll have to have a similar outing sometime soon, since you enjoyed it so much.”

“Prat,” Draco said, elbowing him gently, which made Harry laugh.
“Just a quiet holiday at home with your family, then?” Harry asked.

“Home, yes. Family? Not so much. Mother has been busy with the social rounds, and Father’s been constantly busy with work – we have hardly seen him at all. He won’t even talk about most of what he has been up to, except to hint that Hogwarts should expect an international visitor or two this year!”

“Ooh, that does sound interesting. A new Defence teacher from overseas, perhaps?”

“I don’t think that is it, but I am not certain,” Draco admitted, “as he is being most vexingly vague. However, I am sure I shall wheedle the full story out of him by the time school resumes. Oh! Did you know the reason we need dress robes is because there’s going to be Yule Ball, held at school?!”

Draco seemed kind of excited by that idea, but Harry didn’t see anything in that news to look forward to, so he just nodded politely.

“The World Cup is going to be our big family outing this year – we have seats in the Top Box!” Draco boasted.

“Sirius and I have seats there too.”

“Superb!” Draco crowed enthusiastically. “It is very exclusive. There are only forty seats allocated there you know, including one for the Minister.”

“So…” Harry started slowly. “What’s the plan for today, then?”

Draco shrugged. “Nothing right away. We shall get you and Storm settled in, then a few friends will come over after lunch for a casual Quidditch game, if that plan meets with your approval.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Tomorrow mother wants to bore you silly with a review of etiquette and dance steps before the dinner party on Saturday-”

Harry sighed, but nodded in resigned agreement.

“-and as a conditional reward for good behaviour Master Runcorn will Floo by for a Defence lesson in the afternoon.”

“That’s more like it!” Harry said enthusiastically. “I really liked her.”

“Well I think she’s too rough. I said I would rather have some extra Potions tutoring. However, it’s you who will suffer the most through a morning full of instructions about cutlery and how to waltz, and mother thought you would like that best as a reward.”

“She’s a wise woman. I mean, I wouldn’t mind any extra tutoring – except maybe for Transfiguration which is just so pointless – but you know we don’t tend to have much luck with DADA teachers so any edge we can get is great. Fingers crossed this year’s teacher breaks the chain and doesn’t have to leave, and doesn’t attack me.”

“Thinking of which, Father says to remind you to stay within the wards for safety, and not to go off unescorted with any visitors. Oh, and he said to tell you that the library is open to you if you want to do any reading during your stay. I swear he thinks you’re half Ravenclaw!”
Harry laughed. “I’m a bit of everything! Not much Hufflepuff though I’m afraid – the Sorting Hat refused to let me go there.”

“Well good job, Hat! Hufflepuff! Honestly, Harry. It’s good enough for other people I suppose, but not for you.”

“I like the ideals – hard work and loyalty and all that. But all the hugging and sharing in that House would have been really tiresome to put up with. However, I do hear they have great prefects who really look after the younger kids, and fun parties!”

Draco rolled his eyes. “I doubt they are as good as Slytherin parties.”

“I’m sure they’re better,” Harry teased.

With a scornful huff, Draco replied teasingly, “Someone who thinks that Mr. McDonald’s restaurant is a superior party venue has no qualifications to judge the relative merits of different House parties.”

Harry laughed at that, and Draco joined in merrily.

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The group of friends who showed up with brooms in tow that afternoon was of course heavy on Slytherins. Peregrine Derrick and Graham Montague chattered boastfully about how each of them thought they’d make a great new Slytherin Captain for the upcoming year, now that Flint had graduated. Peregrine claimed seniority as the oldest remaining team member and the best Beater, while Montague’s skill as the team’s best Chaser had him regarding himself as a prime pick for the Captaincy despite the fact he’d only be a Fifth Year. Both thought they were the better tactician and would be skilled at team management.

Flint had been invited along, and listened to their argument indulgently, secure in his superiority as the newest reserve Chaser for the Wimbourne Wasps.

Both Peregrine and Montague agreed that Adrian Pucey deserved the vacant spot for a Chaser – though whether that was due to actual merit or to some kind of bribes or exchange of favours was unclear.

“What about the second Beater position? Is that open for try-outs?” Millicent asked the duo with studied casualness. Vincent listened in silently, obviously eager to hear the answer too.

Peregrine and Montague exchanged a glance, and Montague nodded.

“Bole could go,” Peregrine said slowly. “If one of you did better than him. It is his NEWT year, so he might be willing to stand down to concentrate on classes. I don’t believe he is interested in a Quidditch career – he’s good, but not that good. Yes, we’ll have a Beater try-out, I think. You’re both pretty good and you worked hard as Reserves.”

Millicent looked thrilled at that news, while Vincent glared competitively at her.

“How about Keeper?” asked Greg. “I’ve been practising hard all year. I’m just as good as Bletchley is. Better!”

Montague shook his head. “Not if I am Captain. Bletchley’s in.” Greg slumped visibly at that pronouncement.
“I will give you a try-out at least, if I get the Captain’s badge,” Peregrine promised, which earned him a pleased grin. “I can’t believe old Sluggy hasn’t sent it out yet.”

“He is new,” Montague said thoughtfully. “Maybe he doesn’t know it is normally sent before school starts. I guess he will hand it out at the Opening Feast or in the first week, so someone can be properly grateful to him in person.”

“Do you know what the Gryffindor line-up is going to be, Harry?” Montague asked.

“I’m not really sure,” Harry said. “I imagine the Weasley twins will stay as Beaters despite some competition, and Johnson’s rumoured to be in the running for Captain. Ron Weasley is a shoo-in for Keeper with Wood gone, since he’s been playing Reserve for two years and Wood’s trained him up. He’s super keen about that! I’m not really sure about the other spots, as Gryffindor runs try-outs every year no matter what, and at least theoretically every spot is up for grabs except the Captain’s. There’s a lot of competition for Seeker.”

Tracey and Theodore Nott were there to help make up numbers even though neither was very interested in Quidditch, as was Anthony Goldstein who said that he played a little for fun. Daphne had been invited but was still away on holiday in Wales and couldn’t make it, and Pansy was also too busy with family. Her apologetic note reportedly said that she’d see them all at the ball.

Luna Lovegood was the second token non-Slytherin who’d been invited, though Draco promised he’d invited Neville and Ron too, but both boys had declined their invitations.

Harry drew Draco aside for a private chat. “So Hermione didn’t get an invitation again?” Harry asked. “It’s not too late to get someone to Apparate her here – she’s one of my best friends and I’d like her included. I know you didn’t invite her to the dinner party either.”

“Granger does not own a broom,” Draco replied uncomfortably, “and does not care for Quidditch much in any case.”

“Luna doesn’t play either,” Harry rebutted.

“But she is a keen spectator, and agreed to referee,” argued Draco defensively.

“Is this because Hermione’s a Muggle-born?” Harry whispered crossly.

“Yes! Is that what you wanted to hear? Yes,” Draco hissed angrily. “Father doesn’t want her here, alright? Mother agreed with him and refused to talk him around.” He stomped off to talk loudly with everyone about who’d play what position, so Harry didn’t get a chance to argue with him about it further.

On reflection, Harry thought it was pretty nice that Draco had at least tried to wrangle Hermione an invitation (or maybe two) despite his family’s tendency towards blood purity prejudice. He smiled and spoke politely to Draco as they chatted about their match, to show that there were no hard feelings despite their earlier argument. Draco seemed to relax at that sign of clemency.

Harry and Draco took the Seeker spots for the “Snakes” and “Dragons” teams respectively. Harry’s team had Millicent facing off as Beater against Vincent on Draco’s side.

The Snakes’ Chasers were Montague and Peregrine (even though the latter usually played Beater), while the Dragons got Flint, Tracey, and Theodore (one professional with two amateurs). Greg was the Keeper for the Dragons, while Anthony had been picked as the best Keeper for the Snakes.

Luna hovered at one side on a broom as she refereed. The Malfoys and a few other parents
arranged themselves on white wicker chairs on the lawn to watch the match, sipping at cups of tea and
enjoying some tiny chicken vol-au-vents and ribbon sandwiches, served on delicate china plates by two toga-clad house-elves. Peregrine’s little sister Flavia was ignoring the snacks and the incipient Quidditch match in favour of crooning over Storm as “the prettiest snake in the world”. Storm lay sleepily in her lap enjoying the warm sunlight and tolerating the stroking of his scales for the sake of lazily entertaining one of his favourite humans.

Luna blew a whistle, and they were off! The Dragons had concocted a simple strategy that consisted of Tracey and Theodore throwing the Quaffle to Flint whenever possible. Vincent seemed reluctant to target the sole Bludger at Montague or Peregrine – his possible new Captains – and played a mostly defensive game steadfastly protecting his team’s Chasers and Draco, taking only occasional pot-shots at Harry and Millicent.

Millicent was on the same team as the candidates for Slytherin Team Captain, so felt little hesitation in proving her skill more aggressively. She whacked the Bludger at anyone and everyone on the opposing team who presented a tempting target, getting a couple of glancing hits on Flint and Theodore.

The Snakes were, however, generally outclassed, despite Millicent’s aggressive game and the Chasers’ best efforts. Greg’s skilful play as Keeper for the Dragons kept the Snakes from scoring many goals, while Anthony’s relative inexperience at Quidditch meant he really struggled as Keeper. The results was that the Dragons racked up a large number of goals, all but one of which were scored by Flint. While Flint ran interference keeping Millicent and Montague out of the way, Tracey triumphantly managed one solitary lucky goal for the Dragons which earned her hearty applause from the audience.

With the score at 160 to 30 against his team, Harry spotted the Snitch first and raced Draco for it, weaving nimbly through the other players. Harry managed to catch the Snitch with a death-defying spiralling swoop, earning a hearty round of cheers from his tired teammates, and applause from the watching families. He’d won the match for his team the Snakes by a whisker, at 180 to 160, but the other team had clearly dominated the pitch.

“Amazing! I taught him that move,” Draco boasted, obviously having decided not to be a sore loser. “Last Yule, I showed him some tricks when he visited.”

“Great catch, Potter,” Flint praised, shaking Harry’s hand. “I still say it was a good day for Slytherin when you quit the Gryffindor team! You have a lot of skill on a broomstick.”

“Thanks, Flint,” Harry said, trying to mentally reconcile Flint’s smiling open face with the same person who’d sneered last year about how Sirius Black should have joined the Dark Lord’s crusade like his family had wanted. Flint had been a completely different person when he’d thought he was talking to ‘Antares Black’ from Ravenclaw.

The children mingled with each other and gulped down some freshly squeezed traditional lemonade – which Harry found tasted a bit odd since it wasn’t at all fizzy and was more like honey-sweetened cold lemon juice. However, no-one commented on it, so he decided not to make a fuss. It was at least a nice change from the ever-present pumpkin juice, and the snacks were tasty and familiar.

Flavia proudly told Harry that she was five years old now and learning to read and write from her mother. She also pleaded with Harry to translate a conversation for her with Storm, and he politely obliged.

“Tell him he is the prettiest snake in the world and I love him best out of all the snakes and
rainbow snakes are the best!” she babbled excitedly.

Harry translated it word for word, and Storm was delighted to be praised. “Tell her she is a good young Clever-man and I like her pictures and she is a favourite of mine. Let her know that we display them, so all may admire my beauty when I am not around.”

“I have pictures of him and you on my wall at home!” Flavia said after hearing Harry’s translation, bouncing up and down slightly with excitement. “Tell him that too, please! Also, that he is very, very lucky to get to be the familiar of the Heir of Slytherin! Ask if he can make rainbows! I love rainbows!”

Harry obediently translated again, not bothering to call her on her assumption he was the Heir of Slytherin. It was true enough, even though he didn’t like to admit it out loud, and correcting a five-year-old on his public stance on the issue wasn’t really important.

“I cannot make light, but I know I can make mist or light rain for ssunlight to shine through, and then there will be rainbowss,” Storm boasted. “I will do it now, so she can watch.”

“Ssstorm, I don’t know if that’ss a good idea – people might get wet,” Harry warned, then quickly said a translation aloud for Flavia who squealed excitedly, while her mother murmured polite things about how Storm and Harry needn’t feel obliged to demonstrate anything, and that she and her daughter didn’t want to be a bother.

“It won’t hurt anyone. Tell them to use a ssspell to ssstay dry,” Storm said dismissively. “The little one wants a rainbow.”

“Alright then,” Harry agreed dubiously.

Lunging out of Flavia’s gentle grasp Storm slid to the ground and started waving his body sinuously back and forth.

“Excuse me, everyone?” Harry called loudly. “At a young lady’s request, Storm will be calling up a light mist or rain so we can get some rainbows. So, you might want to give him a little room or use a charm if you want to stay dry.”

“I am a young lady,” Flavia whispered to her mother, full of joyous wonderment at the title Harry had used for her. Her mother smiled down at her and stroked her hair gently.

A small cloud gradually coalesced twenty feet above the grassy Quidditch pitch, bigger than the one Storm had once manifested in the Great Hall above Ron’s head. A very light rain began to fall, and Flavia was thrilled to see the promised rainbows. The adults seemed almost as delighted by the display as the children. With liberal applications of Drying Charms, a little temporary dampness was considered a trivial cost to pay for the sake of courtesy and the chance to see Storm (and Harry, by extension) showing off his abilities.

Mr. Nott was one of the few adults who seemed to take seriously Harry’s subsequent polite demurrals about how he wasn’t the Heir of Slytherin, despite his display of skill as a Parselmouth.

“It’s not like I have a genealogy to prove it,” Harry explained tiredly. It felt like he’d said this to people a dozen times now. “It’s an ability, not a proven lineage. An ability that a handful of others around the world share, especially in India and amongst the Aborigines of Australia. I’m not publicly acknowledged by anyone as the Heir, it’s just people’s private guesses. Maybe it’s true, maybe it’s not.” Sometimes Harry wondered why he even bothered denying it anymore. Mostly it was about not wanting to be associated with the Dark Lord.
Someone muttered something quietly about owls in the background. Harry ignored them.

“Quite right, very true,” Mr. Nott agreed gravely. His thin face looked less amiable when he wasn’t wearing one of his usual smiles. “You do not want to be seen to arrogantly use a title you have no recognised claim to. The Smiths at least have a genealogy going back to Madam Hufflepuff, but there’s no such history for the Potters. Or the Parkinsons, for that matter – I heard they looked into it. Very wise, young man. Quite the proper thing.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You’ve certainly given me food for thought today! It was a pleasure to meet you again,” Nott said with a bow, before leaving with his son. Theodore looked quite relieved when his father turned to him with a smile as they were leaving.

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Narcissa was flabbergasted to discover the next day that Harry couldn’t dance at all, and Friday morning’s plan was quickly switched from an extensive review of table etiquette to a brisk summary, which included the proper use of chopsticks as well as standard cutlery.

Instead, there was a primary focus on learning basic dance steps, much to Harry’s dismay and to Draco’s amusement, even despite the fact that Draco been roped into dancing the lady’s part for Harry’s benefit.

“Draco said you could dance! I had assumed you would need no more than a refresher!” Narcissa cried, as Harry stumbled around the dancefloor.

“I may have implied that,” Harry admitted with a mumble. “And I can dance. A little.”

“Bobbing and shuffling to and fro like you have an urgent need to visit the gentlemen’s room is not dancing,” she said sternly. Harry had earlier tried to demonstrate modern dancing for her, and she had not been impressed by his display.

“I don’t even want to dance,” Harry said stubbornly. “I’m not planning to ask anyone to dance.”

“I understand,” Narcissa said kindly, with a sympathetic look. Harry’s brief moment of hope was quickly quashed, however. “You are shy, and lacking confidence. That will pass. Now, hands clasped, and the other on Draco’s waist. Gently! It just rests there to guide your partner with the pressure of your hand, you’re not trying to grab at them. We’ll start the music again. ONE two three…”

“This is so humiliating,” muttered Harry as he and Draco whirled around the ballroom under Narcissa’s watchful eye, while a grand piano charmed to play on its own echoed in the empty room.

“At least no-one’s stomping on your feet,” Draco said with another wince. “Merlin, Harry, you have to be able to talk and dance at the same time. Watch your feet! No, not like that, stop looking down! Dancing doesn’t get any easier than this – how can you be so rubbish at it?”

“Sorry. It’s my first lesson, have a heart!”

“Muggles! They must be such useless creatures to not even teach you to dance,” Draco said with a disparaging sniff. “Ow! Watch it! The ladies are going to hex your feet off if you stomp on their slippers like you keep doing to my boots.”
Alright, maybe that last stomp had been on purpose.

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After Harry’s poor showing at dance lessons, Narcissa didn’t seem inclined to trust Harry to dress properly without supervision – something she’d previously presumed he’d be capable of. Instead, she insisted on reviewing his planned outfit for dinner.

He’d planned to wear the saffron yellow robes that had been the Malfoy’s birthday gift, ordered especially for the occasion. However, Narcissa shot that plan down right away. “Those are winter weight robes you ordered,” she chided gently, “and will be much more suitable for the Yule Ball.”

“Alright,” Harry agreed amicably. They were a bit too heavy, it was true. He hadn’t really thought about that when ordering them and felt a bit silly now. He’d just ordered ones like last time but in a new colour, forgetting that they were winter robes.

“Now, what else do you have?”

“Plain black dress robes with the Potter crest-”

“Too stuffy for a young man at a dinner party unless there’s no alternative.”

“-Last year’s purples robes from you which I guess are getting a little small though they mostly fit. Various waistcoats, shirts, and trousers. The waistcoat with purple embroidery is very new, I got it in France. No? How about my scarlet dragonhide frock coat and pants set?”

“Perhaps,” Narcissa said, looking the last items over dubiously as Harry laid the set on the bed next to the others. “They’re a little casual.”

“Or there’s the new robes Sirius got me for my birthday. I think maybe they’d probably be the best?” Harry said tentatively, laying them out. Black with red trim and lining, they buttoned down the front and flared out at the waist. Their long sleeves needed cufflinks to close up snugly at the wrists. They were a lighter-weight fabric than the yellow set from the Malfoys, which he hoped meant they’d meet with Narcissa’s approval. “They come with a matching waistcoat, trousers, and another shirt, to wear underneath. Is it white gloves?”

Narcissa examined the robes over with a general look of approval. “You really should wear more green, Harry, to bring out your eyes. That cannot be helped, however – using a Colour Change Charm makes one look cheap. So yes, these will do nicely. White gloves are fine though black to match your outfit will be acceptable too, if you have them, and of course remember to remove them when you’re seated and about to eat dinner. Gloves are optional but preferred for a dinner party, and a necessity for a ball or evening party.

“Now, remember you need to dance at least two dances this evening. It is not a ball, so you need not dance every dance – a couple should suffice.”

“Can’t I just dance once?” he pleaded.

“Only if you want to mark your partner out as the new love of your life and show that you scorn the company of all other young ladies and gentlemen. Though if you really wanted to grant such recognition it would be even better to dance two or even three times with the same partner, and no-one else.”

“If you plaster on a disagreeable expression like you did for half your dances with Draco, dancing only once will show you think yourself above your company, and that you dislike everyone present, including your dancing partner,” Narcissa continued warningly.

“I’ll dance twice and smile while I do it, I promise!” Harry swore.

“Good lad,” she said, smiling at him affectionately. “Remember, that’s at least twice. Do not forget that your partner for the supper set will be seated next to you at dinner, so choose your partner for that dance wisely, if you dance that set. Draco, I believe, is planning to escort your cousin Miss Parkinson to dinner.”

Harry moaned softly. This was like a nightmare.
The Dinner Party That’s Definitely Not a Ball

Chapter Summary

It’s not a ball, it’s a dinner party. You can tell because Narcissa said so repeatedly to Harry.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday 13th August 1994

Harry was relaxing in the Malfoy library on Saturday evening with one of his new birthday books, Basic Hexes for the Busy and Vexed. He’d promised Narcissa he would stay still and do nothing to upset the line of his robes, so was quietly reading when Draco finally finished fussing with his own robes and hair and came and found him.

“The guests should begin arriving soon,” Draco announced, “and mother wants you to join us in the receiving line.”

“Who’s invited that I know?” Harry asked, laying his book aside obediently. “I know a few of our friends are coming, thank Merlin.”

“Apart from Ministry people and the like? Basically, everyone in our year from Slytherin, and a few extra people, like Luna. Neville cannot attend. From the upper years there’s Flint, and Derrick, since you’ve taken him under your wing. Percival Weasley-”

“Percy’s your token Gryffindor?” teased Harry.

“He is not the only Gryffindor invited,” Draco said defensively. “We asked Neville too, remember. There are some Ministry people too who I think were Gryffindors.”

“Uh huh,” Harry said sceptically. “All the Slytherins though? How about Zabini?”

“Yes, he’s coming. We get along alright, even if we’re not especially close. He’s better friends with Nott. And he’s from an Ancient family, of course. There’s also a handful of father’s friends who are in the Ministry or on the Hogwarts Board, and some people from the St. Mungo’s Board since mother makes a lot of donations, and a friend or two-”

“How is that in any way a ‘small’ dinner party?” Harry interrupted.

“Uh… well basically mother has been blatantly lying about that all along,” Draco admitted. “She is just trying to stop you from panicking. It started small, but then everyone just kept adding more people onto the guest list. Father cannot risk offending one person by omitting them if another of similar rank and familiarity is invited, and he must invite his patrons and his most helpful clients of course. Mother had people to add too, and then I suggested we should invite some more of your friends and potential clients. I tried to get Hermione an invitation, but they said no-”

“Thanks for trying, at least. I do appreciate that.”
“You’re welcome!” Draco said, with a pleased expression.

“Of course, we also ran into problems like how we couldn’t invite Percival Weasley without inviting his boss since we are inviting other Ministry figures – though his boss declined his invitation so that is one less at least. We are not allied or friends with the Crouch family. So, after that we obviously couldn’t snub the Minister if we’re inviting a handful of his senior staff. Of course, the Minister accepted for both himself and a guest. Then Madam Bones got the Minister to get herself and another Auror invitations as well, since the Minister wanted security along as the Azkaban escapees are still on the run.”

Harry whistled softly. “Merlin. That’s… way more complicated than I imagined.”

“Come on, we have to go wait for the guests,” Draco urged, leading him downstairs.

Harry waited with the Malfoy family in a receiving line in the atrium in front of the massive marble fireplace as a succession of guests arrived – most of them via the Floo. A small handful of guests walked in, having presumably Apparated outside the manor or travelled via the Knight Bus or by broomstick, and were escorted inside by a Malfoy house-elf in a crisp new toga. The large crystal chandelier glittered brightly, lit by an uncountably large number of candles which thankfully were enchanted not to drip wax on anyone’s fine robes, just like Hogwarts’ candles.

Harry had been introduced to a lot of people by Lucius as “Harold James Potter, Heir of the Noble House of Potter, and my dear wife’s cousin”, and similar introductions by Narcissa who also proudly claimed their family relation. He’d shaken a lot of hands and kissed some others and was getting right royally tired of bowing and smiling to people he didn’t recognise. He also felt awkward receiving people like he was part of the Malfoy family (being only a second cousin), but Narcissa assured him that as her recognised relative and current houseguest, he was right where he was supposed to be according to etiquette.

His friends and other recognisable acquaintances were a relief to meet, in contrast. He was even happy to greet Rita Skeeter, the evening’s “social reporter”, who wore a chartreuse green gown which was so virulently bright it reminded Harry vaguely of radioactive waste. It was also nice to see Master Snape (unaccompanied by a date) who wore plain black buttoned robes that looked barely better than the everyday version he used to wear when teaching at Hogwarts.

Percy Weasley was eager to be reacquainted with Harry and to be introduced to the Malfoys, who seemed politely receptive and welcoming. He wore stiff, new purple formal robes and was accompanied by the trainee Auror Tonks, whom Harry had met in Lutetia. She winked at him when the Malfoys weren’t looking. Harry noted that Tonks didn’t seem to be greeted either as a trainee Auror, or as a relative. She was introduced as “Miss Nymphadora Tonks” by Percy and received a minimal nod of greeting from the Malfoys. Draco didn’t seem to even recognise her name or face. If anything, Percy had been greeted more warmly by the Malfoys than she had been, and Harry could’ve sworn that the Weasleys still had an ancient feud running with the Malfoys. He wondered if Narcissa thought Tonk’s mother’s banishment from the Black family was still socially important to uphold, even if her daughter had been permitted to attend the Malfoy’s dinner party. Perhaps Percy had simply answered his invitation with ‘and guest’, rather than mentioning his date by name. Maybe the Malfoys just hadn’t wanted to cause a scene once she’d already arrived. Harry also wondered what person in their right mind named their daughter “Nymphadora”. Star-themed names seemed a blessing in comparison.

Minister Fudge clearly thought himself the most important guest of the evening judging by his pompous attitude and how he greeted the Malfoys. He wore a long purple robe that was left open to display the tailored suit underneath, and had invited along a guest, Madam Umbridge, who wore
formal robes of pale pink. Harry mentally blamed Daphne and Pansy’s regular bright chatter about fashion for his ability to instantly tell that the high-necked cut of Umbridge’s robes was considered stuffy and old-fashioned, at least by younger witches. The Minister oozed flattery about Malfoy Manor, and how he was looking forward to seeing them all at the World Cup. Judging by the sour expression that briefly crossed Madam Umbridge’s face, she hadn’t been invited to sit in the Top Box with her partner of the evening.

After the Minister and his guest had left the atrium and headed further inside towards the ballroom, Harry overheard Lucius whisper to Narcissa, “Did you invite any werewolves in the end? We cannot have them seated near her, it would be a social disaster. At best.”

“No, dear. It was too awkward with Aurors coming too,” she replied softly. Madam Bones and Kingsley Shacklebolt had arrived shortly before the Minister had.

“You’re pro-werewolf rights, then?” Harry whispered curiously.

Lucius turned to him in surprise. “Yes, of course. We support greater rights for vampires also.”

“It is a great social challenge to invite members of either group to a dinner party, however,” Narcissa added. “I deemed it impolitic on this occasion, which is more about friendly socialising than political manoeuvres.”

“As if there’s a difference, my darling,” Lucius said with a smile, planting a small kiss on the knuckles of his wife’s gloved hand. “You will confuse the boy – he needs to learn, just like Draco.”

“How about house-elf rights?” Harry asked.

Narcissa exchanged a look with Lucius, then fielded that question. “We have embraced the new renaissance in fashion of outfitting our house-elves in togas, and as always accord them the customary social courtesies. However, I see no reason to alter their status – they are happy as they are.”

They paused their conversation for a round of bows with the Greengrass family, who had broken their holiday in Wales especially for the Malfoy’s dinner party. Being able to Apparate certainly made such exceptions a lot easier.

Daphne was wearing the long satin evening gown she’d worn to Harry’s birthday party at McDonalds, but with the addition of a floor-length cloak and long satin gloves that went up past her elbows. She looked much less out of place in her outfit in the grander surroundings of Malfoy Manor. She checked her appearance quickly after arrival in the large gilded mirror above the fireplace and was evidently pleased to see her clothing was free from soot, and that the complicated piled-up hairstyle of blonde coils secured with jewel-studded silver hairpins was still in place. Her little sister Astoria had a less complicated hairstyle, with most of it flowing free and only a few tiny braids secured with silver ribbons into cute loops.

“It is so good to see you both again!” Daphne cooed to Draco and Harry, holding out her satin-gloved hand for their dutiful kisses. “Cantre'r Gwaelod has been simply marvellous. We’ve spent a lot of time at the beach, blissfully unbothered by any Muggles, and we’ve seen three venationes.”

Draco stared at Daphne for a moment before he gathered himself and remembered to reply. “What was your favourite venatio? Did you see one with the Welsh Greens?”

“I had to since they are your favourite, Draco! It was a great show - they lured one old bull dragon
in with a live goat, which it devoured in a trice, then the dragon keepers surrounded it, Stunned it, and bled it.”

“I wish they would omit that last part,” Draco muttered. “Dragon’s blood is squandered so thoughtlessly. Oven cleaner! Spot remover! That dotard should be thrown in Azkaban for promoting such things, not lauded for his research. Honestly, it is such a travesty – a tremendous waste.”

“Well, you should be pleased to hear the dragon survived quite nicely – they have plenty of blood to spare. I did enjoy the show with dragons, but my favourite was the one with the dogs – the Cŵn Annwn,” Daphne continued, turning with a smile for Harry as she ignored Draco for the moment. “Have you heard of those creatures?”

“It doesn’t ring a bell. I’m pretty sure they’re not in our textbook unless it’s the Welsh name for the Grim? I know there’s Grims all throughout the UK,” Harry said.

“No, Grims are known as Gwyllgi in Welsh,” Daphne said with a shake of her head. “The Cŵn Annwn are white, with red ears. And they are so cute, Harry! We got to see a pack hunting a deer, and then they brought out some soft little puppies for people to hold. I do declare, they are the most adorable things you have ever seen! One really loved me too – he licked my face. They simply adore wizards and witches, just like Crups. But you cannot buy them without a special licence, and father says we are not likely to get one as we have Muggle neighbours who might be attacked, and our yard is not big enough for them to hunt on anyway, and they prefer to live in packs.” She let out a wistful sigh.

“How about the Welsh Fair Folk?” Harry asked. “Are they real too? Are they like a large fairy or house-elf?”

“Harry,” Daphne said slowly, “the Fair Folk – the Tylwyth Teg – they are us.”

Harry blushed faintly pink at that. “Oh, yes. Of course. Obviously.”

Daphne brightly farewelled them as her family gathered to move onwards to the ballroom.

The Parkinson family arrived not long after, and Draco immediately dove into quiet gossip with Pansy while the adults greeted each other. “Daphne had her hair up! She is out!” he whispered.

“No!” Pansy gasped.

“Yes! She is fourteen now, so I suppose she managed to convince her mother at last.”

With a jealous scowl, Pansy patted her own dark flowing hair which had a few flowers attached in it somehow. Harry couldn’t see how they were staying put – it was probably a charm.

“I am going to look like a girl next to her,” Pansy complained.

“You still look lovely,” Draco reassured her. “I hope you will save me a dance or two this evening? Perhaps the first and the supper set, if you have those free?”


Harry seized on his friend’s example before he lost his nerve. “And one for me too, cousin?” he asked. “A waltz?”

“Just one,” Pansy agreed, writing down notes on a tiny card. Harry breathed a sigh of relief. One
dance booking down, one to go.

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Harry stood awkwardly with Millicent and Luna at one side of the ballroom during the first dance, as they too seemed to have failed to attract or choose partners for the opening “quadrille”. Harry had no idea what steps were required and was waiting for his waltz later on with Pansy – the only dance he felt even vaguely confident of trying. As four sets of couples arranged themselves into squares and started gliding around and swapping partners with graceful timing, Harry was very glad he’d decided to sit this one out.

“Cousin Narcissa promised me a dinner party,” he muttered unhappily to Millicent, whose attention was only partially focused on listening to Harry as she watched the dancefloor with an avid assessing gaze to spy on who was dancing with whom. “A dinner party shouldn’t require opening up a massive ballroom for a crowd to dance. And a live chamber orchestra. She made it a ball.”

“Well of course it is a ball, and that requires musicians. Squibs do need employment,” Millicent said in absent-minded rebuke, still watching the dancing. “It is a kindness to them. I thought you liked Squibs, Harry? Not counting Filch, of course.”

“Oh! Well, I do. It’s just… a lot. Very fancy, that’s all. How can you tell they’re Squibs?” He looked over at the group of musicians on a small raised dais. They all seemed to be wearing plain black clothes, so they matched in tone if not in style. The pianist and cellist both wore suits, while a couple of the violinists wore robes. There was also a witch sitting at a harp wearing a long black dress, who wasn’t one of the performers for the current song.

Millicent shrugged. “Well, in truth I cannot be sure. But they probably are. Or mayhap they are untalented or impoverished wizards and witches, since they are in service roles. There’s a waiter or two circulating around somewhere with drinks – they are probably Squibs too.

“Look!” she hissed in distracted excitement. “Anthony’s parents have spotted him dancing with Tracey! Did you see his mother’s face?”

“No?”

“Oh. Well, she didn’t look impressed. The Parkinsons look happy to see Pansy dancing with Draco, though.”

“I think she likes him,” Luna said with a dreamy smile. “Do you think he likes her?”

Millicent shrugged. “Perhaps. It is a good match. They are both pure-blood and with no close relations within three generations. They get along well, and their families do not have any feuds to worry about.”

She glanced out over the couples again. “Zabini and Roper might make a match, but I do not know much about their families. She is very Light aligned for a Slytherin, and thinks herself above our company, the snooty harpy – I think that is probably just a courtesy dance.”

“I wish I was dancing,” mused Luna. “Everyone looks like they’re having a lovely time. What about you, Harry?”

“Oh no, I’d stomp all over someone’s feet,” Harry averred. “I don’t know those steps at all. I’m waiting for a waltz to do my duty. How about you, Millicent? Do you want to dance?”
“Was that an invitation?” she asked, looking startled.

“No! I mean, that is… I suppose we could later if you want to, but not for this particular dance,” Harry stammered awkwardly. “I was just wondering if you wished you were dancing, like Luna.”

“Well do not ask me to dance,” Millicent said. “I know I am not pretty enough – no-one will ask me except as a gesture of courtesy. I do not need you to add insult to injury – or vice versa really – by stomping on my feet. I have a couple of dances on my card and that shall have to suffice for the evening. You should ask Daphne – she will appreciate the attention since she is officially out with her hair up, wearing her daring Muggle-style gown again.”

“I don’t know…” Harry said hesitantly.

“Are you ever going to grow your hair out, Harry?” Luna asked, brushing her gloved hand over his short dark hair and ruffling it slightly. “It is only a few years until you are of age. You could start now, you know. When did you last have it cut?”

Harry smoothed his hair back down nervously, shuffling closer to Millicent and away from Luna. He thought “maybe when I was eight or something” probably wasn’t the right answer for how often a normal wizard got their hair cut, and he tried to remember how often Dudley visited the barber. He was pretty sure it was at least a couple of times a year – he had never really paid attention.

“Some months ago? I don’t remember exactly,” he volunteered eventually. “Do you think I should grow it long like Lucius, or your dad, Luna? I know some wizards grow it long, but not all do. The Minister hasn’t, for instance. Mr. Weasley hasn’t, but his son Bill Weasley has though his mother didn’t seem to like that – I overheard her tell him off about it at their garden party. Is there a reason why? A normal pattern?”

“Oh yes! You really should grow it out,” agreed Millicent, though thankfully unlike Luna she kept her hands politely to herself as she looked thoughtfully at his short, tidy jet-black locks. “Wizards usually grow it out as a mark of status and distinction. Men’s hairstyles usually denote their rank rather than their marriageability – it signifies that they’re the Head of their House, or the Heir. It can be used for other ranks too – if they are a Warlock, or have a Mastery in a field of magic, or an Order of Merlin. Even if they just hold a high position in the Wizengamot – that is also an acceptable justification for growing one’s hair out. The Minister arguably could, but he likes to pretend he’s too humble even though it is more about not being qualified. He would look pretentious to traditional pure-bloods if he tried, and someone would probably get offended.

“Some men grow it out to be rebellious – some like to act like they are important, while others might want to show they scoff at the Old traditions. Aurors and Hitwizards often keep their hair short to show that they are warrior witches and wizards above all else – that is a very Old tradition. I do not know where from. It was probably Roman. Most things are,” Millicent finished, with an uncertain shrug.

“They’re finishing up!” Luna said brightly, as the music trailed away with a few final chords, and partners bowed to each other.

“Go ask Daphne for a dance, now,” Millicent ordered Harry.

“I don’t really want to–”

“The supper set would be good.”
“I don’t know, Millicent,” he said evasively. “Not the supper set.”

“I shall agree to owe you a minor favour if you just ask her to dance – any dance at all,” she said, sounding exasperated.

“Hmm!” he said happily. Favours were better than gold, amongst the Slytherin and pure-blood set. “Not a minor one, though. A bigger one than that.”

“Fine! Medium. Now go!”

Harry went.

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“Whew! Well I’m glad that’s over,” Harry said with relief as the music ended and he took Daphne’s hand in the crook of his arm to escort her back to her coyly giggling group of female friends.

With both of his dances done, Harry was now free to truly enjoy the evening. There was another dance left to watch, then dinner. After that there would be just two final dances which he now felt safe to treat as entirely optional. He was really looking forward to dinner not just because he was hungry after a very light lunch but because earlier that day the Malfoys had tried to be very mysterious about it and had promised an “amazing feast”. Draco had immediately started pouting and whining for hints in a rather Dudley-esque fashion, and his parents had quickly caved and hinted that dinner would feature some exotic dishes cooked by professional chefs from overseas skilled at international cuisine (hired specially for the evening), and some particularly spectacular desserts including a “castlette” or “pie castle” which was apparently an old favourite of Draco’s.

“Oh. You’re glad it’s over, are you?” Daphne said frostily, echoing his words.

Harry looked at her nervously. “Because… I’m bad at dancing? It’s not you, it’s the dancing I’m not too fond of,” he ventured in hesitant apology. “Sorry about your feet. I didn’t mean any offence - you obviously like dancing more than I do because you’re so good at dancing.”

“That must be where the difference lies,” she said. Her chilly expression eased, but her smile as they rejoined their friends looked a little false to Harry, and he knew he’d offended her. He hadn’t meant to, he’d just relaxed once the dance was over and had spoken without thinking. Talking to girls was hard sometimes, and he suspected lately that she expected him to act more like a flattering potential boyfriend, and less like just a friend. That just wasn’t something he was interested in doing.

When he’d had a brief quiet moment in a lull between dances, Harry had double-checked with Draco his understanding of what putting your hair up meant for a girl. Draco had explained that it was symbolic of her family and society recognising her coming out as a young woman rather than as a girl. That she was now someone able to date and accept suitors, and was potentially open to negotiating marriage contracts, even though she wouldn’t be able to act on those for a few more years (at a minimum) when she would be officially of age at seventeen. According to Draco, long engagements were relatively common, entered into while people studied Apprenticeships or built up a career or business, so that they could enter married life with more financial security.

Draco led Pansy out again for the last dance before supper, while Theodore stopped by to invite Luna to dance, who looked both surprised and delighted to receive such unexpected attention. Greg danced dutifully with Millicent, while Vincent Crabbe led Tracey onto the dancefloor. Peregrine Derrick asked Daphne for her hand for the supper set, which she seemed relatively pleased by.
Stripped of his usual social group couple by couple, Harry stood awkwardly at the edge of the dancefloor wishing he had Storm with him to talk to. Narcissa had promised Harry could have Storm join him once dinner started, and for the final two dances of the evening, hinting heavily that he wouldn’t want his pet getting in the way while he danced with young ladies before dinner. He’d gotten the message loud and clear – Storm’s presence was held hostage, contingent on Harry’s acceptable performance of his social duties.

As had been the case every time he’d skipped a dance that evening, some temporarily unpartnered guests stopped by to chat with Harry. The Minister had already smarmed a greeting earlier and hinted again that Sirius’ Top Box Quidditch tickets were due to his influence, which Harry had expressed courteous gratitude for. Snape had stopped by twice to check on him, once introducing him to an old friend of his, Richard Avery. Avery had bowed to Harry, said courteous nothings about the dinner party, and asked superficial questions about how Harry’s schooling at Hogwarts was going.

Harry had been a little unsettled to see Snape whirling ladies around the dance floor with carefully precise steps – it just seemed odd to see him socialising. It was only twice – once with Narcissa, and once with the beautiful Mrs. Zabini. Her son Blaise looked even more disturbed than Harry did to see his mother dancing with their former teacher.

Madam Bones had stopped by for a brief chat with Harry about her niece Susan’s membership in “Potter Watch”, before being courteously whirled out onto the dancefloor by Mr. Mortalem, after his brief shy greeting to Harry. After that, Percy Weasley – who was without a partner for this dance – seized a chance to wander over and say hello.

“Good evening, Harry, lovely night isn’t it? I’m so glad I came. Can you believe dad didn’t want me to come? He tried to talk me out of it – he said the ball would be full of the wrong sort,” Percy snorted in disbelief. “The Minister’s here, you’re here, and a good handful of top Ministry people – that’s definitely the right sort.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that you argued over it. Have you made some good connections this evening?” Harry asked politely.

Percy nodded enthusiastically. “Oh yes! I got to talk to the Minister – wonderful chap isn’t he – and Madam Umbridge, too. I danced the cotillion with Madam Bones – you know, the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She’s a lovely witch and very light on her feet. We had a chat about the Azkaban escapees – it seems like her mind’s on business this evening and she apologised that she might be a bit of a distracted partner but I thought her a very fine dancer all the same. And Macnair from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures shook my hand and said he’d already heard of me as ‘a very promising young wizard’. He said people are speaking of me as an excellent addition to the Ministry.” Percy looked puffed up and proud as a peacock at the remembered praise.

“Marvellous,” agreed Harry. “I’m sure you are, Percy. They’re lucky to have you.”

Percy beamed happily at him. “Thank you, you’re too kind. I’m sure you would have a fine future in the Ministry yourself, if you should ever choose that over Healing. I would be more than happy to assist you in that endeavour if and when the time comes.”

“I think I’m quite happy with my current plans but thank you for the compliment. And where’s your partner, Miss Tonks? Shouldn’t you be dancing with her for the supper set?”

“Oh, Tonks is off dancing with one of her fellow Aurors. We’re not dating or courting. To be perfectly frank with you, I only invited her as a political move. I needed a partner since Penelope
and I parted ways, and somehow Tonks heard on the grapevine that I had an invitation for this evening, and she promised she’d be in my debt if I brought her along. The Ministry runs on favours and influence, Harry. You never know when having a friendly Auror owing you a favour might be useful to you later on. She’s pretty junior in the Ministry at the moment but then so am I, and you never know what the future holds, do you?”

Percy wore a slightly defensive look, seemingly wondering whether Harry would appreciate or judge him for his pragmatism. Harry didn’t really see anything wrong with what Percy had said, though, and decided to reassure him by opening up a bit in turn. “I got a favour promised to me by Millicent for dancing with Daphne.”

“Not with Miss Bulstrode herself? How very singular.”

“I think Daphne likes me, and Millicent didn’t want to risk her toes to my inexpert dancing,” admitted Harry. “So, she promised a favour to help her friend, who didn’t mind a few stray stumps.”

Percy laughed. “And do you return Miss Daphne – Greengrass isn’t it?”

Harry nodded.

“-Do you return Greengrass’ affections? Witch Weekly won’t hear about it from me if you want to talk about it,” Percy promised.

“No, I don’t like her like that. I just like being friends. What about you and Mrs. Zabini? She seemed to enjoy dancing with you,” Harry said, redirecting the conversation away from himself.

Percy shuddered. “Certainly not. She’s a siren, that woman. She lures men to their doom – she’s gone through seven husbands already, you know. All mysteriously dead, though no charges have ever stuck. Luckily, I’m too poor to be of much interest to her. At least my comparatively poverty has that advantage.”

“Ugh,” Harry said disgustedly. Time for a safer topic of conversation than the perils of womankind. “Are you going to the Quidditch World Cup?”

Percy looked grateful for the topic change. “Yes, my family got tickets ages ago. I might be fighting with dad, but my invitation still stands so I thought I’d go.”

“Sorry about that.”

“It is not your fault,” soothed Percy. “Will I see you there?”

“Yes, I’m going with Sirius Black. We have Top Box tickets, thanks to the Minister!”

“Marvellous! Well, I shall look for your tent and shall stop by to visit, if I may?”

“You’d be most welcome to call on us.”

Harry smiled as he watched Percy leave. He was a stuffy social climber but so cheerfully honest about it that one really couldn’t take offence. Harry wondered if Percy’s honesty was what had kept him out of Slytherin - he lacked that touch of subtle cunning that perhaps would’ve seen him otherwise sorted into Slytherin, the home of the ambitious. You had to be brave to be honest with people and damn the consequences. Or perhaps Percy simply hadn’t wanted to buck a family tradition and had argued with the Sorting Hat – like Harry had – to send him to Gryffindor.
Harry still hadn’t forgotten how diligent Percy had been as a Prefect and Head Boy, and how much he worried about his family, like fussing over his sister when she was sick, and shooing Ron away from trouble. He really was a kind young man and the sort of person it would be wonderful to have as an older brother – Harry really couldn’t understand why Ron didn’t appreciate him more. Harry appreciated both kindness and honesty, even if the latter was admittedly rather lacking in himself. He did like to think that he was kind, at least.

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Dinner was amazing, and not at all what Harry had expected. He’d expected French food, given the Malfoy family origins, and the promise of international cuisine. Snails in garlic butter, magical toad legs, roasted peacock, and crepes drenched in liqueur and perhaps set aflame with glittering purple fire. But perhaps that didn’t count as exotic enough to impress local palates, for it wasn’t to be a French banquet at all.

After the dancing, the ballroom was swiftly repurposed by bustling house-elves and Squib waiters into a grand dining room. The tables were covered with red tablecloths, heavily embroidered across every inch with designs incorporating phoenixes and fruit, and they were set with an odd assortment of bowls and cutlery that had guests murmuring with interest. There were lacquered wooden chopsticks next to the bowls, and oddly shaped ceramic spoons. The Malfoys announced that dinner was to be a Chinese banquet, to a patter of applause at the novelty.

Harry was seated at the main family table with Pansy and Draco on one side, who were talking about their summer homework, and a pair of adult guests he didn’t recognise on his other side, who were absorbed in their own conversation. A house-elf popped by to deliver Storm, as Narcissa had promised, who immediately launched into hissed complaints about the whole business.

“I wanted to see the dancing and I don’t understand why you listened to that woman and put me in my tank. I got out of course, but I couldn’t open the door!” Storm whined from atop Harry’s shoulders, arching his head around to glare accusingly at Harry’s face.

“We are guests here, remember? We’re being polite. You can stay for dinner and the last two dances, as she promised.”

“I would say a dinner table is not the right place for a pet snake, but it is actually not the first time I have seen it done!” laughed the wizard on Harry’s left, leaning past his slightly nervous-looking female partner to talk to Harry. The man’s attention had clearly been caught by Storm’s sudden appearance. He was a tall, blue-eyed wizard with short dark hair and a thin black moustache. His face had the heavy lines and worn appearance of an older man, and a few small scars marred one cheek. “Walden Macnair, Son of the House of Macnair. May I also introduce you to my wife, Prosperina Macnair, Daughter of the Sacred House of Carrow.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir. Harold James Potter, Heir of the Noble House of Potter, and of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black,” Harry responded politely, as a British waiter placed bowls of soup in front of them with an announcement that it was shark fin soup, which was renowned for enhancing one’s magic. Harry took his dress gloves off and tucked them in his lap under his napkin, ready to eat. Not that he felt very enthusiastic about eating shark, but food was food and never to be scorned. He certainly wasn’t about to make a scene over it.

Macnair gave a low whistle of admiration, looking visibly impressed. “Well now, isn’t that interesting news.”

“Pardon me, what did you just say?!” Draco said, clearly flabbergasted as he dropped his spoon with a clatter. Pansy was seated between Harry and Draco and had drawn his attention to the juicy
gossip with a quick whisper to her friend. “Are you really the Heir of the House of Black, now Harry? Since when?”

“Uh, since a few weeks ago? Didn’t I tell you yet?” He could have sworn he’d mentioned it at some point.

“No,” Draco said frostily. He turned back to his small porcelain bowl of soup with a very fixed expression, avoiding Harry’s apologetic gaze.

“Sorry,” Harry said guiltily. “Sirius made me his Heir, and I did mention you as another possibility to him but… well he uh… kind of insisted it should be me.” The full truth of Sirius’ feelings on the matter wasn’t appropriate to share, Harry thought. Especially not in public.

“You’re not wearing your rings, Mr. Potter?” observed Mrs. Macnair, with a questioning air.

“I keep them on my fob chain so I don’t lose them,” Harry explained, taking a careful spoonful of soup. The thin strands of shark fin were tasteless and somewhat rubbery. They had a very interesting texture, being soft and flexible but with a slight crispness to them. The clear yellow broth the strands swam in was pleasantly innocuous in flavour, reminding him of chicken stock. He chewed down the gelatinous mouthful dutifully and took another spoonful of the liquid part of the soup.

“For formal occasions, at the very minimum, you should be wearing them openly. To show pride in your Houses. Young Draco is wearing his Malfoy Heir ring, see?”

Harry glanced over and saw it was true. “Oh. Alright then. Terribly sorry about that, thank you for letting me know.”

Putting his soup spoon down and setting his gloves and napkin on his chair, Harry stood up briefly to unbutton his black and red robes to reveal the matching red-trimmed black waistcoat underneath. It really was a little warm for so many layers. He sat back down, carefully draping his robes (as prompted by Pansy) so they wouldn’t get too crushed in the process and rummaged in one of his two tiny waistcoat pockets for his fob weights. He carefully removed his rings from the chain, leaving his Gringotts key and the torus-shaped stone Portkey to tuck back into the little pocket.

“Does it matter what hand or finger I wear them on, cousin?” he asked Pansy. He glanced a little worriedly at Draco, but Draco was still ignoring him studiously.

“I don’t think so?” she said uncertainly. “Probably wherever they fit best. Index or middle fingers if they fit there. There’s no special rules about them apart from avoiding your left ring finger which is for wedding rings – at least in England. Not many people are lucky enough to be Heirs or Heads of multiple houses, so I don’t think there’s a tradition about it, and if there is, few people will be familiar enough with it for it to matter.”

Mrs. Macnair agreed with Pansy’s summation, so Harry slid the solid gold Potter Heir signet ring with its decorative intaglio flowery shield pattern onto the index finger of his right hand. The Black Heir ring was silver, but fancier in design with its setting of an onyx shield decorated with inset silver forming the chevron, stars, and dagger of the House crest. It lacked the hounds and family motto that decorated the Head of House ring, as well as being fashioned of silver rather than gold. Harry wondered absent-mindedly if the Head of House ring for the Potter family would include more decorations like a Hippocampus or a motto. He slid the Black family ring onto the index finger of his left hand, as though it was chunkier in design than the Potter ring, it seemed fashioned for slightly leaner hands.
While Harry was busy fussing with his clothes and rings, Draco had turned to his other side to gossip in a low murmur with his mother. Harry felt guilty about the stir he’d caused but didn’t really know what to do about it. He guessed he really should have said something earlier rather than surprising Draco and everyone else with the news in public, but it was too late for that now.

“So, tell me about your snake then,” Macnair said. “Rainbow serpent, XXXX rating if I’m not mistaken. You will of course have a permit for that saying you are fostering it?”

Harry turned to him in relief at the opportunity to chat about something other than his new status. “Not exactly, sir. Storm was a permanent gift, with the permission of the Australian wizarding government. I have a letter with stamps on it, saying I’m approved to be the permanent owner of a Wonambi.”

Macnair whistled. “Someone pulled some strings to get you that.”

“The Parkinson family, sir,” he said, with a nod in Pansy’s direction. “Storm was a generous and most appreciated Yule gift from my cousin Pansy.”

Pansy smiled happily at the recognition and said with false modesty, “It was no trouble at all.”

From a little further down the table and out of his direct line of sight, Harry overheard a wizard indiscreetly gossiping – presumably about him – to a quieter neighbour. “But if he’s the new Heir, who is the Head of House? …Oh yes, of course.” Harry decided to simply ignore their chatter. There was no polite way to stop them anyway – the news was going to spread one way or another. He just felt bad that he’d embarrassed Draco at his family’s ball.

“Remember if your snake kills someone you should talk to the Ministry about getting it shipped back to Australia,” Macnair warned. “You are not permitted to slay it. In the majority of cases if a dangerous magical creature needs to be executed that responsibility falls to me or someone else from the Ministry – you do not have leave to take matters into your own hands.”

“That won’t happen,” Harry said confidently. “I am a Parselmouth, after all. Storm and I have talked several times about appropriate behaviour. He wouldn’t kill anyone.”

Pansy coughed delicately on his left, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Well, he wouldn’t try to kill anyone unless he thought my life was in danger,” Harry clarified. “A situation in which I hope extenuating circumstances would be taken into account.”

“Or if you told him to,” Macnair grinned wickedly, winking at him. “I work for the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. So, if a situation ever arises where people are calling for your pet to be killed, you should get in contact with me. I might be able to do something to help.”

For a price, no doubt, thought Harry.

“Thank you, sir. I hope the situation won’t ever come up, but I’ll certainly keep your advice in mind.”

“You wouldn’t kill anyone, would you Storm?” Harry checked, a little nervously, eating some more of his soup.

“No, you ssaid not to. Do you need sssomeone killed? I thought you didn’t want me eating anyone. Besidess, everyone is ssstill too big for me to sswwallow. I could use my lightning?”

“No, there’s no danger. I was just wondering if you’d kill sssomeone for me if I asked.”
“Certainly. Which person?”

“No-one,” Harry hissed quickly, glancing around nervously. A few people were looking in their direction, but thankfully none of them should be able to understand what Storm was saying. “It’s just a hypothetical question. That means I don’t want anyone killed, I was just asking if you would kill someone.”

“Oh,” Storm said, completely unruffled by the topic. “Well yess, but I think it might be difficult. I shall have to practice my lightning more. Where’s my dinner? Do I get a treat?”

“You ate only two dayss ago! And just ssso we’re perfectly clear, I don’t want you to kill anyone. At all.”

“I’m a growing sssnake, I just shed my ssskin,” Storm said defensively, looking with interest at the tables as waiters and house-elves removed the soup (finished or not) and placed new dishes in front of them. “Are those black things eggs?”

“Peking duck – the dish of emperors – served with steamed pancakes, spring onions, vegetables including traditional carrots, and sweet bean sauce. It is accompanied by a side dish of century eggs, paired with thin slices of sweet pickled ginger,” murmured the pale-skinned waiter in a suit to each group as he placed down the platters, and began carving up the duck.

Harry wondered why the Malfoys hadn’t hired Chinese waiters. Maybe there just weren’t any Chinese Muggle-borns or Squibs who wanted that kind of work. Their wizarding population in Britain wasn’t that big, after all.

After the waiter had finished his explanation of the dishes, Harry finally answered Storm’s question. “Yess they are. They’re a sort of pickled egg and I don’t think you’ll like them. But I know your ssstomach is pretty robust, so you can try one if you really insist upon it.”

He offered Storm an egg which was happily pounced upon. For his part, Harry was happy to be served a couple of thin pancakes filled with duck, cucumber, and purple carrot, but turned down the black and frankly rather unappetizing-looking eggs which didn’t smell very inviting either – like garlic or sulphur. He hoped Storm wouldn’t end up with a stomach ache.

The thin sticks of purple carrots didn’t taste exactly like the more standard orange variety. They were still sweet but slightly peppery, and a little tough. Harry guessed that since they weren’t especially delicious or very Chinese (as far as he knew) that meant they were supposed to impress in some way other than flavour – perhaps the purple variety was very expensive or magical.

Another waiter was circulating amongst the tables with a pair of silver ewers. Harry let the man pour some Hippocras into his goblet – a drink which turned out to be a spiced wine which got watered down for the younger or more abstentious guests.

Out of the corner of his eye Harry noticed Pansy carefully copying how he was holding his chopsticks. Harry tried to hide his small smug smile as he discreetly held his chopsticks at a handier angle for her to view his technique. It wasn’t often that he did better than her on matters of etiquette – he’d known how to use chopsticks even without Mrs. Malfoy’s drills. The Dursleys might not be too keen on “nasty foreign muck” but even they’d ordered Chinese home delivery from time to time – Dudley loved sweet and sour pork. He guessed Chinese food was a lot more exotic and impressive for pure-bloods than it was for Muggles – Cho Chang was one of only a very few Asian students at Hogwarts, and even she sounded properly British, like her family had been in England long enough that she didn’t have a trace of a Chinese accent. He’d tried to compliment her on her lack of accent once at Slug Club, but she hadn’t taken it well for some reason. Small talk
was tough sometimes, and she was very prickly – all his attempts to befriend her thus far had been
dismal failures.

Little finger bowls of warm water with tiny white flower blossoms floating in them were brought
out for people to wash their hands in before the next course, since some people had been eating
their duck pancakes with their hands. Harry had seen this done before at other banquets – it was an
old pure-blood tradition dating back to Roman times, and very practical if you were serving a lot of
finger food at feasts.

The next dishes were a distinctly non-Chinese course of salad and cheese. Each table was delivered
an elaborate, massive round silver platter with salad in shades of green, grey, and black carefully
arranged to form an image of the Malfoy family crest. Snow peas and various leafy greens formed
the green portions of the crest, while olives, black grapes, and tiny shavings of truffle formed the
black quarters and the wyverns. The silver sections were picked out with delicate little mushrooms
that glimmered a soft silver when the light caught them right. Harry had never seen them before
but thought they were mostly likely some variety of magical mushroom from France, given how
much they loved their fancy fungi there. Or they could be from China, of course, to match the
evening’s theme.

“So, Harry, are you going to run Potter Watch again this year?” Pansy asked, sitting back as a
waiter served her some salad, a small wedge of soft cheese, and a couple of small globi, which
were deep-fried cheese dumplings spread with honey and poppy seeds.

“I guess so, I think people will want it to be on again. It was pretty popular.” Harry munched on his
dumplings first – the combination of flavours worked better than he’d expected.

“Are those tiny eggss?” asked Storm, eyeing the black things dished onto Harry’s plate. His tongue
licked at the air inquisitively as he uncoiled to stretch closer to the table. “I didn’t like the big egg.”

aren’t eggss either – they’re full of cheese.” Storm subsided back onto Harry’s shoulders with
disinterest.

“It is an excellent social opportunity as well as educational,” mused Pansy, ignoring Harry’s
distracted hissing with the ease borne of long practice. “We really could have used it most in
second year, mind you. Lockhart’s year is when we truly suffered – though perhaps the Slytherins
less than most Houses. I do hope we shall have a good teacher this year. Leaving aside whether
people want to be in your group or not, do you enjoy running it? It seems like a lot of work, and I
know you like time for private study.”

“It can be a lot of work, but it’s not too bad. I don’t know, I haven’t really thought about whether I
like it or not. People want me to run it, so I guess I will.” Harry pondered the topic for a minute
before continuing. “Yeah, I guess I like it, but mostly I prefer being a student. I don’t love public
speaking so I’m not terribly keen on being a teacher, but if it makes people happy I’ll keep doing it.
It’s not so bad, and I like helping people. I wouldn’t want anyone to get upset if I cancelled it or
handed it all over to someone else. I already got some complaints last year about how I only taught
the middle group and didn’t come to the junior group meetings often enough.”

“Some people have no gratitude for what one does manage,” sniffed Pansy. “Ignore the ingrates,
Harry. You did marvellously, and all sensible people recognise that.”

Harry smiled. She really was his favourite cousin, Dudley’s recent improvements notwithstanding.

After salad was yet another savoury course, and Harry realised why all the portions served had
been so small – he was getting pretty full and they still weren’t up to dessert yet. This one was a serving of “Chinese style” whole roast suckling pig, with leafy green bok choy and red lingzhi mushrooms arranged around the dish in a ring.

“Lingzhi are known as the ‘Divine mushrooms’ and promote longevity and strengthen the heart, for witches and wizards,” explained the waiter.

Artistically carved orange carrots and white radishes made an impressive garnish, arranged decoratively around the platter like a miniature diorama of plants and animals. Harry asked to be served a tiny piece of radish intricately carved into the shape of a cicada, just for fun. When he picked it up with his chopsticks it made a vaguely realistic buzzing noise, which made him yelp as he hadn’t expected it had been charmed. Harry had to warn Storm not to eat it, it looked and sounded so realistic. Pansy was amused and delighted by the display, and promptly demanded a carrot phoenix for her own plate, which let out a tiny squawking cry when touched.

Harry tried very hard not to look at the piglet’s face and focused on his plate as the waiter carved the meat at the table, cutting the roast into bite-sized portions that would be easy for the guests eat with chopsticks.

“This is more like it,” Macnair rumbled approvingly to his wife and Harry, gesturing for the waiter to serve him some extra pork. “Lucius always serves up the best roasts.”

Storm’s tongue flicked at the portion of meat Harry held up for his inspection, but he declined to try it, which wasn’t a big surprise as he rarely indulged in cooked meat and was currently stuffed full of preserved egg.

“It smell-tastess boring,” Storm said, very disinterested.

Harry thought it smelled delicious, but of course Storm preferred the smell of live prey (and an occasional egg) to the rich scent of pork crackling and succulent gently spiced meat.

Pansy chatted to Draco and Narcissa about how her home’s four Flutterby bushes were about to bloom, possibly within the next year. Since they only bloomed once per century they had eager apothecaries and potions masters lined up, ready to purchase the blossoms as soon as the buds opened.

The tables were tidied up and fresh bowls brought out for dessert, which was made into quite the spectacle. Musicians played classical music in the background to gently discourage conversation while the castlettes were brought out. Draco had enthusiastically told Harry all about his favourite fancy dessert pie earlier that day. Castlettes were a very old traditional dessert and were elaborate constructions of pastry shaped like castles. Hogwarts was obviously a popular choice, but other structures were sometimes emulated. Each separate pie tower had a different sweet filling, either relatively ordinary ones like rhubarb and custard, pomegranate and apple, or caramel pecan, or more magical options like Crazyberry or Dirigible plum. Crazyberry gave you the giggles, and fresh Dirigible plum pie would literally float off your plate if not eaten quickly after the filling was exposed to the air.

Each table this evening was delivered its own stunning miniature pastry version of Hogwarts, with the minor details of the castle made from spun sugar. Tiny marzipan owls adorned the rooves and flapped their charmed wings repetitively.

The guests clapped in polite admiration as the final course was brought out. Yet the waiters stood by the tables, unmoving, without cutting up the castlettes. The musicians who’d been playing soft classical music in the background switched to loudly playing a vaguely Chinese-influenced tune,
led by the harpist.

With great ceremony, three Chinese people walked slowly into the dining room and headed straight towards the main table where the Malfoys and Harry were seated. The man in the lead wore a traditional long silk Chinese robe, and a small round hat with a knob and tassel on the top, underneath which could be glimpsed his long black hair tied up in a bun. A large embroidered square panel stitched on the front of his robe displayed a tree with a red-feathered bird perched in it. With both hands he carried with great care a shining golden platter upon which rested five rather ordinary looking white peaches with a pink blush to their pale velvety skin, atop a bed of fresh green peach leaves.

A Chinese man and a woman followed him, dressed in what Harry instantly identified from Dudley’s television viewing as some variety of ‘kung-fu outfits’. Their tunics were much shorter rather than the long, elaborate robe of the man they accompanied, and were embroidered with square panels featuring sinuous red dragons rather than a tree. Loose trousers and comfortable slippers completed their outfits. Harry wasn’t sure if the staff each warrior carried was for magic or for fighting, but either way he thought they were definitely guards, judging by the way they were keeping a wary eye on everyone around them, looking around alertly for trouble.

Neither the Malfoys nor the waiters announced the special dessert – they clearly preferred to let the gossip spread on its own and basked in the speculation and admiration of their guests. There was a growing tide of gasps and wild applause as those who didn’t know the significance of the display were informed of the details by their more knowledgeable neighbours.

“All the way from China!”

“Immortality peaches!”

“Incredibly expensive, I can’t believe it…”

“Guarded of course, look at those two!”

“The Portkey costs would be a drop in the ocean compared to getting peaches from the Imperial gardens.”

“Amazing! I hope there’s enough to go around. Five magic peaches…”

“We shall get some,” Macnair murmured with satisfaction to his wife. “We are at the top table and I have been friends with Lucius for years.”

Macnair wasn’t the only one at their table looking especially self-satisfied at their high-status seating position which had suddenly become incredibly important, judging by the envious looks of those less favoured.

“They don’t really make you immortal though, do they?” asked Harry.

“Hard to say. Even the Emperors and Empresses die eventually,” said Macnair. “But they are rumoured to live a lot longer than other witches and wizards do. The peaches of immortality are said to make an old man feel spry again for a time, smooth the lines from one’s face, and grant a longer span of years. What a single slice will do for us is unlikely to be noticeable – probably not much more effectual than those mushrooms – but it remains a grand offering all the same. Thieves earn themselves a slow and painful death if they try to steal from the Imperial magical peach garden, and it costs a small fortune to even ask to purchase one of the imperial family’s peaches. This is quite the social coup for Lucius and Narcissa.”
“No doubt she will be crowing about it for years,” his wife murmured softly. “Rightfully so, of course. It is very impressive. I wonder what they taste like?”

“Peach,” Macnair said, with a low cackle.

The Chinese attendant carrying the peach platter cut the peaches himself into quarters with a sharp golden knife, and then the regular waiters were permitted to approach one by one to ferry tiny golden bowls – each containing a single peach slice – to everyone at the top table. Guests at the other tables had to make do with boring old magical pie slices, which had lost a lot of their charm after glimpsing what the favoured few got to eat in addition to pie.

Harry thought Macnair was right – it tasted simply like peach. It was succulent and sweet, with ripe juicy white flesh and a wonderful aroma. However, the fruit didn’t spark on his tongue or anything like that. It just tasted… delicious.

“You know what it reminds me of?” Harry said to Pansy, licking the last stray bits of peach juice off his tiny fork in a blatant breach of usual decorum. Others were doing it too, so he figured he should copy. “The water tasting you led last year. Remember? How it all tasted like water, but Storm’s rainwater and conjured water tasted just that little bit better. The peach is like that – just that extra bit of… something. It satisfies you that bit more than an ordinary peach does. Like this is how peaches are supposed to taste.” He didn’t want to directly mention their Imbolc celebration, but she clearly remembered it too.

“It was nice, wasn’t it? I think you’re right. And didn’t you say you preferred the milk at Longbottom manor, too?”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, though I thought that might be just because it was fresher, and creamier. It’s hard to say – I’d have to try one after the other. I don’t think their cows are magical or anything. They do avoid iron through all stages of the milking process, of course. So that might help.”

“Naturally.”

After they’d observed all of the guests eating up their servings of peach, the Chinese wizards and witch bowed to the Malfoys, and left the room in a ceremonious procession. They guarded the peach pits and stem fragments resting on the bed of leaves with just as much zealous attention as they had given the whole peaches, if not more.

Harry tried a slice of the tart orange Dirigible plum pie as his last course of the evening, which was oddly difficult to swallow but felt fine after he’d eaten it. Once everyone had finished dining, waiters and house-elves cleared the room again for the final two dances. The first dance, however, had fewer dancers than those before dinner. Perhaps it was because there were so many clusters of people gossiping. Harry saw a large number of people heading in his direction with inquisitive glints in their eyes. He glanced around quickly for an escape and saw one possibility nearby.

Quickly pacing over to Luna, he asked, “Would you like to dance with me, Luna?”

“Oh yes, that does sound nice,” she agreed placidly, smiling at him but not taking his hand. “I think I would, at least if you were careful with your feet. However, I am sure you wouldn’t mean to make mistakes – we are friends after all. Everyone does make mistakes sometimes, so I would try not to get cross. I think I would like it, on the whole.”

“I meant, do you want to dance with me right now?” he clarified, holding out his hand and wiggling his outstretched fingers encouragingly at her. One of the advancing horde pointed crassly
at Harry’s beringed hands, nudging the person next to her.

“Oh!” Luna said with surprise. “I thought it was another hypothetical question. Alright then.”

He led her away with relief to do a country dance, leaving the gossips to seek their information from more obliging sources. At least this dance wasn’t as complicated as the ones earlier in the evening.

Sirius collected Harry the following morning, and though no-one resorted to curses it was an even more uncomfortable experience than being dropped off had been.

Draco still seemed cross with Harry, though he promised stiffly that he didn’t blame _Harry_ when Harry anxiously checked in with him about the matter of his future inheritance from the Black family.

When Sirius arrived Narcissa seemed chilly with him, rather than being willing to smooth over any sneers between him and her husband as she had been last time. Their respective token polite greetings quickly moved to a pointed discussion of Harry’s new status as the Black family Heir, and Lucius’ political affiliations.

“Draco really does have precedence,” Narcissa said frostily. “Both as the son of a Black rather than a grandson, and as Pollux Black’s descendant, who was Dorea Black’s _older_ brother. _She_ was the youngest of her generation.”

“You might have married sine manu, but your first child is a _Malfoy_ by contract, not a Black. And even if he wasn’t? I would rather be tormented in Tartarus than see the Black fortune go to Death Eaters,” sneered Sirius.

“I was found _innocent_ of all charges,” Lucius insisted. “Charges which are in any case not in any way relevant to my son’s eligibility to inherit.”

Draco shifted about where he stood, which to Harry’s eye showed a high degree of discomfort with the conversation given how rigorous he usually was at hiding his feelings.

“Oh, I’m _so_ sorry, of course you weren’t a _real_ Death Eater,” agreed Sirius, with a smile that showed too many still-yellowed teeth. “Everyone agrees that it is so sad that you were so weak-willed as to be easy prey for the Imperius Curse.”

Lucius’ hand twitched as he grasped his snake-handled cane more firmly. “Regretfully so. I am just as sorry for _you_ to have been brought so low by a mere _Cheering Charm_,” he said, oozing fake sympathy.

“Can we go, please?” Harry pleaded, turning wide eyes on Sirius. “I’m anxious to get going.”

“Of course you are,” agreed Sirius, eyes still on Lucius as he added, “and _Dobby_ is anxious to see you back at home.”

Harry hunched worriedly, eyes flicking to the Malfoys, but they seemed unsurprised and unperturbed by this final taunt.

“Safe travels, Harry,” Draco said politely, if stiffly. “We shall see you at the Cup.”

Harry waved a relieved farewell as Sirius grabbed his shoulder and they Apparated away.
Venatio - Animal show or hunt (as typically seen in a gladiatorial arena).
The order of courses - These are based off Regency etiquette: soup, main/s, salad and cheese, main, dessert/s. The dishes are a mixture of prestigious Chinese dishes, and fancy medieval and Roman dishes designed to impress.
Carrots – The original and predominant colour of carrots eaten in Europe prior to the sixteenth century was purple (white and yellow were also variant options). Orange is a more modern domesticated variety which became popular later.
http://www.carrotmuseum.co.uk/
Embroidered Mandarin squares - These are Ming and Qing dynasty fashion, and they denote rank.
kuonji – Thank you for spot-checking the details of my Chinese banquet, your help was most appreciated.
archer27 – A mention of Flutterby bushes for you. :)

August 1993

A couple of days later, after settling back into life at Grimmauld Place, Harry wouldn’t say he was bored as such. He had plenty of books to read for both school and pleasure, and no chores worth speaking of to soak up his time. He’d gotten a head start on some of his home school study and assignments too (for his English, Biology and Human Biology subjects), wary of the demands on his time that would kick in when he started his fourth year at Hogwarts. Despite having things to do and oodles of free time, Harry was feeling a little restless and cooped up, and wanted something new to do. Grimmauld Place – despite being much cleaner than it used to be – was rather gloomy and worn, and Harry wanted to get outside into the fresh air.

As preparation to sweeten his host’s temper given the favour he was planning to ask, Harry carefully cooked up an impressively large breakfast as soon as he heard Sirius stumbling about and finally getting ready to face the day. Sirius was always late to bed and late to rise, Harry had found. Lupin seemed to copy him just to keep him company, staying up late in the evenings as well. Harry and the house-elves had the mornings to themselves, and Harry often used this time to sequester himself in the library for quiet study or reading time and a chat with Phineas, with a cup of tea and a slice of toast fetched by an eager house-elf for him to enjoy at the newly-polished desk.

Sirius often liked to pretend he had a headache or was just “sleepy” in the mornings. The latter might be somewhat true since he was a night owl, however. Harry had seen empty bottles of Ogden’s Old Firewhisky in the dustbin outside, and suspected Sirius was often drinking late at night after Harry had gone to bed. Sirius’ rare complaints about “bad dreams” he didn’t doubt. He’d heard the man sob and cry out fearfully in the middle of the night once, but after Harry had cautiously knocked to make sure everything was alright and had been reassured through the closed door that it was just a bad dream, Harry hadn’t ever heard it happen again. He suspected Silencing Charms of some kind were the reason behind that, rather than more restful nights. Sirius almost always had the dark shadows under his eyes of someone who wasn’t sleeping well.

Harry served Sirius and Lupin some nice full plates of a proper full English breakfast of bacon, fluffy scrambled eggs, sausages, thin slices of black pudding, fried tomatoes and mushrooms with a touch of herbs, and buttered toast. He’d wanted to add baked beans as well but couldn’t find any tins of them in the kitchen, and he didn’t know how to make them from scratch from the bag of dried white beans that Kreacher had grudgingly directed him to when queried.

Harry waited until he was sure they had enough food and a nice cup of tea before serving himself a plate and joining them at the large but homey kitchen table. They were still avoiding using the formal dining table, despite Kreacher’s dissatisfied muttering about slipping standards and all his hard work going to waste.
“Wonderful fry-up Harry, thanks very much,” praised Sirius.

“Marvellous, you’re a great cook,” agreed Lupin, cutting into the sausages eagerly. “Not that I didn’t like yesterday’s porridge, but a full English is a nice treat occasionally, isn’t it?” He chewed contentedly with a soft hum of appreciation.

Harry waited patiently for what he judged to be the perfect moment to ask a favour – or it would have been if he’d been dealing with Uncle Vernon. His uncle was always the most amenable to granting requests when he looked replete and contented, but not yet finished eating and ready to move from the table.

“I was wondering if it’s not too much trouble, if I could have some friends over to visit?”

Sirius froze with his forkful of eggs halfway to his mouth, which made Harry instantly hunch up.

“What friends did you have in mind?” Sirius asked slowly.

“Not Draco,” Harry hastened to reassure him. “I was thinking of Neville and Hermione.”

“We’re under Fidelius here, remember,” Sirius said slowly, looking at Lupin who seemed to be trying to communicate some unspoken message, judging by his meaningfully widened eyes. “For safety. Enough people already know about my home here… too many, in fact. I don’t want to invite… that is, I don’t really know them that well… It’s a risk.”

“Neither of them is associated with Death Eaters in any way,” reassured Lupin. “Longbottom of course wouldn’t be, and Granger is a Muggle-born.”

“Plucky thing, I like her, even though she tried to curse me,” smiled Sirius. “She reminded me a little of James, actually – vowing vengeance for crossing her. Look Harry, I like both your friends, I really do…” he trailed off.

“Is it their families?” Lupin asked his friend carefully. “What if we only told the children?”

“It’s not just about me, it’s you too, Remus. What if they saw you?” Sirius said, the remnants of breakfast neglected and growing colder on his plate.

“There’s a full moon coming up on the weekend. I’ll be away then in any case.”

“What if they wandered about and saw your room? Having half the Order know you’re here is risky enough.”

“Neville and Hermione know Lupin’s innocent already, remember. Besides, they don’t need to stay overnight,” Harry suggested, his voice carefully pitched to be placating, but not wheedling. “Just a day visit. I want some company to do some gardening. If that’s alright with you. We won’t go exploring upstairs, I promise.”

Sirius looked a little startled. “The garden’s in horrible shape. It’d be a bit dangerous to even go outside at all, actually.”

“Sorry I haven’t done anything about that, there is Wolf’s Bane everywhere,” apologised Lupin. “I haven’t been able to so much as set foot outside – it’s blooming and there’s pollen in the air.”

“I heard it’s overgrown, but that’s why I want Neville to visit most of all,” explained Harry. “He’s awesome at Herbology – top of our year. He has his own greenhouse at Longbottom Manor. And I won’t see him at the Quidditch World Cup – he’s not going. I’d like to catch up with him again
before school goes back, and he didn’t go to the Malfoy dinner party. Neither did Hermione – she wasn’t invited.”

“I thought it was a ball? Well, it sounds like he has good taste. Longbottom can visit on the weekend then,” compromised Sirius, “but not his grandmother – just him. Granger you’ll see at the Cup, right?”

“Yes, she wrote to say she’s going with Millicent Bulstrode.”

“She’s friends with a Bulstrode?” Sirius asked, startled. “Why would she prefer the company of the Bulstrode family to ours?”

“She’s casual friends with the Slytherin girls – Millicent included – but she usually gets on best with me, Neville, and Greg. I guess she’s pretty good friends with Draco and Luna, too, even though Draco won’t use her first name. Anyway, apparently, she ran into this whole etiquette problem. Draco and Greg insisted that a young lady shouldn’t go unchaperoned on an outing without her family with just men for company – with us, that is. Luna Lovegood invited her too, but well… Luna lost her mother when she was nine. So, there’s no adult witch to chaperone her. While Draco likes Luna, he doesn’t think much of her father’s ability to supervise or chaperone, it seems.”

“And of course the Sacred Malfoy family couldn’t invite a Muggle-born to accompany them, so they’re out. Who’s Greg again?”

“Gregory Goyle.”

“Ah,” said Sirius, exchanging a significant look with Lupin.

Harry’s shoulders hunched up again defensively. “They’re trying. I mean, they’re from pure-blood Traditional families and they’re befriending Hermione, who’s a Muggle-born. Don’t you see that they’re all doing what they can? They’re trying to be open-minded, while Hermione for her part is trying to be respectful of old customs.

“Millicent volunteered to host her in the end – Millicent’s whole family is going. Her parents are strict, but relatively tolerant of Muggle-borns, and Millicent didn’t want Hermione to be stuck with reaching out to the Weasleys for their patronage – they were the last family who offered to help.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the Weasleys, and Fred and George in particular are great kids. They’re all a good lot except maybe for…” Sirius stopped abruptly and jerked slightly in his chair. Harry strongly suspected the man been kicked under the table by Lupin, despite Lupin’s convincingly innocent air as he continued eating his breakfast without pause.

“Since we don’t suit as chaperones for Granger, we’d be happy to have Longbottom here,” Sirius said, dropping the other topic like a hot potato. “You can borrow my owl and send an invitation to him for Saturday or Sunday. I’ll pop by the house with a note for him, so he can get through the Fidelius, if you swear he’s trustworthy.”

“He is,” promised Harry gravely. “I can’t think of anyone less likely to betray you or anyone to the… You-Know-Who, or any of his people.”

Sirius sighed and wordlessly dug back into his plate of food, eating with mechanical determination.

“He doesn’t have to visit if it’s too much trouble…” Harry said hesitantly, smoothing down his hair in a nervous gesture. It was obvious this was upsetting Sirius – he hadn’t meant it to. “It’s alright if you’ve changed your mind.”
“It’s fine,” Sirius said determinedly. “No trouble at all.”

On Thursday Sirius let Harry know that Neville’s visit had been confirmed, and discussed another upcoming event.

“So your friend Longbottom is visiting this Saturday. I thought I would also let you know that the week after that – on the twenty-seventh of August – is our next Order of the Phoenix meeting,” he said. “Dumbledore is hoping you’ll attend, remember. I’m hosting it here, so you can join in to talk about the diary and Lockhart going missing, then nip off back to your room for the rest of it.”

Harry nodded. “I was thinking you might like to see the last letter Professor Lockhart sent? It talks about his travels in Africa.”

“Sounds great,” Sirius approved. “You know, if you could get it now, that would be even better. People have been looking for him already. He’s not the only disappearance, of course. Not that the Prophet is talking about any of them. Hopefully the chap’s just off adventuring or something.”

Harry frowned worriedly and went upstairs to rummage through his trunk. He retrieved the last letter he’d received from Lockhart months ago and read it over as he meandered downstairs, looking for clues and trying to judge if it had really been written by Lockhart or by someone impersonating his handwriting. The style was certainly his, with grandiose statements and lots of underlining. Though some words were underlined which didn’t seem to really merit the dramatic emphasis placed on them…

Harry froze on the stairs. I’m an idiot, he thought with shock, staring at the letter. He’d missed the pattern the first time around. He couldn’t blame his friends for missing it – it was solely his own fault. He’d only read the letter aloud to them, so they’d never even seen the unusual pattern in the underlining.

He quietly whispered to himself as he read out just the underlined words, “Again help me please Harry, I in big trouble. England. Dark. Not on an adventure.”

He dashed downstairs and showed it to Sirius and Lupin, who crowded together to read it carefully. After reading it, Sirius looked at Harry in amazement, “How did you miss that code? It’s so simple!”

“I’m sorry, but I’d never seen anything written in code before,” he said defensively. “Lockhart always underlines things. It’s not like I read mystery books for fun. Am I… am I too late?”

Lupin looked at him sympathetically. “You didn’t know to watch for anything – no-one did. We shall look into it. At least you spotted it at last, and now we know for certain that he’s not just… busy. We will find him.”

“I can’t believe I missed it,” fretted Harry. He didn’t like the man, exactly. He was a blackmailing schemer. But he didn’t deserve to be kidnapped by Lord Voldemort, or whatever other “Dark” person had him captured. “I thought maybe he’d just gone into hiding. Do you think the Dark Lord has him?”

“Voldemort? Maybe. Probably him or Pettigrew, or some other Death Eater,” said Sirius with a sigh. “I’m going to share this letter with Dumbledore right away if that’s alright with you, Harry.”

“Sure.”
Harry paranoidly looked over his older letters from Lockhart, but they seemed perfectly ordinary. He also read over his letters from the Dark Lord again, thinking about his demands for Harry to make a proper commitment to neutrality or to one side of the war. How could the Dark Lord be so friendly to him? It was very confusing. Harry only had a week and a bit left to decide what to do. If he was going to come clean about all his omissions and deceptions, the upcoming meeting of vigilantes – this ‘Order of the Phoenix’ – would be the perfect time to do it. He’d really rather stay out of the war altogether, but it didn’t feel like that was going to be a viable option. Lord Voldemort was offering the friendly neutrality of a formal truce, but what would his friends and the Light side say if they knew he was tempted to pick that instead of fighting against his parents’ killer?

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Pre-warned about the overgrown and perilous state of the garden at Grimmauld Place, Neville showed up on Saturday morning via the Floo armed for trouble. He wore his ‘gardening leathers’ which consisted of a battered and patched green dragonhide tunic and thick linen trousers, sturdy old leather boots, and brand new dragonhide gloves. Hanging from his thick leather belt was a silver sickle, protective goggles, and some wickedly sharp-looking secateurs. Neville also carried a large sack with him that clanked with metallic sounds as he walked forward to shake Sirius’ hand, tugging one glove off to do so.

“Welcome, Mr. Longbottom,” Sirius said politely.

“Thank you for letting me visit, sir.”

“Hi Neville, glad you could make it. What’s in there?” Harry asked curiously, pointing at the sack.

“Hi Harry! Thanks for inviting me. You said you were uncertain as to what equipment you had, so I have brought along a pruning saw, hedging shears, ear muffs, a shovel, and a couple of trowels – both brass and silver-plate,” Neville said. “I also grabbed a small bag of fertilizer, and some tins of fungicide and herbicide. There are also a couple of other bits and bobs that might come in handy. It sounded like a big job.”

He looked Harry up and down, assessing his outfit. Harry had on some jeans, a t-shirt, dragonhide gloves and last year’s dragonhide boots. They were a bit small now and pinched a little, but they still fit well enough to wear for a short while, and Harry didn’t want to risk his new boots getting ruined while gardening before he even made it to school.

“Do you have a dragonhide vest or tunic?” Neville asked. “Since there’s a Snargaluff tree you might need the added protection. Professor Sprout says they are mandatory if you take Herbology at NEWT level.”

“Not really, unless you count my nice scarlet frock coat?”

Neville shook his head. “It will get ruined.”

“I’ll see what I can find for you,” volunteered Sirius. “Actually, better yet… Kreacher!”

Kreacher popped into the hallway and bowed to Sirius. “Master called?” He looked over suspiciously at Neville and didn’t seem to know what to make of him.

Neville seemed to approve of Kreacher, however, nodding in approval at his outfit. “New toga with the family crest. Excellent. Hermione’s going to be pleased, Harry. I have heard it is becoming a bit of a trend.”
Kreacher glanced at Neville warily, but didn’t respond to him.

“Harry needs some gardening leathers – a dragonhide vest or tunic,” Sirius said. “See what you can find for him – perhaps something old of mine or Regulus’. I think he was planning on taking Herbology to NEWT level.”

“Does Master Harry want Kreacher to do this?” Kreacher checked.

“I want you to do this!” Sirius huffed. Kreacher glanced over at Harry, who gave a tiny nod as discreetly as possible.

“Kreacher will find something appropriate for young Master,” Kreacher promised, popping away.

“What happened to Dobby?” Neville asked.

“Oh, he’s around,” Harry said. “Still visiting with me. I think he’s busy making us a pie for lunch. Either that or knitting. He’s finished my new jumper and is working on some socks now.”

“What do you have out in the garden, sir?” Neville asked Sirius.

“Apart from the Snargaluff tree? Well, I know there’s some Wolf’s Bane, which has been a real drag for Remus. Uh… I think there used to be some Fanged Geraniums, too... definitely roses… I’m not sure what else. Probably a bunch of plants that are useful for poisons – Mother liked those.”

Neville nodded, looking excited rather than scared to hear that the garden was full of poisonous plants and at least two magical plants that would probably try to eat them.

“How are your parents settling in at home, Neville?” Harry asked, while they waited to see what Kreacher found.

“Great!” Neville said enthusiastically. “I mean, they aren’t cured or anything, but they seem much happier. Nebbit has been looking after dad, and he wanders down to the tablinum a lot – dad likes it there and has a favourite seat that Gran said always used to be his favourite, and he drinks tea all by himself without any help! And my mum is smiling a lot and hums to herself sometimes – can you believe it?!”

“That’s great!”

Sirius muttered something about checking on Kreacher and wandered off up the stairs.

“She loves the peristylium the best,” Neville continued. “I think she likes the sunlight – sometimes she closes her eyes and turns her head up to the sky like she’s enjoying the sun and the breeze. Sooky’s been taking turns looking after her with Jipley, and she loves to stand on the bridge over the pond in the peristylium and watch the fairies and the butterflies flitting about the flowers. She… she stood on the bridge and watched me gardening there last week…” Neville said, choking up with emotion. “She watched me, Harry. She watched me working in the garden and she smiled.”

Harry nodded, tears prickling at his eyes. He’d never know what it was like to have his parents smile approvingly at him. His Boggart-Dementor induced memory of his mother’s face was… not so pleasant. “I’m… I’m so happy for you,” he said thickly, and gave his friend an awkward pat on the back.

Neville scrubbed roughly at his watery eyes with his sleeve. “I’m being a troll-brain. Sorry.”
“It’s alright. They’re happy tears,” Harry said understandingly, fishing in his left pocket for a clean hanky.

Neville wiped at his face, then peered at the colourful snake embroidered in the handkerchief’s corner. “Is this supposed to be Storm?”

Harry grinned. “Yeah, it was a present from Peregrine’s family. Cute, huh? Unsurprisingly, Storm likes that one best and says I should always carry it.”

“Is he going to join us in the garden?”

“After lunch, maybe. He wants us to get rid of all the dangerous things first, while he’s napping. I’ve been sternly instructed to save him any fairy eggs.”

Kreacher popped back before Sirius returned, with a stiff old green dragonhide tunic for Harry. It had clearly seen better days but should be serviceable enough. “For young Master. It used to belong to Master Regulus. Mistress says Master Harry may keep and wear any of Master Regulus’ old things, and that it is most appropriate.”

“Thank you, Kreacher,” Harry said, then caught Kreacher looking oddly at Neville again. “Oh, I should introduce you, shouldn’t I? Kreacher, this is my best friend, Neville Longbottom, Heir of the Sacred and Noble House of Longbottom. Neville, this is Kreacher, house-elf to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black.”

“I don’t say ‘Sacred’,” mumbled Neville, which prompted Harry to murmur a hasty apology.

Kreacher seemed to relax after Harry’s introduction and nodded approvingly. “Kreacher will go and help Dobby makes lunch for Master and Master’s friend. Young Master can call if we is needed in the garden. The haunch of meat is in the bag at the door, and the key is being in the lock.”

“Thank you again. Good work, Kreacher,” Harry said, pulling the tunic on and doing up the lacing over the chest. It was a bit large, hanging down to his knees, however, it was designed with slits up the side which would allow him a good range of movement.

“Ready?” he said, turning to Neville.

Neville pulled his goggles on, then popped some kind of soft mouth guard over his top row of teeth that looked a bit like a mouldable strip of clear jelly. “Ready.”

Harry turned the key and pushed the door open with a loud creak, and the two stepped outside warily, silver-plated secateurs and golden sickle raised and ready in case of immediate botanical attack.

Luckily for them the Snargaluff tree was situated right at the back of the small, narrow yard. It looked to Harry’s eyes like an ordinary gnarled and mossy stump, just sitting there innocently in the sunlight surrounded by a tangled mess of overgrown plants and grass, but Neville recognised it instantly and was relieved it wasn’t right near the door.

“Where shall we start?” asked Neville, looking around wide-eyed. “This place is a mess.” The garden certainly was badly overgrown and running wild. Seeding grass grew waist-high in some places, there was a thorny mass of tangled rosebushes in the centre of the garden, and purple-flowering trees that had perhaps once been tidy bushes now loomed over overgrown garden beds.

“You’re the expert,” Harry shrugged, looking around. “The flowerbeds nearest the door, maybe?
Those flowers look purposefully planted – will they try and eat me if I sniff them or something?”

He gestured to a weed-choked bed to his left, where weeds were crowding out pretty cream flowers with purple veins running through the petals, and deep purple throats.

Neville shook his head. “No, but they might make you giddy, so don’t try it. That’s henbane.”

“Good for Confusing Concoctions, and poisoning people. Anything else?” Harry asked.

“Hmm. Well I think the leaves are used in a few potions, and the seeds are useful for a toothache potion. But apart from that I think its main use is in broomstick ointment,” Neville said thoughtfully. “Since Black said there’s some aconite around here-”

“There, against the left fence,” Harry gestured to the tall stalks covered in sprays of purple hooded flowers.

“I wonder if there’s some belladonna too?” Neville continued. “Broomstick companies keep their exact flying salve ingredients a closely guarded secret, but everyone knows those three are key components. You get them in broomstick polish, too. Look for a shrub with purple and green bell-shaped flowers.”

Harry pointed out another plant with spires of tubular purple flowers with speckled interiors. A few fairies were flitting about, hiding shyly inside the flowers when they saw him looking in their direction. “That one?”

“No, that’s foxglove. Don’t take your gloves off, Harry,” Neville reminded him absent-mindedly, stepping very cautiously out of the doorway onto the long grass and looking around. Harry followed carefully in his footsteps.

“Good for potions for dropsy,” Harry commented. “Which is actually to do with the heart, not a build-up of fluid – I looked it up. But the effect still works, even if the Potions theory is flawed. Extracts are used in Muggle heart medications - digitalis.”

“Fanged geranium down the back on the right,” Neville pointed with his secateurs, where a large red flowering bush snapped at them with sharp white pointed teeth-like protrusions lining the interior of the blossoms. “Mandrakes over on the left. So I think we shall be safe if we work near the door for now. It will also ensure a safe path of retreat. Let’s get started with some weeding and make two piles of clippings – one for compost with anything magical of course going in there, and one to discard if we have poisonous leaves or seeds.”

“What first?”

“You prune the rhododendron,” Neville said, digging in his sack and retrieving some hedging shears for Harry, “and I’ll weed the flowerbed since I’ve got long sleeves on.”

Harry looked at the dense flowering tree. “Purple again. I’m sensing a theme – I think the fanged geranium’s the only plant that doesn’t have purple flowers. I’d wager the rhododendron’s the right species to produce mad honey, since everything else here seems to be poisonous or otherwise dangerous.”

“Witches and wizards love purple,” Neville said with a shrug. “This is a very traditional garden, if a little inclined towards the dangerous plants but I am certainly not going to judge the Blacks for that. The more temperamental plants are always the most interesting. It must have been very beautiful here once upon a time. What’s mad honey, Harry?”

“It’s a dangerous kind of honey you get if bees visit very specific flower species. You use a
teaspoonful or two in some potions – it’s good to induce trances,” Harry said, snipping carefully away at the rhododendron. “It’s an ethereal potions ingredient, and associated with the element of air. But you can’t use too much – more than a teaspoon can be poisonous. The Turks call it ‘delibal’ – they even used it as a weapon of war against Pompey’s soldiers during a Roman invasion. They left bits of honeycomb along the soldier’s path, and they were easy to kill after they’d eaten it and gotten all sick and delirious – it’s intoxicating and potentially fatal.”

Harry called briefly for Kreacher to fetch his broomstick. He gripped it tightly with his legs as he hovered on it in mid-air to prune the top of the enormous rhododendron bush into a tidier and more compact shape, cutting it back hard. Occasionally he paused to let white-tailed bumblebees enjoying the nectar move along to other flowery branches, wary of being stung. “Are these shears enchanted? They’re cutting very smoothly.”

“Of course!” called Neville. “Just for sharpness and durability – nothing fancy. You seem to have learnt a lot about poisons. New book?”

“Yes,” Harry called back. “Poisons et Antidotes by Pierre Monvoisin. I got it in Knockturn Alley. There’s a lot of great information, but not a lot of pictures of plants, or of anything else really. It mentions a lot of poisonous things you might ingest by accident, including misbrewed potions. There’s a few good antivenom recipes, too. It’s in French – can you read French?”

“No, sorry. Just English and a little bit of Latin,” Neville apologised. He was rapidly accumulating a pile of weeds next to him as he worked with swift and practiced competence. Stray poisonous plants growing outside their garden bed were dug up with a silvery trowel and placed carefully in a second pile to be discarded.

Sirius checked up on the boys a couple of times while they worked. He helped shred some leaves into mulch for the newly weeded garden beds (and for the start of a compost pile) with some repetitive charm work and levitated the pile of dangerous clippings and large branches out to the dustbin in front of the house.

As they explored, Neville found a couple of bumblebee hives, which Harry would never have recognised as they didn’t look like typical honeybee hives – they were just a cluster of terracotta flowerpots upturned on the ground with roof shingles placed on top of them as rooves to protect the nest’s entrance holes in the pots. Tiny gaps between the shingles and the pots let the bees sneak out of their terracotta nests.

Sirius pointed out where there was an old granite birdbath hidden under some sprawling lavender-hued rosebushes, and showed them the remains of an old garden shed which had collapsed into a pile of rotting timber.

“It looks like the charms failed,” Sirius said, wand drawn and covering them as the boys cautiously investigated the wreckage. “That’s the problem with building things sometimes – if you do it properly from scratch it can cost a fortune. Not a lot of wizards and witches – or even Squibs – specialise in being builders, and you can’t employ Muggles when there’s fairies flying around or gnomes making burrows in the lawn. Charms and runes help things stay up even when they probably shouldn’t, but you need to keep renewing them.”

“Don’t the neighbours see the fairies?” asked Harry.

“They’re territorial little creatures, they don’t stray far,” Sirius said, with an unconcerned shrug.

“They hide from Muggles,” Neville added, “and they’ll always prefer to stay near areas richer in magic.”
“Can they tell apart Muggles from witches and wizards?” Harry asked. “Storm can sense magic a little, but it’s not perfect.”

“Maybe,” Neville said. “One theory I have heard is that they just hate iron. I never use iron in the garden. They are hiding more from you than they are from me right now – it might be your Muggle clothes. You have a steel button on your trousers, correct?”

“Oh! It might be. Or in the zip. I didn’t think of that.”

From underneath the detritus of the shed they uncovered a rotting old wooden wheelbarrow which Sirius pressed into temporary service with the judicious application of some repair and transfiguration spells. They also found a tiny golden sickle, and a silver-plated shovel and sickle that didn’t have even a hint of tarnish on them. Sirius explained that it probably wasn’t because of enchantments, it was because the silver was just so pure. With the addition of new wooden handles to replace the warped and splintered old ones they’d be quite serviceable. Most other supplies weren’t recoverable, however. There were decayed sacks of gardening supplies that would need to be thrown out, and a few brass tools corroded and ruined by powdery turquoise verdigris.

They broke for lunch, which was served in the stuffily formal dining room rather than the kitchen, at Kreacher’s stubborn insistence since there was a visiting pure-blood Heir. Sirius wasn’t impressed as he preferred to eat downstairs where it was more homely and cheerful, and pulled Kreacher aside into the hallway to argue with him about it. It was not the best location for such a discussion, however, for his mother’s portrait overheard their argument and started screeching at Sirius.

“How dare you suggest guests should eat in the kitchen, you uncouth troll! I am yet again ashamed to call you my son!” she howled so loudly the boys could hear her even through the closed door. “This is not someone from your pack of Mudblood friends or the blood traitor scum you usually pollute the house with! This is a young pure-blood Heir, come to visit the Heir to our Noble and Most Ancient House!”

Neville and Harry exchanged an awkward look, silently agreeing to eat their lunch and pretend they couldn’t hear Sirius yelling at his mother about the ridiculous fuss over meaningless status, and her gargled screams of anger. The delicious chicken pie and sandwiches lost a little of their savour under such conditions. Harry explained in a few muttered words how Sirius had made him his Heir, news which Neville accepted unquestioningly with a quiet nod.

It didn’t take long for Sirius to banish Kreacher elsewhere and yank the curtains back over the portrait, and soon enough he rejoined them with an apology for the brief commotion.

“Is she… unwell?” Neville asked cautiously. “I wasn’t aware portraits could… That is, I thought charms generally kept them happy. Is she in need of some kind of painting restoration?”

Sirius laughed ruefully and shook his head. “No, sadly it’s an accurate depiction of how she was late in life. She was always a bigot, and she went mad as a hatter by the end.”

“Oh,” Neville said, looking extremely uncomfortable. “I am very sorry, I did not know…”

“No reason you should have known. It’s alright.”

Harry saw Neville picking at his food anxiously and tried to change the subject a bit. “For such an old house, it seems to me that there’s not a lot of portraits around, Sirius? Or do most houses only have a couple of portraits?” Malfoy Manor had dozens of animated paintings.
“Mother got even crazier before she journeyed on. Apparently, she decided most of the portraits were spying on her and whispering about her and got rid of most of them. I took care of a couple more when I moved in – nasty bigoted old grumps. There’s only a few left now, who know how to keep their unwanted opinions to themselves. I’d get rid of hers too, if it wasn’t for that blasted Permanent Sticking Charm.”

Well, that didn’t work, Harry thought ruefully. Abandoning his attempt at subtly steering the conversation away from talking about a mother who’d been driven mad, Harry launched into a ramble about how fascinated he was by Fanged Geraniums, but that he didn’t know much about them.

Neville perked back up and chatted eagerly about how as with most plants, the full moon was the best time to harvest the Fanged Geranium’s flowers, leaves, and seeds for maximum potency in potions, while the new moon was best for harvesting roots.

After lunch Storm came out to play but was very disappointed he wasn’t going to be allowed to hunt the fairies or eat their eggs.

“There’s too many poisonous plants in the garden,” Harry explained. “The fairies have been sussupping the nectar from them and maybe eating poisonous honey, so they and their eggs might be toxic.”

Storm was unpersuaded by his logic. “I’m sure I’d be fine. They look healthy enough – they’re moving fast. I’ll just eat a couple,” Storm insisted stubbornly.

“I ssaid no,” Harry ordered sternly. “I don’t want you eating any fairies! And they’re not sssafe for you anyway.” Storm subsided into an odd quiescence.

“I obey, Harold.”

“I’m sssorry, but it’s for your own good,” Harry said guiltily.

Storm curled up on a newly-uncovered paving stone to bask quietly in the sunlight near the rosebushes, while the boys and Sirius got back to work, carefully pruning the Fanged Geranium. The Snargaluff Tree they left for last, and they started by tossing the leg of beef to it to see what it would do. Long, prickly, bramble-like vines flew out of the top of the stump and lashed through the air to drag the meat into a hole in the middle of the tentacle-like branches.

Harry’s face went white, as he imagined what would’ve happened if they’d just walked up to it all unknowing.

“Galloping gargoyles!” Sirius swore. “I don’t remember it ever being that bad. Are you sure we need to prune it, Longbottom? We could just burn it.”

“A lovely healthy tree like that?” Neville objected, eyes shining bright with excitement. “It would be a crying shame. The pods should be ripe to harvest in a couple of months.”

“Gryffindor,” Sirius said with amused House pride, which made Neville beam.

In the end they tossed the stump some more meat to quiet it down, and just worked around it. Even with Sirius’ help there was still plenty of other work that needed doing.

At the end of the day they were all exhausted, and covered in sweat, dirt, and a few scratches. Harry and Sirius also had some bite marks from the Fanged Geranium.
That was fantastic, thanks again for inviting me,” enthused Neville, as Harry dabbed some Essence of Dittany on his friend’s scratches. The potion bubbled up with a puff of green smoke, leaving unblemished skin in its wake. Harry put the empty vial back in his black Healer’s bag and got out another one for Sirius.

“No, you fix yourself up first, Harry,” Sirius said, waving him off.

“I hope I can visit again, Mr. Black?” Neville asked tentatively. “Maybe at Christmas? Winter can actually be a good time to work in the garden too – you get it all ready for spring.”

“Sure!” Sirius said brightly. “You can call me Sirius if you like, by the way. You and Harry seem like great friends, and I’m very impressed with how you fixed the garden up.”

Neville smiled shyly and mumbled his thanks.

“I might be with the Dursleys for Christmas,” Harry apologised, “my plans aren’t settled yet. So, we’ll have to see. Maybe Neville and I could both visit.”

He glanced over at Sirius warily for his reaction, but he was smiling brightly. Perhaps a little too brightly. He couldn’t be sure.

“Well, you would be welcome whenever you can come,” Sirius promised cheerfully.

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After dinner, Harry went outside and across the road to the park fence, to await the expected influx of post owls at sunset – he saw the curtains of Grimmauld Place twitching when he glanced back at the house. Sirius was covertly watching him again to make sure he wasn’t kidnapped or attacked by Death Eaters, or maybe harassed by Muggles or something while away from Grimmauld Place’s wards. He didn’t get as much mail while at Sirius’ house – not all owls had the magical power or persistence necessary to find him when he was usually at an unknown address. Tonight, there was nothing, which Harry found a bit of a relief.

Yesterday Draco’s eagle-owl Aquila had brought a very cautiously polite letter from Draco asking if he was in Sirius’ will at all and Harry had no idea how to answer that politely. He’d asked Sirius for advice, but the blunt suggestion of saying “no” didn’t really appeal as a solution.

Harry wandered back inside after a bit of a boring wait, and Sirius’ mother accosted him as he passed. The curtains over her portraits had been drawn back again – Harry wasn’t sure if she was somehow able to make them open herself, or if Kreacher was the surreptitious culprit. Whatever the cause, he was spotted coming in and imperiously summoned for a brief word but escaped to the parlour as quickly as he could.

“Your mother’s trying to convince me to change my name again,” he complained to Sirius as he sat down next to him on the sofa. Sirius was reading – or pretending to read – a book which he set aside on a tiny side table as soon as Harry entered the room. “I think Kreacher told her about how you’ve been offering to adopt me.”

“Master Harold called?” Kreacher said instantly, popping into the room.

“Tea for two, please Kreacher,” Harry said. Kreacher bowed and popped away.

Sirius shook his head with a small laugh. “You’d think I had already, Master Harold. But no, only if and when you’re ready. You can keep the Potter name for all I care. It would be entirely up to you.”
“She doesn’t like Harold, either. She says it’s not a traditional Black family name.” She didn’t seem aware of his occasional usage of “Antares” or consideration of it as an option, which pleased Harry because it suggested that Phineas hadn’t been gossiping to her.

“Tradition,” snorted Sirius. “She was always too fixated on tradition. Dead times and dead ways. She was always proud as a Hippogriff that we are a ‘Most Ancient’ House. It’s all a load of dragon dung! Houses and blood purity and all that rot has led to generations of infighting and killing each other. Pointless feuds over nothing, and people forced into unhappy marriages with the very few pure-bloods they’re not closely related to. We’d all be better off without it, and all the stupid superstitions that go along with it all. Hanging onto the past like it matters whose many-times-great grandmother or grandfather was on the Wizengamot when it started up and whose wasn’t. As if it makes you better! It doesn’t. So why should people bow and scrape to some family whose claim to being superior is so ridiculous? As if you’re entitled to a better job or more influence just because your family is more inbred than someone else’s. Muggles are almost as bad as we are, with their Queen and their nobles. I have sometimes thought the Soviets have the right of it – we’d be better off without the royalty, the nobles, and all the bourgeoisie.”

Harry nodded politely, not even wanting to touch that last topic. “Who gets to be in the Wizengamot?” Harry asked, as Kreacher and Dobby popped into the room. Kreacher poured some tea while Dobby dropped Storm onto Harry’s lap and served some currant biscuits. Storm hissed conversationally about his plans to go hunting in the attic for prey that evening – being a hungry and growing snake – while Harry tried to pay attention to Sirius’ answer.

“Heads of Ancient and Noble families are on it. Anyone living who has an Order of Merlin second class or better, which isn’t very many people. Some of the Heads of the so-called ‘Sacred’ Houses. Cantankerous Nott created that category partly out of stupid pure-blood vanity, and partly as a political move – those seats left vacant as some Noble and Ancient families’ lines have died out have been increasingly filled with so-called ‘Sacred’ family members, and a small handful of other pure-blood families without titles but with well-connected patrons.

“The Potters didn’t get to be ‘Sacred’ not because they weren’t pure-blood – they were as pure as any other old House back in the twenties. It was because they were a Light family and political opponents of old Nott and wouldn’t stoop to bribing him to be included in his book. Other families did – like the Blacks who wanted the occasional outcast Squib or marriage with a Muggle carefully ignored.”

“What about the Weasleys?” Harry asked, munching on a biscuit while he waited for his tea to cool. “They’re a Light family and pro-Muggle rights, and I doubt they’d bribe anyone.”

“Well, I’m not sure they really were pro-Muggle back in the twenties,” Sirius mused thoughtfully. “House politics can change over time. It really started with Arthur’s generation. I understand he’s worked with Muggles for maybe twenty years now, and he still barely knows the basics of their society. I know more about Muggles than he does, since I did Muggle Studies at school and hung out with Lily and James and went out a bit. Arthur’s parents didn’t let him mix with Muggles – ever – and he’s still rather hesitant about venturing outside our own society. He cares about them but from a cautious distance. He married a pure-blood witch quite young, just like his parents wanted. Their family has always been full of isolationists.”

“The Weasley kids don’t seem very traditional, except for Percy. Ron doesn’t know much about Muggles, though,” mused Harry.

“Mm hmm,” Sirius agreed vaguely, before taking a sip of his tea and changing the topic. “So, what are your plans for tomorrow, then?”
“I thought I’d spend the morning doing a bit more work in the garden fixing up the lawn edges and doing some more weeding for you. Maybe harvest a few plants to hang up to dry in the potions room? Then I was going to spend the afternoon studying in the library.”

He also planned to talk to Phineus about how formal House feuds, truces, and alliances worked in the wizarding world but didn’t mention that part. He didn’t want to have to explain to Sirius why he wanted to do that.

“You don’t have to do that. Why don’t you relax and do something fun?”

“Oh, I want to study,” said Harry. “As well as my Hogwarts subjects I’m doing five correspondence courses, remember? In addition to Chemistry, I’m also doing English, Biology, Human Biology, and Business Studies. English and Biology I studied last year, so there’s much less to do for those but I still need to work at finishing them. The Business Studies IGCSE I’m planning to take next year, but I want to do the tests for the other four at the end of the year, if I think I’m ready. I really should have worked harder last year.”

Harry wished he’d taken better advantage of the Time-Turner while he’d had it. He’d frittered away too much time chatting and learning spells he wouldn’t need to know for another year.

If I’d worked harder and hadn’t been so lazy, I could’ve finished up Biology and English last year as well, he castigated himself silently.

“I thought you took three of those Muggle OWL tests, after just one year of study? Aren’t you waiting on results for those?”

“Well yes. They were just the easiest ones, though.”

Sirius shook his head. “You did fine, little eagle. Remember, that’s on top of your actual schooling! Anyway, that wasn’t what I was talking about. I didn’t mean you shouldn’t study, I meant you don’t need to work in the garden. I’ll get around to it eventually. I want you to do something fun – enjoy your holiday.”

“I do! I read for fun in the evenings before bed,” objected Harry. “I also do some brewing occasionally, so I’ll have a stockpile of medicinal potions to help people with during the year. I don’t mind gardening, really – it’s nice to get outside. Dob- The house-elves don’t like me working in the kitchen too often or doing any laundry, and I want to do something so I’m not a burden to you during my visit.”

Sirius looked at him with the gravest expression he’d ever seen him wear, and Harry’s heart sank. What had he said wrong?

“If it’s not what you wanted, I could do something else? I’m sorry. More cleaning inside? I could do that instead, it’s just hard without being able to use my wand and not having cleaning supplies. I didn’t mean to take over your garden if you wanted it kept closed up… I’m really sorry about that,” he babbled.

“Harry, stop. Slow down a moment.”

Harry’s head hung low as he hunched in his seat. “I’m sorry.”

“No, Harry, it’s fine. You and your friend did a great job with the garden, honestly. I love it.”

Harry sighed in relief, and some tension eased from his shoulders.
“I don’t need you to garden for me, though. It’s not your job,” Sirius said, sounding unaccustomedly stern.

“I just don’t want to be a burden,” he said quietly to Sirius. “You’ve been so nice, paying for my birthday party, feeding me, giving me lots of free time, and making up a room for me. Two rooms, really! I appreciate that, and I want to show that I’m grateful.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably on the sofa, and he and Sirius both drank their tea for a moment in silence. Kreacher popped back into the room to stoke the crackling fire, slowly adding a couple more logs to the fireplace and arranging everything to his satisfaction with a battered old brass poker.

“Do you want to hear a story, Harry?” asked Sirius. “I think it might help.”

Seeing Harry’s interested look, Sirius began his tale. “I remember when I left home for good. I was sixteen, and my dear old mother – long may she rot-”

“Ungrateful Master broke Mistress’ heart,” muttered Kreacher.

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Where was I? Oh yes, I left home at sixteen when I just couldn’t take things at home any longer. I don’t want to go into it, any more than I imagine you want to talk about the Dursleys, but I just couldn’t stay. Too many curses, let’s just say, some of those with a wand. Not just words.”

“Master deserved-”

“Shut your festering gob, you repulsive little wretch!” roared Sirius angrily. He clenched his hands and his nostrils flared with rage as he breathed deep and slow, trying to calm himself. Kreacher stopped talking, but the angry scowl on his wrinkled face said he wasn’t happy about it.

“Kreacher, why don’t you go help Dobby in the kitchen or tidy the bedrooms?” suggested Harry nervously, sitting very still and watching Sirius carefully. “The fire is fine for now, thank you.”

Kreacher got while the going was good, and to Harry’s relief Sirius calmed down and returned to his story. “So, I left home at sixteen. I just packed my trunk and left. James found me at the Leaky Cauldron and dragged me to his home – Potter Manor – with your grandfather Charlus and grandmother Dorea. With me sobbing and protesting all the way that he didn’t need to, vowing that I’d make my own way in the world and owe my family nothing. Mind you, I hadn’t allowed for mother closing my personal vault. Uncle Alphard paid my tab for me at the Leaky Cauldron, or I might’ve been in big trouble there. Good man – you would have liked him. Mother was furious with him, of course. I think she was hoping I’d come crawling back, and he ruined that dream. He sent me a little pocket money every month – he helped pay for Hogwarts tuition too.”

“The Dursleys don’t know about my money in Gringotts,” Harry volunteered hesitantly. “They think my Hogwarts fees and school supplies are paid for with a scholarship for orphans.”

“Smart,” approved Sirius, to Harry’s relief. He’d wanted to share that titbit but had been worried it might seem too ‘Slytherin’ for Sirius.

“So, I went to live with James for the last year and a bit of my schooling,” continued Sirius. “I worked extra hard at my studies to show off for Charlus and Dorea. I ate with perfect table manners that I never even bothered with at home under threat of hexes. I helped manage the estate when they let me assist. I bowed so often that your dad laughed at me and said they weren’t a herd of Hippogriffs and no-one was going to bite me, and to cut it out.”
Harry smiled at that. He loved hearing nice stories about his dad.

“I’ll never forget how Charlus pulled me aside one day and said something to me that I’m going to say to you now: ‘Do not distress yourself so, son. You have no need to prove your worthiness to have a place here, any more than James must. This is your home now. And no matter how you vex us, or try our patience with pranks and japes, we shall not cast you out.’ ”

Sirius slowly pulled Harry to his side into a careful hug. “This can be your home, Harry. If you want it to be. I want you to live here. Even if you don’t do a single jot of gardening or cooking or cleaning up you are still welcome here – to live or to visit. You don’t have to earn your keep.”

Sirius let him go, and Harry sat very still, trying not to let his welling tears escape.

“Off to bed now, it’s getting late,” Sirius said gruffly. “Think it over – there’s no rush. Now, next year, three years’ time… the offer will still be on the table if you ever decide it’s time to leave the Dursleys for good.”

Harry nodded, and hustled away to his room to cry in private.

Chapter End Notes

Lockhart’s coded letter – This can be read in full back in Chapter 29 of “An Abnormal Godfather”, which is entitled “I’m Your Number One Fan” (the chapter title is a quoted line from the movie/book “Misery”, by Stephen King).
Blazevein – You’re right, the Addams family would love the Blacks’ garden.
CataclysmicAngel – I have an old note that you wanted magical bees, but they didn’t fit this chapter, I’m afraid. Grimmauld isn’t really a good environment for Glumbumbles. But I offer instead some mad honey!
“Mad honey” is a real thing, with an interesting history! Don’t try eating it though, folks – this stuff can potentially kill you. The rhododendron at Grimmauld Place is a Rhododendron ponticum, which is one of the species that bees make mad honey with. It can kill off European honeybees, so the species Harry saw in the garden is the buff-tailed bumblebee (Bombus terrestris).
Honey’s magical association with the element of air is from Cunningham’s Encyclopedia of Wicca in the Kitchen by Scott Cunningham.
Guest – You asked: “How do you explain Dorea not being blasted from the tapestry by Walburga? She blasted Alphard for leaving some money to Sirius in his will. Dorea's 'crimes' of receiving the runaway Sirius and letting his son to marry a Muggle-born certainly would be worse in Walburga's eyes.”
Good question! Firstly, a reminder that when I started writing this series, the post-canonical revelations about Fleamont and Euphemia hadn’t been made up yet by JKR, so Dorea & Charlus were the best picks for grandparents. Secondly, I like to work with canon here, so Dorea needs to stay unblasted on the tapestry. I think the best explanation for that is that Dorea lied like a champion. I think she used her Slytherin wiles and cooed sympathy to her niece Walburga about how difficult children are, and how stubborn her own husband was about not supporting the Dark Lord (though she loved him dearly still), and how she hoped she’d be able to sway Sirius to returning to his mother, but if she couldn’t at least he hadn’t run off to live with Muggles like he’d originally planned to do before she’d talked him around (he hadn’t been). I think she told Walburga everything she wanted to hear so she wouldn’t cause trouble (and so
Sirius wouldn’t be totally disinherited) and laughed about it all with Charlus later. To tweak things a little more, Alphard was blasted off the tapestry not just for giving Sirius gold, but for insulting and criticizing Walburga when she complained to him about it – he told her what a dreadful mother she was being, enraging her with his insulting and judgmental tone. Lastly, remember the timing. In my fic (at least) by the time James and Lily married, Dorea and Charlus were already dead. No point blasting off a dead couple, who couldn’t possibly do anything about their son’s decision to marry.
Thursday 25th August 1994

Sirius and Harry got up early on a very misty Thursday morning for the Quidditch World Cup. Sirius tossed back a couple of potions, which seemed to clear his gogginess somewhat – Harry was sure one was a Pepperup Potion judging by the steam coming out of his ears. It was a bit funny to see Sirius wearing jeans, a vintage t-shirt for the punk band “The Clash”, and a leather jacket. The only not-quite-right part of his outfit was the dragonhide boots (although those would pass for ordinary leather), and the braided red and gold headband he’d tied around his forehead which was holding his long hair back. Harry didn’t say anything about it. It was still a more successfully inconspicuous Muggle outfit than he expected the vast majority of pure-bloods would manage.

“Better than tea or coffee for an early morning,” Sirius proclaimed. “Want some? There’s no breakfast yet – Dobby will pop over to look after us once our tent’s set up, but Kreacher shall be remaining behind to look after the house and your pet.”

“No thank you, I’m used to getting up early,” Harry said politely, “and I can wait for breakfast. I must admit I thought Kreacher would want to come too.”

“He honestly doesn’t,” Sirius explained. “He’s a bit too old to leave the home he’s bound to for too long, Harry.”

Harry nodded and made a mental note to pass that gossip on to Hermione for her house-elf research, for confirmation or further investigation.

“Are you sure I can’t bring Storm? He won’t be a bother, I promise,” Harry wheedled.

“No pets or familiars are allowed at Quidditch matches, Harry. Just house-elves and team mascots, and even those can be a problem. It’s a long story but it basically boils down to the fact that wizards have tried some very creative ways to rig the outcome of matches and cause chaos for opposing teams over the centuries.”

Harry sighed, but conceded the point, remembering a story about a match-ruining Augurey from Quidditch Through the Ages. Well, he’d promised Storm he’d try again, and he had. “It’s probably for the best, I suppose. Percy wrote to relay Mr. Crouch’s request that Storm not attend, as snakes make him ‘nervous’ and we’ll apparently be sitting quite near to him in the Top Box. He read all about Storm in The Quibbler.”

Sirius nodded. “Well, ready to go? We’ve got a tight window.” He hoisted the heavy long leather bag that held their folded-up tent onto one shoulder, and an old canvas bag onto the other. Harry had offered to carry the tent but had staggered under the unexpected weight. Sirius had explained
that it could have unpredictable effects if you used Feather-Light Charms on objects with expanded interiors. If they hadn’t been properly enchanted with that feature during their creation, it was best not to add extra magic to the mix. As it was a few items like the tent poles already had shrinking charms of some sort on them, to reduce the overall weight.

Harry picked up his clothing-stuffed satchel and his Healer’s bag (which he’d added some books and snacks to for the trip, since it was so capacious). “Ready.”

Sirius checked the parchment tickets one last time. “Right, we’re Apparating to the woods into a blue ring, facing a picture of a unicorn, between six and six fifteen in the morning,” he read aloud. “Hold on tight, Harry. I’m a bit rusty with Side-Along-Apparition.”

Harry squashed in tight and clung to Sirius with his nose pressed against the rich scent of Sirius’ old leather jacket as the world disappeared. They arrived with a thump in a large circle of thick bright blue rope spread out on the grass in some misty woods, facing a wooden sign stuck in the ground that had a piece of parchment with an animated drawing of a unicorn on it. The unicorn’s merry prancing was much more magical than the sight of the tired and grumpy wizard who stood waiting with a gold pocket watch, a thick roll of parchment, and a quill. He was wearing a white shirt and black suit trousers, with a women’s purple cardigan with knitted flowers on it worn over the top to ward off the morning chill.

“Black and Potter party? Any Splinching?” he asked in a bored tone.

“Yes, that’s us. No Splinching,” Sirius said, patting himself down quickly and looking Harry over more carefully.

The man ticked them off on his scroll and pointed off into the woods. “Head that way. It is less than a quarter mile to the first field – please check in at the cottage. Your site manager is Mr. Roberts. Remember he’s just a Muggle – don’t mention Quidditch. You’re here to camp. The poor Obliviators have been working themselves to the bone so don’t make it worse for them.”

It was a short walk to Mr. Roberts’ cottage. He was a slightly dazed-looking fellow who took their pounds in exchange for a map of the campsite without any fuss. After they left, Sirius boasted happily to Harry about his O in Muggle Studies and how Lily had even helped him revise for his NEWT in it, as they trudged up the misty field through the dew-covered grass between long rows of tents. The tents on the outskirts looked fairly ordinary, but the closer they got to the stadium the less convincingly Muggle-like the tents looked – some began to have odd features like chimneys or weather vanes. In the distance Harry could spy some colourful constructions that were clearly extravagant and obviously magical – no wonder the Obliviators were busy. Wizards and witches did so love to show off, and too many either had no idea at all how to blend in with Muggles, or no inclination to even try.

Sounds of laughter and singing made a joyous din coming from everywhere around them as the crowd grew thicker, and the air was alive with the chatter of hundreds of voices speaking dozens of languages. Somewhere far off in the distance some people were playing harps, while closer by Harry could hear some rapid-fire drumming. Salesmen popped in and out around the crowds hawking their wares – sometimes literally as they Apparated to take themselves and their trays or carts of goods past a chattering group of witches and wizards blocking the narrow main road. Sirius – who seemed delighted rather than frustrated by the crowded conditions – waved down a couple of vendors. He bought himself and Harry each a green rosette to pin on their t-shirts, on the grounds that they had to support Ireland for the Cup. Then Sirius followed his nose towards the source of the scent of spices and curry wafting on the breeze and bought a paper bag full of piping hot ‘Aloo Tikki’ from a vendor to share as a breakfast snack while they walked. Harry decided he
loved the spicy potato fritters daubed with mysterious sauces.

They passed a pair of shabby and plausibly Muggle two-man canvas tents on their left as they headed down the main path. A small wooden sign hammered into the ground read WEEZLY, and Arthur Weasley – clad in a golfing jumper and a pair of jeans that were a bit too big for him – was out in front of the campsite with his kids. As he explained excitedly, they were cooking eggs and sausages over a campfire “just like real Muggles”. Harry and Sirius stopped by briefly to say hello, and the twins immediately crowded eagerly around Sirius to chatter conspiratorially away from their father about fake wands and Ton-Tongue Toffees, while Percy and Ron were keen to greet Harry, and Ginny shyly listened in to their conversation.

“I just Apparated in a minute ago,” boasted Percy. “I passed my Apparition Test two weeks ago.”

“Congratulations Percy,” Harry said, shaking his hand. “Excellent work. How are you doing, Ron? Got everything sorted for school?”

Ron beamed at him. “Fantastic! Yeah, mum’s doing the shopping today while the crowds are small. Her loss, I can’t believe she’d miss this – I can’t wait for the match. Ireland for the Cup! I hope Krum gives us a good show, though – he’s amazing.

“Say, I ran into Wood when I was fetching water, and guess what? He’s just been signed to the Puddlemere United reserve team! I’m hoping I can join the Chudley Cannons when I graduate, and Wood said he thinks I’ve got a great chance. I can’t wait for the Quidditch season to start. I’m going to be watching the Keepers today! Wood said you should always watch the professionals to pick up new moves.”

As Sirius and Harry ventured onwards through the sprawling city of tents that stretched in every direction they saw several familiar faces or names mixed in with the foreign visitors. Harry spotted a spangled banner stretched between several tents that read THE SALEM WITCHES’ INSTITUTE, as well as some African wizards cooking over a purple-flamed campfire.

A sign in the grass noted that PARKINSON had a tent on the right. It had a front garden full of purple and pink flowers, and was complete with a birdbath, sundial, and fountain. Its manicured lawn didn’t match the surrounding wild grass – a dead giveaway that the garden as a whole had somehow been magically transplanted.

“Sirius? Can we stop and say hello to the Parkinsons?”

“Maybe later,” Sirius hedged. “We’ll have a look around after we’re set up – these bags are getting heavy.”

They found their own reserved campsite a bit further along on the left and spread the bundled tent out on the ground, after which Sirius used a shortcut and incanted “Erecto!” to have the tent fluidly rise up on its own. Tent poles lengthened and floated neatly into place, and wooden tent pegs hammered themselves into the ground to secure the guy ropes.

Their large but surprisingly normal-looking tent was held up by a central pole at either end, plus four shorter corner poles. It had a sloping roof, and straight edged sides, all held taut by ridge poles and half a dozen guy ropes on either side which had been staked into the ground with wooden tent pegs. The tent was made of heavy squares of patchwork leather dyed forest green, rather than canvas. Harry knew better than to expect artificial fabrics from even the most Muggle-loving wizards and witches – even the Weasley’s tent was a heavy cotton or hemp canvas. The Black family crest adorned the top of the central tent pole at the entrance like a standard, and crenelated silver trim rimmed the edges of the tent as its sole other decorative touch.
“What’s with the tent?” Harry asked Sirius eventually, as he helped hold things in place while Sirius double-checked and tightened the last of the dozen ropes holding the sides taut. “It looks so normal. Relatively speaking, that is. It’s not Muggle, obviously. I mean that it’s very ordinary in comparison to some of the others. It doesn’t even have a weather vane or a chimney, let alone turrets like that tent I can see off in the distance. It *is* enchanted, isn’t it?” Harry thought it looked a lot like someone had decided to make an enormous patchwork quilt out of large squares of old green leather, and then changed their mind and turned it into a tent instead. If it hadn’t been made of leather it probably could have passed for a Muggle tent.

“It’s an old family tent. I know it’s very Slytherin and dull on the outside, but fret not,” reassured Sirius, “it has been given a good clean and the runes have been checked over. Naturally, it’s much bigger on the inside, and very comfortable.”

“Like a police phone box,” laughed Harry.

“Exactly!” agreed Sirius, though Harry suspected he’d missed the reference to Doctor Who. “But this one’s not a lift, of course. It’s basic compared to some tents I suppose. Whichever Black originally ordered it was looking to impress with their conspicuous hints about being from an *Ancient* family. They commissioned an authentic-looking Roman-style centurion’s tent, rather than a tent with all the modern bells and whistles.”

Sirius and Harry barely needed to duck to enter the tent at the centre opening, and Harry was thrilled to see that it was indeed bigger on the inside than on the outside. The walls – much further away than you’d expect – were made of swathes of green fabric which obscured all but a hint of patched leather tent behind them, and worn, patterned purple rugs covered most of the thick canvas floor. It was dim inside, and Sirius moved forward to flick his wand at the brass lanterns hanging from the ceiling, illuminating the tent’s interior with a soft glow. The room was relatively bare, with a round table and sturdy low-backed Roman-style chairs with curved legs. A few side-tables held unmoving marble busts of long-dead Black ancestors, and a Victorian style coat stand stood near the entrance, holding a couple of black umbrellas, a pointed black hat, and an old green cloak. A low-set chaise longue in the old Roman style that Ambrosius called a klinai was pushed against one wall, out of the way.

Sirius pulled back the curtained wall at the far end of the tent to reveal another room beyond – a comfortable looking living room with purple plush sofas and a writing desk.

“There are three bedrooms on the left,” he said with a gesture at the curtained wall as he wandered into the living room, followed by Harry, “basic but clean. On the right we have the kitchen, the loo, and a separate bathroom with two pools – it’s enormous, you’ll love it! The water’s self-heating and cleaning – don’t ask me how it works because I’ve got no idea. It’s a nifty bit of enchanting! Definitely the best part of the tent.”

After he’d put his bags in one of the bedrooms, Harry spent a little while exploring. The Roman-style tiled baths were enormous – one was cold, and the other pool heated, and the bottom of the pools were glazed with paintings of sea serpents. The kitchen was old and worn with an ancient wood-burning stove, but the pantry had enough fresh food for a couple of days at least, the copper pots in the wooden cupboards looked freshly scrubbed, and the air smelt faintly of lemons. Harry’s small green bedroom had distinctly snake-themed décor just like much of the Black residence had, and to his continuing disappointment not a single snake in any wall hanging hissed comprehensibly at him. Lupin had caught him last week trying to talk to the doorknobs at Grimmauld Place (without success), which had been a slightly embarrassing conversation.

After he’d finished his roaming, Harry called Dobby to settle into the third bedroom.
“Dobby will like having a room just for Dobby,” the house-elf proclaimed with a determinedly uplifted chin. “It is not being scary at all.”

“That’s the spirit!” Harry encouraged, noticing but not commenting on Dobby’s clenched hands. “New things are hard, but you get used to them eventually.”

Sirius and Harry went exploring after that, running into the Lovegoods who’d been at the camp site for a week already, and before doubling back to visit the Parkinsons as promised. The Parkinsons’ massive tent-mansion held not just Pansy and her parents, but also her grandfather Trophonius, and an uncle and his family. Sirius made excuses for the two of them to leave after only a short visit as they’d caught the family in the middle of lunch but sighed with frustration when Harry subsequently wanted to go and find the Malfoys and the Bulstrodes.

The Malfoys were easy to find – even before Harry caught a glimpse of their tent he knew where to find it. The distinctive mournful cries of “Aioww!” from several peacocks tethered in front of their tent led him straight to it. The Malfoy’s tent was an extravagant confection of striped silk like a miniature palace, and ornately carved marble planters full of purple and white flowers both poisonous and magical stood at either side of the entrance. Black-stemmed moly with white flowers competed for space and sunlight with the purple spires of flowering aconite, and late-flowering tiny purple violets visibly shrank away from Harry and Sirius as they neared the door, the delicate blossoms hiding behind their round fuzzy leaves as if shy.

“I won’t go inside to visit with them,” Harry promised nervously as they approached the Malfoy’s tent. “I’ll just invite Draco to come out for a walk with us – is that alright? I’m sure he’ll know where we can find Hermione and Millicent.”

“That seems less likely to cause arguments than a long visit,” agreed Sirius. “He can tag along with us for a little while provided he doesn’t yap about any blood purist nonsense or nag me about the Black estate.”

The Malfoys were being visited by the Goyle and Crabbe families when they stopped by, but Draco was swiftly released to go exploring with Harry. In fact, Draco’s parents seemed politely eager for their son to become better acquainted with Sirius and were (for a pleasant change) models of politeness in talking with him. Either they’d decided courtesy was a better strategy than arguing, or they didn’t want to look rude in front of their other guests.

Vincent and Greg tagged along with Draco without a word of discussion. As they left the campsite the two seamlessly moved into position in front of the group to clear a path so that Draco (and Harry and Sirius by association) weren’t impeded by any riff-raff as they walked through the crowds milling around outside the endless rows of tents.

“Client families?” Sirius asked Harry quietly, though Draco could probably overhear since he was right next to them.

“Yeah. For multiple generations. It seems to work well for them all, though.”

The Bulstrodes’ tent was one of the more common ordinary-looking variety made of drab olive canvas… at least on the outside. Given how Millicent, her parents, two older adult siblings, her aunt, and Hermione all came out of the tent like they were exiting a clown car, Harry thought it was safe to assume that it must be enchanted to be more spacious on the inside.

Harry barely had time to say hello to Hermione before Greg eagerly greeted her and monopolized
her attention to talk about the draft of their book *An Introduction to Wizarding Culture for Muggle-borns and Muggles* which was apparently experiencing some difficulties going through the editorial process at Rumihart Books.

“They said it was three times as long as it should be!” Hermione complained to Greg’s sympathetic ear. “That it’s too long to be a best-seller and they won’t publish it in its current state, and I need to learn to be succinct. But there’s exactly the amount of information necessary – I can’t cut any of it! It’s all essential!”

“You cannot cut the bowing, or the holidays,” Greg rumbled. “I do not understand what their editor is thinking. We worked hard on those sections - it is all very important.”

“I know! And the holidays might be ‘controversial’, but that’s all the more reason to discuss them, surely? She said the information about house-elves is ‘superfluous and unnecessary’. But a frank discussion of house-elf slavery and welfare is critical.”

While Hermione and Greg brainstormed possible solutions to their dilemma such as splitting their book into multiple volumes, Draco looked quietly huffy at having been totally ignored by Hermione, who hadn’t even offered him a token greeting.

Millicent politely said hello to him and everyone else. “Did you see the Minister’s tent?” she gossiped. “It has three floors and several turrets! It looks like the craftsman tried to make a medieval castle out of canvas.

“Honestly, I simply cannot comprehend why they even bother asking us to dress and act like Muggles in the first place. The stadium is so warded against them with Muggle-Repelling Charms on every inch of it that they have no hope of getting close enough to see someone like that man,” she said, gesturing to a wizard wandering by clad in a flowery nightgown. “Even if they did get that close, people’s clothes are the least of our worries, surely! They would spot the stadium itself, which is much more of a risk.”

The stadium did indeed tower up impressively in the distance – shining golden walls curved around a massive oval-shaped Quidditch field in a magnificent large structure that looked like a taller, gilded copy of Wembley stadium.

“Not that I really mind dressing up as a Muggle for a couple of days. Look! Hermione got her parents to buy me some Muggle ‘jeans’ and a hat as a thank you gift for hosting her. My mother said I could wear them since they were a gift, and the International Quidditch Association insists on us all dressing like Muggles. What do you think?” she said, turning in a circle so Harry and Draco could admire her outfit of jeans and a green blouse, topped with a green baseball cap with a shamrock embroidered on it. Hermione was wearing a similar outfit with a matching hat, but with a green t-shirt rather than a silk blouse.

“Very convincingly Muggle,” Harry assured her. “Only your boots might give you away, and even they’d pass a casual inspection.”

“You look lovely, the colour suits you,” Draco said, politely but unenthusiastically. “So, you have been here longer than we have – what is there worth to go and see apart from the Minister’s tent? Harry wants to explore, and so do I.”

“Oh, definitely the Irish section! They are off to the west, with the Bulgarian supporters on the eastern side of the stadium, naturally. I saw where Moran’s staying! The guards didn’t let us go and greet any of the team, unfortunately. She’s amazing,” Millicent said, dreamy-eyed. “I wish I was as good a player as she is.”
“Isn’t she one of their Chasers?” Draco asked, as Millicent prodded everyone to meander to the west through the maze of tents.

“Yes! I know, I should barrack for the Beaters, and I shall do that too. Still, Moran is just incredible. She is the best Quidditch player in the world. Ireland is surely going to win this year! You should have seen her in the semi-final against Peru – they utterly crushed them. The Peruvian Beaters could not so much as clip her, she is just so graceful in the air.”

“Krum is the best Quidditch player in the world,” Vincent said pugnaciously, turning to argue over his shoulder. “Everyone knows that.”

“He is just a Seeker,” scoffed Millicent. “All that takes is good eyesight and a fast broom. Being a top tier Chaser or Beater takes skill.”

Draco in particular took great offence to that assertion, and the whole group swiftly descended into a heated argument over which Quidditch positions required the most talent and training. Harry even got dragged into the bickering as an example of an untrained player who had excelled at being a Seeker and had to defend himself as having been intensively trained by Wood before his first match.

The mix of colourful tents, drab canvas ones, and a few extremely rare Muggle nylon tents slowly gave way to a sea of bright green ones, often bedecked with shamrocks. The Irish and their supporters (Harry heard a smattering of French here and there) could often be seen and heard outside their tents singing raucously cheerful Quidditch songs in Gaelic. But tents weren’t the only accommodation option available for the Irish.

“Some of the Irish witches and wizards have fairy mounds to stay in,” Hermione told Harry excitedly. “I asked how they got them here, and apparently they built them specially months ago! Some of the keystones were shipped in from Ireland by Portkey. The Irish King is staying in one, and their national Quidditch team has a large one of their own. A few other rich or notable people must have them too, I think, since there’s a dozen or more of them.”

Clustered close to the stadium, where the anti-Muggle charms would presumably be strongest, were a small number of round hillocks instead of tents. Tidy hemispheres of lush grassy earth (sometimes dotted with patriotic shamrocks) were lined up in neat rows. Some of the mounds were ringed at their bases with curbstones engraved with geometric patterns – triple spirals, zig-zags, swirls and diamonds. A couple had thorny bushes around their bases, while others just blended smoothly into the surrounding grass.

The embedded entrances to the mounds were fashioned from giant grey rectangular slabs of rock, each topped with a capstone, most of which were heavily engraved with both intricate decorations and inscriptions of Ogham runes. Harry couldn’t interpret them, but he’d read ahead a little for Ancient Runes and the columns of patterned parallel lines were quite distinctive of Ogham. The music of harps and wind instruments emanated from inside one of the larger mounds, where it seemed a rowdy dance was going on inside judging by the sounds of thumping feet, laughter, and cheering.

“Very nice,” Draco said approvingly. “They used to have them in Britain too, you know.”

“The Blacks have a barrow,” Sirius commented, startling Draco who seemed to have forgotten he was standing right behind them. “It’s only used for burials, though. Not for camping! You can’t see the entrance unless you’re a witch or wizard. Or perhaps under the right astrological conditions. If I remember correctly, I think Muggles can see it at Halloween if there’s a new moon – something like that. The entrance is otherwise invisible.”
Their group’s primarily Irish-supportive green shirts, hats, and rosettes passed muster with the surrounding crowd, but Vincent’s red rosette attracted a few scowls from passers-by.

“Finnigan’s got a tent nearby, would you like to stop by to say hello?” Hermione suggested.

“Harry outranks him,” Greg objected, eliciting a snort and an eyeroll from Sirius. “Finnigan should call on Harry, not the other way around.”

“It would just be a casual social call, nothing formal,” Hermione soothed.

“But it’s the morning,” Greg complained. “Time for salutatio. Casual social calls are only for the afternoon.”

“Well, I’m going to make an exception,” said Harry.

Greg’s protests subsided into quiescence at a warning shake of the head from Draco, but he didn’t look happy. Harry ignored him – there was such a thing as being too attentive to protocol.

“As I am no great friends with Finnigan, I shall stay here and see if I can get anyone from the Irish team to sign my rosette, rather than calling on him,” Draco pronounced. “Meet us back here in fifteen minutes or so, Harry.” Greg and Vincent split off from the group to stay with Draco without a word of consultation being needed, which left Sirius, Hermione, and Millicent with Harry.

Seamus Finnigan was sharing a bright green canvas tent with his sandy-haired mother. He’d been accompanied to the Cup by his friend Dean Thomas, who needed a patron to attend as his mother and step-father were both Muggles. They were both happy to see some familiar faces stop by to say hello. Mrs. Finnigan greeted Sirius politely enough, after an initial startled look. She cheerfully herded them all inside the tent, which resembled an old-fashioned cottage living room, and fetched him and the others some cups of tea and scones when Sirius reported that they hadn’t had much of a breakfast yet.

“Yer too thin,” she scolded, in a lilting Irish brogue. “Skin and bones, my God!”

“I’m trying!” Sirius promised. “My house-elf isn’t much of a cook. He’s getting better though.”

Finnigan flopped down onto an old beige flowery sofa next to Thomas and ignored his mother’s fussing, turning instead to chat to Harry. “Just got here, did ye? Ye must have gotten some pricey tickets! Mam and I took a Portkey from Tara two days ago. Capital of Ireland, that is,” Finnigan added, as he spotted Harry’s look of polite incomprehension.

“Is it hidden in Belfast or Dublin?” Harry asked.

“Neither. Tara is in Munster, in the south-west, but Muggles can’t find it of course since some Irish druids hid it centuries ago. Muggle historians know there once was a royal site in Munster called Temuir Lúachra – Tara of the Rushes they call it in English – but they have no idea where to even start lookin’ fer it. Even when Muggles could find it centuries ago before better spells were invented, it was always hidden so there was no way in after sunset – it’s a really ancient site that’s been enchanted for a long time.”

“Cool! So, it’s southern Ireland playing today, then? The Republic of Ireland?”

“Oh no! We’re our own united Irish magical nation – separate from Britain with our own hidden capital and our own High King – no north or south fer us! Otherwise it might be the United Kingdom or the British Isles playing Bulgaria, wouldn’t it? Fine mess that would be too, if we had to take some of England’s players onto our team! England got flattened by Transylvania 390-10.
They were out of the running pretty early on.”

Harry ducked his head apologetically. “Sorry, my mistake. No-one really teaches us wizarding geography, do they?”

Finnigan shrugged. “Bit of a shame, really, isn’t it? It’s not just Ireland – other nations don’t always match up with the Muggle stuff either, like how Tibet is its own country still. Anyway, in Ireland our wizarding government ignores all that Muggle sectarian rubbish – we keep to ourselves, mostly. Well no, I guess the government doesn’t ignore it, yer just supposed to stay out of it. If ye get caught helping either side of the Muggles fight yer in for years of magically bound community servitude, or being shipped off to Azkaban, depending on what ye did.”

“So, the ‘High King’ doesn’t take sides?” asked Hermione, sipping at her tea.

“Well…” Finnigan mused thoughtfully, “technically he doesn’t – we don’t get involved in the Muggles’ fights. Varry isolationist. Mam and I live just outside Derry and let me tell you it’s been a mess at times – Bogside, Waterside… it’s not worth dying over, right? I don’t even understand why a bunch of Muggle Christians want to fight with each other over some tiny differences about what they believe – that’s not what it’s all about, is it? They should turn the other cheek, and do unto others, ye know? The whole not wanting to be ruled by the English thing I get – no offence meant. I don’t have a problem with ye or the Ministry or anything, it’s the Muggle history and all that.”

Hermione shrugged, unconcerned. “No offence taken.”

“Anyway,” Finnigan continued, “officially High King Niall’s neutral but off the record I think his majesty favours the ROI. He’s not keen on all that Muggle empire stuff – even the English Ministry of Magic sticks their nose in a bit more than he’d like, waffling on optimistically about how wonderful a united magical Britain would be. The Ministry doesn’t get too pushy ‘cause they don’t want another war, and we follow most of the Ministry laws already anyway.”

“So, is your King like the Queen of England, a Muggle? It sounds more… wizardly. I mean, I’ve never heard of a King of Ireland, so he must be a wizard, right?”

Finnigan nodded. “Right. Hermione or Bulstrode could tell ye all about this, I talked the girls’ ears off about it yesterday until Hermione ran out of questions and let me tell ye that took a while!”

“It was very interesting,” Hermione said defensively. “You were much more well-informed and a better storyteller about Irish history than Binns has ever been.”

“Not a high bar to meet there!” laughed Thomas, nudging his friend in the side.

Finnigan grinned. “I’ll take my compliments where I find ‘em. Thanks, Hermione. Anyway Potter, I’ll give ye the short version mate, since Dean and I are off to a to-do for lunch soon.”

Harry nodded.

“So, Ireland’s been ruled by a High King or Queen for ages, and they have to have wizarding talent. It’s not an inherited position though, like that sort of thing is fer Muggles. When our monarch dies another one is chosen – any Irish wizard or witch can try for the spot, at least in theory. If ye’re well-connected or respected, you often get to shuffle to the front of the queue and try yer luck on the first day of the trials. The Lia Fáil – that’s an ancient enchanted stone – magically chooses the best candidate. When the person most worthy of rulership touches it, it lets out a loud shout of acclaim to mark them as best ruler fer our land. Then they ‘marry’ the land and are pledged to protect Ireland and all our people. The stone doesn’t work for Muggles – plenty
have tried! Muggles get no reaction from it at all – not so much as a hint of a whisper.”

“The High King’s staying in one of the mounds here, right?” Harry asked.

“Right, in one of the raths,” Finnigan confirmed. “So will I see ye at the match, Potter? Whereabouts are you sitting?”

“Oh, Sirius and I are in the Top Box.”

Seamus whistled, low and impressed. “Just the stands in the western section fer us. We’re not sitting too far from the girls here, though.”

“We’re near the goalposts,” volunteered Millicent, “for the best view when Ireland scores goals.”

Finnigan insisted on teaching them the first verse of the Irish National Quidditch team’s song before they left. “No doubt ye’ll be singing it a lot. Ireland fer the Cup!”

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The Quidditch World Cup match started after dusk. Red and green lanterns blazed into life at the deep echoing sound of a noisy gong, lighting a path to the stadium entrance for the feverishly excited crowd who laughed and chatted and sang snatches of songs as they headed for their seats. The immense golden stadium walls glimmered in the colourful lights, enclosing a stadium big enough to seat what looked like a hundred thousand strong crowd gathered from the wizarding nations of the world. A Ministry witch at the entrance checked Sirius and Harry’s tickets as they entered before the pair made their way up staircase after staircase, all carpeted with rich purple runners. It was a long climb up many levels to their prime seats in the Top Box which held around forty purple and gilt chairs in four rows of ten and was situated midway between the goal posts for the most central view of all the action.

Sirius was wearing a sedate outfit of black trousers and a black waistcoat with gold embroidery over the top of a frilly white shirt. Harry had dithered over his own outfit more than Sirius had, due to prompting from Pansy (whom he'd visited briefly) that he couldn’t wear his scarlet dragonhide coat and matching pants if he was supporting Ireland. For the first time, Harry felt his wardrobe was sadly lacking in green. He settled in the end on black trousers, his new waistcoat from Lutetia embroidered in green and red, a lace-cuffed white shirt, and a fancy green cloak the Malfoys had given him a couple of Christmases ago. Sirius had helped Harry tie his green cravat in a patriotic “Irish tie” knot with a practiced wave of his wand.

As they ascended the endless stairs, Harry was glad he didn’t have to hitch up the long swathes of cloth typical of formal robes. With nothing more troublesome than a cloak to manage, he could instead keep his hand on the railing. From behind them as they climbed, Harry heard Draco’s voice asking, “How high up are we?”

“Put it this way – if it rains, you’ll be the first to know,” Lucius answered with a small laugh.

“Great,” grumbled Sirius quietly. “How did they get tickets for the Top Box? It’s supposed to be very exclusive – you can’t just buy tickets.”

“Oh, I believe Cousin Narcissa made a very generous donation to St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, which the Ministry ah… appreciated.”

Sirius sighed. “I guess you can just buy tickets. In a roundabout fashion.”

“How did we get ours?”
“Ministry guilt for locking me up without a trial, thanks for not ranting about that to all and sundry, and a wish to hobnob with a war hero or two,” Sirius said, glance flicking meaningfully to Harry’s forehead which hid his scar behind a tidy fringe of dark hair.

When they reached the Top Box, Sirius and Harry shook a bunch of hands, and Harry bowed to a number of witches and wizards.

Ludo Bagman introduced himself as Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports, and as the match commentator for the evening. He was wearing his old long Quidditch robes in thick horizontal stripes of bright yellow and black, which stretched tightly across the large belly he probably hadn’t had when he played Quidditch for England. He nattered happily about it being fine weather for the match, and mysteriously hoped Harry would look forward to “all the fun” at Hogwarts coming up soon.

Cornelius Fudge, the Minister for Magic, was delighted to see them again, and unsuccessfully tried to coax Sirius into taking up the Black seat on the Wizengamot. Fudge was also very eager to introduce Harry to his Bulgarian counterpart who was wearing splendid formal robes of black velvet trimmed with gold. Unfortunately, Fudge seemed to be compensating for a lack of ability to speak Bulgarian by instead speaking loudly and slowly in English. “Harry Potter… oh come on now, you know who he is… the boy who survived You-Know-Who. Oh, for Merlin’s sake. Show him your scar, Harry.”

Feeling unpleasantly like a pet on display, Harry obediently pushed his fringe aside, eliciting some excited gabbling and pointing from the Bulgarian. “Knew we’d get there at last,” Fudge said with relief, and then turned to greet the Malfoys.

Harry was very intrigued to see the Irish High King enter, a confident-looking middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair and a tremendous beard that was almost entirely grey. He looked resplendent in green velvet robes tied with a fancy belt, but he wasn’t wearing a crown, and neither was his partner. The High King carried a staff which looked ceremonial or magical rather than practical as a walking aid. It reminded Harry a little of Ambrosius’ staff, though in colour and shape it was clearly different. Hanging from the king’s belt was a gold-edged drinking horn of ancient pale-tan ivory.

The High King escorted a regal lady on his arm, while a sharp-eyed witch walked on his other side, apparently a guard for the royal couple. Matching her husband’s robes, his queen wore a long dress of green velvet, pinned to which was a magnificent glittering diamond brooch shaped like an eight-pointed star, with a shamrock picked out in emeralds in the centre. In due course his majesty’s guard formally introduced High King Niall, the Ard-Rí na hÉireann, and his wife, High Queen Brigid. Sirius did the less-impressive honours in return for himself and Harry. While they were impeccably polite, the monarchs didn’t seem especially inclined to linger and chat with them and soon moved on to greet more important guests.

Harry and Sirius’ introductions were over, with one last exception. Harry spotted a house-elf cowering in the last seat at the end of the row behind them, with its hands covering its eyes. The clean striped blue and white tea towel it wore as a toga meant it couldn’t be Dobby or Kreacher, and Harry decided to introduce himself while Sirius was busy chatting with some Ministry official.

“Hello there,” he said gently, crouching down to greet it. “I’m Harold Potter, Heir of the Houses of Potter and Black. Who might you be? Are you alright?”

The creature lowered her hands to reveal large brown eyes and a bulbous nose. “My name is Winky, sir. I is alright, I is not liking heights, is all. Winky is the house-elf for the Sacred and Noble House of Crouch, and I is saving a seat. And you – you is Harry Potter!” she concluded
Harry blinked. That wasn’t the usual claim to fame he was recognised for. “You know Hermione?”

The house-elf’s large batlike ears waggled excitedly as she nodded furiously. “Oh yes! All house-elves are hearing of her, she is much talked of. Miss Hermione and her H.E.L.P. Society will help any house-elf who is needing anything. She will send cloth or tea towels for togas, and warm socks, and will arrange for someone to talk nicely to families for you if you are shy with talking and you don’t have enough work, or you wants a nice new nest. And if someone wants to leave their family,” she said, pausing to shudder at the thought, “she will help with that too. With talking to the House-Elf Relocation Office, or whatever you wants. Maybe that is good for childs ready to leave home for a new House. But Winky is proud to serve Mr. Crouch! Even if I musts be up so high. Winky is a good house-elf!”

“Well I’m glad you’re alright. You let me know if you need any help, okay?”

Winky smiled and nodded. “Sir is very kind. Just like Miss Hermione!” She curled up again then, perched on the edge of the seat, reburying her face in her hands to block out the terrifying vista of the enormous Quidditch field and stands, with the grassy ground far, far below them.

Harry went and took his seat in the third row next to Sirius, and Draco took the spot on his other side. Draco’s mother sat next to Draco, serving as an additional person to buffer Sirius and Lucius from having to interact.

With help from a Sonorus charm, Ludo Bagman announced the start of the match, his voice echoing into every corner of the stands. “Ladies and gentlemen… welcome! Welcome to the final of the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup!”

The spectators screamed excitedly, clapped, and sang their competing national team songs in a tremendous din. The Bulgarian team mascots – Veela – came out first, to a roar of approval from the scarlet-clad sections of the stands.

Harry flinched and tried to occlude his mind as the beautiful women started to dance, white-gold hair fanning out behind them as they spun in graceful circles. Calm blue skies, calm blue skies, he thought, visualising the clouds and the gentle breeze on his skin. It worked at first and his mind remained still and calm. It was even easier with his eyes closed. But as the pounding music got faster and faster a few scared and angry shouts rang out from around the stadium.

Nearby, he heard Narcissa quietly casting the Leg-Locker Curse as she muttered, “Locomotor Mortis.” It startled Harry from his concentration and he opened his eyes to see what was going on.

“You don’t understand, I have to get to them,” Draco was hissing furiously to his mother, eyes locked on the field, jumping awkwardly in place. Harry’s own gaze instinctively followed for a foolish moment, and his own attention was instantly caught too.

“No, you don’t. Control yourself, Draco,” she replied sternly.

Harry wanted to impress the Veela. No. He wanted to amaze them. Could he float himself down to them? He threw off his repulsive green cloak and stood up and drew his wand. He was startled to find himself interrupted in his plans as his right wrist was grabbed by Sirius.

“Let’s not do anything rash, now,” Sirius warned, amusement thick in his voice.

“Silencio,” Narcissa incanted in the background, and Draco’s pleas to be allowed to run out of the Top Box and explain to the Veela how pure, powerful, and rich his family was abated mid-
sentence. In a quiet hissed whisper to her son she added, “You will thank me later. You are being an embarrassment to the family right now.”

“I need to talk to them, I have to let them know that I don’t support Ireland,” Harry explained urgently. “That I’m smart and rich, with rare magical powers, and tutored in magic by Merlin himself! You have to let me go.” Harry struggled distractedly in Sirius’ grasp – eyes still locked on the Veela below – but Sirius had a firm grasp on his wrist and much better ability to focus, and wasn’t letting go of him.

Luckily for them both as wild ideas about how to escape to reach the Veela drifted through Harry’s distracted mind, the music cut off rather abruptly, evoking low angry yells from the crowd. Harry joined them in their chorus of objections at first, but as the Veela stopped dancing and left the stadium, he choked and froze.

“Merlin, it happened again,” he said with a shudder, fumbling for his discarded cloak and wrapping it around himself tightly. Sirius’ grasp loosened, and he let go of Harry’s wrist when it became clear Harry was just putting away his wand and sitting down.


“Obviously not really,” he replied more quietly, with a cautious glance to the side to see if Draco was paying attention. Probably not – he seemed to have his mother hissing recriminations in his ear and wore a hangdog expression.

“Well of course not. It was a fine boast, though. When have you encountered Veela before?”

Harry glared at him jealously, cloak tucked tightly around himself like a shield against the world. “France – a part-Veela,” he said shortly. “How did you not get affected? Are you good at Occlumency? Will you teach me? I tried, but when I got startled I lost my calm. I’m pretty good usually, I mean… I thought I was. But I don’t have anything to practice against.”

Sirius shook his head amusedly. “No, I’m no Occlumens. Resisting magical charms is just a knack that comes with time and experience. I’m just used to fighting that impulse to make an idiot of myself over a beautiful woman. It’s usually the younger adult and teenage wizards – and a few witches too, mind you – that the Veela catch with their charms.”

“How can anyone get anything done if they feel like that all the time? Are you saying that’s how people normally feel about girls?” Harry asked, aghast. “If that’s what love is like I don’t want any part of it!”

People around him chuckled about that, and Harry carefully put on a blank face that didn’t show how upset he was.

“You’ll feel differently when you’re older, young man!” said a green-clad Ministry wizard on the other side of Sirius, with a jolly wink.

Harry shuddered.

“Not all the time, only if it is that certain special witch you would do anything for,” soothed Narcissa. “When you are in the throes of new love.”

“You get used to it! Ah, love. It doth make fools of us all!” said Sirius. “Your father swore once that Lily must have Veela blood, but of course she didn’t. The red hair alone would tell you that.”

“Didn’t it feel… strange to you, being forced to feel attracted to someone? Like even your thoughts
weren’t your own?” Harry asked Sirius, hoping for some understanding.

Sirius didn’t seem to get it, though. “It was a heck of a lot better than being forced to feel terror and despair,” he replied cheerfully. “I’d take Veela over Dementors any day! It was a blast!”

Harry wondered if his Hippocampus Genius would protect him against Veela effects too. Did you need a different Patronus to protect you against “positive” emotions?

“I didn’t like it much either,” Draco whispered to Harry as the Irish team’s leprechauns flew around the field in a dazzling display of rainbows. “I’m going to practice my Occlumency more. Mother says I would have been fine if I’d Occluded before I’d seen them. We can work on it together, if you like.”

Harry nodded in determined agreement, lost in his thoughts and ignoring the rain of glittering coins falling around them. Leprechaun gold. It was fake and wouldn’t last – he knew that from his textbook, though judging by the scattered cheers and scrabbling for coins of some people crowded in the stands, not everyone was so well informed. False money, and false feelings – that’s what the mascots had offered. He vastly preferred the former illusion.

The match was a fine distraction from his shaky hands and roiling thoughts. Harry fixed his attention on the zooming players and listened to Bagman’s litany of player names (and an occasional move name) as the Quaffle changed hands with dizzying speed. Millicent was right – the Irish Chasers were superb and got three goals before Bulgaria managed one. Harry closed his eyes and Occluded as best he could while the Veela danced in celebration.

Krum proved his skill as a world-class Seeker with a plummeting Wronski Defensive Feint that fooled Ireland’s Seeker, Lynch, into a terrifying crash to the ground with a dull thud. There was a huge groan from the Irish supporters, and a horrified gasp from Harry. Mediwarts hurried onto the field and ladled potion into and onto Lynch, who staggered to his feet at last and got back on his broomstick, to loud cheers from the crowd. Harry let out a relieved huff of breath and an enthusiastic cheer of his own.

After fifteen more fast and furious minutes, Ireland had pulled ahead to lead one hundred and thirty points to ten, and the Irish team song was chanted loud and proud throughout the stadium. The Bulgarian Keeper (who hadn’t been making a fine showing so far) was called to task for cobbing the Irish Chaser Moran, giving Ireland a penalty shot. This provoked an argument between the team mascots, and subsequent bickering between the players and the referee who’d been affected by the angrily dancing Veela. In the end, the Irish got two penalty shots out of the whole mess and pulled ahead even more.

Play was getting dirtier now, with the Beaters on both sides using their clubs more indiscriminately against Bludgers and players alike. Harry missed bits of play periodically when he closed his eyes to zone out from the Veela’s dancing, and he wondered why the referee hadn’t persisted in his attempts to send them off.

Draco nudged him in the side with an elbow during one of Harry’s moments of steadfastly ignoring the Veela (calming his racing heart with carefully slow breaths).

“Harry, open your eyes, you should see this!”

Harry peeked cautiously and saw the Veela were changing shape. Their faces were elongating into sharp, cruel-beaked bird heads, and long, scaly wings were bursting from their shoulders.

“Wow, just like in the pictures,” Harry said, amazed. “Much easier to look at now, aren’t they?”
“I liked them more before,” Sirius said wistfully, watching the team mascots battle below. The Veela were throwing handfuls of fire at the angrily screeching leprechauns, as Ministry wizards flooded onto the field to separate them.

Moran scored again, then Krum took a Bludger full in the face, but his broken nose and the blood gushing down his face didn’t stop him from following Lynch in a dizzying dive for the Snitch, beating him to it as Lynch once again hit the ground with tremendous force.

“Krum has caught the Snitch, but Ireland wins, one hundred and seventy to Bulgaria’s one hundred and sixty! IRELAND WINS!” Bagman’s voice boomed around the stadium. The screams of delight of the Bulgarian fans gave way to the growing triumphant roar of Ireland’s supporters.

The vast golden cup was brought into the suddenly illuminated Top Box, and High King Niall accepted it on behalf of his nation, holding it aloft to massive cheers. Both Quidditch teams filed in to shake hands with the High King, the Bulgarian Minister, and Fudge (as the host nation’s top government official).

Krum was last in line for the Bulgarians, and was thin, dark-haired and sallow-skinned, with thick black eyebrows. His large nose was clearly still broken, and he looked a real mess with two black eyes and a blood-covered face. Aside from the Irish Chasers, he got the loudest cheers from the crowd.

Harry’s hands were numb from clapping by the time they were done, but he wouldn’t have missed any of it for the world. Except for the Veela. He’d be happy if he never laid eyes on them ever again, walking Imperius Curses that they were.

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Sirius didn’t seem inclined to want to join any of the many parties they passed on the walk from the stadium, preferring to retire for the night to their tent, where he opened a new bottle of Firewhisky to pour himself “just one” celebratory drink in Ireland’s honour. When Harry declined a “small sip” Sirius got out a Butterbeer for Harry instead, and gave Harry a cheeky bow of respect to his commitment to sobriety. They reminisced about the game for a while before Sirius called Dobby to clear away their glasses.

“It’s getting late,” he said, in response to Harry’s yawn. “Probably best for you to be abed. We’ll head home in the morning when there will be more light to pack up, and I’m not too tired to safely Apparate.”

“Alright. Do you have any client families you’re expecting will visit us for morning salutatio?” asks Harry. “Shall Dobby and I do some baking?”

Sirius looked bemused. “I’ve been in prison for a decade, and my house is nigh-impossible to find. Anyone looking to the Black family for patronage has long since drifted away.”

“Except Lupin,” mused Harry. “I was thinking that maybe since your tent can be easily found, you might get some visitors.”

Sirius scowled. “Moony’s a friend,” he said with irritation making his voice a rough growl.

“Sorry, sir. Of course he is,” Harry said in swift apology.

Sirius sighed and raised his hand to his temple as if in pain. “No, I’m sorry, Harry. Don’t mind me. My bark is worse than my bite, I promise. I just don’t like to see things reduced to an exchange of favours and squashed into stultifying formality. There are some traditions that are worth keeping,
but I don’t believe that’s one of them. Sometimes you just help someone because they’re a friend, not because they can do anything for you.”

“Are you sure you weren’t sorted into Hufflepuff?” Harry asked with a little grin, hoping to get a laugh, which it did.

“Hah! No, though the Hat did mention loyalty in passing. It decided on Gryffindor pretty quickly, though. Slytherin didn’t even get a look in, much to my family’s disgust.”

Sirius pushed up from the table, and Harry followed his example. “Good night, Harry. Sleep tight, don’t let the Lethifolds eat you. Don’t worry about any baking. I don’t expect we’ll see anyone, and even if we do, I don’t want to make a fuss of it.”

“Alright. Good night, Sirius. See you in the morning.”

But he wouldn’t have to wait that long to see him again, because in the middle of the night, Harry woke to the sound of screaming.

Chapter End Notes

The Wembly Stadium simile refers to the older version of this structure, which was demolished (and afterwards, replaced) in 2003.

Irish regalia – Medieval and earlier Irish kings don’t appear to have worn crowns – some old paintings do show this, but they’re based on English/European ideals, not historical records. Accordingly, as his regalia symbolising his royal power, my Irish High King carries a rod of lordship (slat na ríghe), and a drinking horn of wild ox (coirn buaball). The queen’s brooch is the historical Diamond Star of the Irish Crown Jewels, mysteriously stolen in 1907 from Dublin Castle and never recovered.

Ard-Rí na hÉireann – High King of Ireland.

Devon Lawton – Thanks for your help this chapter with the Irish accent.
Scenes of Terror

Chapter Summary

There’s no peaceful night’s sleep for Harry, as screams and panic fill the grounds at the Quidditch World Cup.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Friday 26th August 1994

Sirius wasn’t in his room when Harry nervously went to wake him, worried by noises outside their tent. However, he spotted Sirius when he went towards the tent’s entrance to peek outside. In the front room of the tent a half-empty bottle of Firewhisky and an empty potions vial lay on top of the table. Underneath the table, half-hidden by the chairs, lay a shaggy black dog with his ears flattened low against his head. The dog had frozen very still when Harry had pushed through the curtains into the room, and the whites of his eyes were showing as he tried to watch Harry and the tent’s entrance at the same time.

“Sirius?...Padfoot?” Harry asked cautiously, tying the cord of his dressing gown tight as he approached the table to look at the label and shorthand symbols on the empty vial. Calming Draught, with the alchemical symbol for gold on the label which told him it had been brewed in a gold cauldron for extra potency. “Could you change back, please? I need you to be a person right now! Do you know what’s going on outside? I thought I heard screaming… not people celebrating. Do you hear it? Should we leave, or go and help?”

They both listened carefully, Sirius pricking up his ears. There were loud sounds of raucous cheering and laughter outside, but the cheers were definitely being punctuated by an occasional panicked scream or indecipherable angry yell.

Harry moved to the tent entrance and pushed the heavy leather to one side to peek outside, wand at the ready just in case. Sirius padded out from under the table to move up to Harry’s side, hackles raised.

Far off in the distance in the direction where the cheers and screams were mostly coming from Harry could see figures being floated about in the air, and a large crowd surrounding them, marching away through the aisles of tents. The crowd was quite far away, and Harry couldn’t make out the details. There was a smell of smoke in the air – somewhere, something noxious was burning.

“Hey! Excuse me!” he shouted to a brown-haired witch who was running away from the pandemonium, passing by their tent, clutching a sobbing toddler tightly to her chest as she panted and stumbled down the path wearing nothing but a long blue nightgown. “What’s going on?”

Her terrified face turned to him, and she slowed for a brief moment in her panicked rush, gasping as she caught her breath to talk to him. “Death Eaters! They’ve caught a family of Muggles to play with, and they’re burning tents. Someone’s put wards up – don’t try to Apparate or you’ll Splinch yourself! Just run, boy! Head for the woods!” she urged him, before hurrying away with her child.
Sirius’ fuzzy head butted against Harry’s legs, trying to nose in front of him and push him back inside the safety of the tent. Harry obliged him, yanking the tent flaps shut.

“Sirius,” he said firmly. “There’s Death Eaters out there, attacking people. You need to-”

Harry’s persuasive speech had been barely started before the dog’s form twisted and lengthened, and Sirius was standing before him. Sirius was still dressed in the trousers and frilly shirt he’d worn to the match earlier that evening, lacking only the embroidered waistcoat. It looked like he’d never gotten changed into his pyjamas or made it to bed at all, but had stayed up all night.

“Death Eaters. They are really… definitely out there?” Sirius asked, looking a little confused but speaking calmly.

“Yes, and there’s an Anti-Disapparition Jinx up, someone said. So, we can’t just Apparate out.”

“You stay here then. I am going to fight,” snarled Sirius, glaring at the closed entrance to the tent as if his mind was already on the upcoming battle. He pulled a wand out of the sleeve of his frilly shirt.

“I could head for the woods,” suggested Harry. “Or I could help, maybe-”

“NO!” yelled Sirius, spinning around to look at Harry, his eyes wide. “You could be killed. You stay here where it is safe. There are charms on the tent – good ones, I cast them this evening. Not as strong as home, but ‘twill suffice. You stay put.” His voice segued from alarm into an artificial calm the longer he spoke, presumably due to the lingering after-effects of the Calming Draught he must have taken earlier in the evening.

“People know this is our tent. We should stick together. I’m… I could be a target,” Harry worried.

“So am I,” admitted Sirius. “Wait just a second.” He darted quickly out of the tent’s entrance before Harry could object and was back in again almost as fast. He tossed a couple of things he’d fetched from outside onto the tent floor – the wooden sign announcing the “BLACK” campsite and the Black family crest that had previously adorned the outside of the tent.

“That should help a little. Harry, there’s a price on my head – it’s been confirmed by multiple sources. We think I’m wanted perhaps even more than you are, right now. If I stay I’ll just put you in more danger if they come looking for me. And Pettigrew’s out there somewhere. I have to go. Remember, there’s so many spells flying about that the Ministry won’t be able to spot it if you use your wand, so don’t hesitate.”

“You should stay, not go and fight them on your own!” Harry pleaded. “I have a Portkey for emergencies, we could-”

“Nay, you would get SPLINCHED!” Sirius yelled, grabbing at Harry’s shoulders (despite his flinch) and glaring at him angrily. “I know not where you got it from, but do not you even try to use that, lest you end up in two pieces! YOU STAY HERE AND DEFEND YOURSELF, UNDERSTAND?!”

“Yes, sir. I will,” Harry promised.

Sirius whirled away and ran out of the tent. Harry peeked through the gap and to his relief saw Sirius join up with Madam Bones and another brown-robed Auror who were similarly heading against the current – they all ran off towards the trouble to the south.

“Looks like old dogs can’t learn new tricks,” Harry mumbled to himself as he watched Sirius
running away. “At least I’m old enough to look after myself this time, if you don’t come back.”

Great, he thought glumly. Left alone with Death Eaters on the loose outside. Actually... not quite alone.

“Dob-” he started to call, before cutting himself off in worry that his loyal little house-elf might Splinch himself in trying to come when called. He rushed to the house-elf’s bedroom instead and roused him from the nest of blankets Dobby had made underneath his own bed, with an urgently communicated summary of what was going on, along with a warning not to try “popping”.

“Dobby will help protect Master Harry,” the house-elf pronounced, sleepy but determined, and fetched a copper frying pan bigger than his head to wield as a weapon, stationing himself at the tent entrance.

Harry grabbed his Healer bag from his room, since surely someone was bound to be injured sooner or later, and then rushed back to look around the main entrance room for inspiration. The round table wouldn’t make much of a barricade, and even if he did push it and a sofa up to bar the entrance, what if someone set the tent on fire? He’d be trapped. He should make some kind of cover for himself though. He tipped a klinai on its side, and stationed himself behind it, facing the entrance.

“Sanctuary!” came a hoarse low cry from outside. “I seek Sanctuary from the Noble House of Potter for a client!”

Harry startled, he knew that voice. “Greg?” he called out. “Is that you? Come in!”

“I’m not a client,” a very familiar feminine voice piped up argumentatively. “I’m a friend.”

Harry moved forward and pulled the tent flaps open. “Come on in, you two.”

Greg stood there like a statue, holding onto Hermione’s arm. “I seek Sanctuary for a client,” he intoned formally. Behind them, a wizard ran by crying and stumbling, clutching at his face which was dripping some kind of purple liquid. He was followed shortly afterwards by a family of five – the father looked fine but the mother’s robes looked scorched by fire, her face set in grim lines of pain and she limped as they hurried past, heading north-west towards the woods.

“Do you need help?” Harry called out to her and her family, but they either didn’t hear him or didn’t want to stop. “And yes Greg, you and Hermione are both welcome to shelter here.”

“Let me go,” Hermione insisted, trying to tug her arm free. “I’m not running off again, Greg. I saw enough! We’re here, alright?”

“Say the proper words,” Greg insisted to Harry, setting his jaw stubbornly. “Not for me, just for Hermione. You have to promise to look after her. She is a Muggle-born, they might... they might hurt her.”

Luckily for them both, Harry had looked into learning the proper etiquette from Pansy since accidentally falling into the pattern with Luna on the Hogwarts Express. “I grant thee Sanctuary this day, daughter of the House of Granger-” Harry started.


Harry echoed him obediently while Hermione piped a question in the background asking what that was about, since she was definitely a Granger, and what research had he been doing that he hadn’t told her about? Greg studiously ignored her.
“-and I shall shield thee against the wrath of thine enemies, be they friend or foe of my House,”
Harry concluded.

“Now you accept,” ordered Greg.

Hermione huffed, and rattled off quickly, “I thank thee for thy Sanctuary Heir of the Noble House
of Potter-”

“And Black and Slytherin,” added Greg.

“And Black and Slytherin and shall offer no harm herein to thy kith or kin this day.” Hermione
finished. “He’s a friend too, Greg. And a sworn ally, to boot. Words of Sanctuary won’t make a
difference.”

Greg wore a relieved smile after the ritual was completed. “Words always make a difference for
wizards. I have to get back to mother, now. I promised father I’d look after her.”

He released Hermione to stumble inside Harry’s tent, and yanked the tent shut behind her as he left
hurriedly.

“He’s got some nerve, manhandling me like that,” Hermione muttered in irritation. “He grabbed
my wand arm you know. Like I was going to go dashing off to fight Death Eaters if I got the
slightest opening. I was just looking. Very discreetly, I might add, with my cloak hood up.”

Glancing down she caught sight of Dobby in his toga and armed with a shining frying pan, and her
voice softened. “Hello Dobby, it is marvellous to see you doing well. Be careful and remember we
can help protect you if there’s an attack. Don’t put yourself in any danger – your life is just as
important as anyone else’s.”

“Miss Hermione is kind to say so!” Dobby replied, flapping his ears excitedly and wearing an
enormous toothy grin. “Dobby is happy to help! Dobby planted the carrot seeds Miss Hermione
sent, and they is growing green and healthy!”

“What did you see out there? And what’s happened to Millicent? I thought you’d be with the
Bulstrodes?” Harry asked, refusing to be distracted by talk of carrots at Potter Cottage.

“We got separated – it was chaotic out there! The tent next to ours got trampled by the crowd, so
we had to evacuate. I stopped for a second when I saw the Death Eaters floating the Roberts family
in the air – with two little children, Harry – and when I looked back the Bulstrodes were gone.
Millicent should be fine, though – the whole family were sticking together like glue.”

“Were they alright?” Harry asked, peeking out the tent flap distractedly. Most people were running
away from the chaos, but he saw a few of people he didn’t recognise running towards it – one
couple in hooded cloaks were laughing. “The Roberts?”

“Last I saw they were… alright, nothing too serious. They were terrified and screaming, and I think
maybe a bit cut up. But they were generally fine, except for being bounced around in the air. You
know the most frightening part, Harry? It was that there were just six of them – the attackers. Just
six Death Eaters in their hooded cloaks and bone-white masks. People could’ve taken them easily
if they’d worked together,” she said, voice trembling. “But they… they were just cheering.
Ordinary people. Drunk, some of them. Others maybe not so much – they knew what they were
doing. A hundred, maybe two hundred… people marched behind and around them, cheering them
on and laughing while those animals treated a family like… a puppet show. There were some
people who clearly wanted to help the Roberts, but there was a crowd of excited bystanders in
between them and the Death Eaters, blocking them. The Death Eaters cursed some people and blasted a few tents. Most people weren’t even *trying* to do anything to stop them. They just… ran.”

Harry let the tent flap fall and walked over to his friend. “I’m sorry. That’s terrible. I’m glad though, that you didn’t stay and fight.”

“I might be a Gryffindor, but I’m no fool,” she said with a snort, rubbing at her eyes. “I would’ve been spotted and cursed six ways to Sunday. I hope the Aurors get them.”

“I saw some Aurors run by – Sirius joined them. A couple of hundred supporters is a lot, but it’s a tiny fraction of the hundred thousand who came here. They’re vastly outnumbered, really,” Harry said, hoping to comfort his friend.

“They were handing things out to their supporters,” Hermione added distractedly. “The Death Eaters. One had a giant wicker basket, handing out *party favours* like they weren’t a criminal on the run. Like it was all just a fun party – a night out with friends. They were passing out little purple flower corsages for people to wear. Lots of people were putting them on their robes.”

“That’s odd…” Harry said slowly. “They’re usually associated with skulls and snakes for symbology, like with the Dark Mark. Did you see what flower it was?”

“I couldn’t be sure in the dark, but I think it was aconite. The wizard handing it out was wearing gloves, though that could be a coincidence. It could be seen as symbolic, given you die if you eat it – Death Eaters, you know?”

A wolf howled off in the distance, its clear tones ringing through the air, and it was joined by others in a musical chorus. Harry went to the tent entrance and peeked outside as the night was suddenly filled with a chorus of screams reaching a new pitch of terror. The Dark Mark hung ominously in the sky, made from green flickering light like an eerie aurora – a skull with a serpent protruding through its open jaw. The serpent’s mouth was agape, ready to strike with bared fangs in an angry threat to the world.

“No, not aconite,” Hermione said, fear bringing a quaver to her voice. “Better to call it *Wolf’s Bane*. It’s not the full moon, but they don’t need it to change if they want to change.”

“You’re right, it will be werewolves. I don’t suppose you ever learnt the Homorphus Charm? I only know the name.”

Hermione shook her head. “No, I didn’t learn it either – its beyond NEWT level. I *do* remember you have to place your wand tip directly on the werewolf’s throat – too dangerous to try as an untested spell in the middle of an attack. Silver, we need silver,” she fretted.

Harry was thinking frantically about what else was best for fighting werewolves. It was dittany and powdered silver for treating fresh bites so they’d clot, he remembered that, but it wasn’t a lot of help right now.

“Right. Their hides will be resistant to magic,” Harry said. “Stunners might work if we’re coordinated, but probably not. If we make silver needles, we can banish them towards them. If you fight werewolves, sometimes they’ll go for easier prey, like how aconite will discourage them from approaching. Dobby, split one of the logs in the kitchen into tiny bits of kindling, and bring all the pieces here.”

“Yes, Master Harry!” Dobby said, bustling away.

“But sometimes they’ll focus on taking out the threat, if they’re injured,” argued Hermione.
“That’s just as common, in the literature. More so, I would say. They’re not opportunistic predators or easily dissuaded from attacking, like real wolves would be.”

“Well, we have to try *something*. I remember that they won’t attack animals,” Harry said, still trying to think of something else. “I wish Storm was here, he’d love to zap them. Ah! That gives me an idea. *Serpensortia!* *Serpensortia!*

Harry cast the snake-summoning spell, over and over again. Draco had taught it to him back in April, so Harry could make “a million snake minions”. Now seemed like a *great* time for that. Harry hissed instructions to them – they were to guard everyone in the tent from wolves. He sent four to wait for trouble outside in the grass, more to lurk just inside the entrance hiding in the folds of green cloth that hid the tent’s leather walls, and in a fit of inspiration he had Dobby fetch the black and gold waistcoat Sirius had worn all night and got a half-dozen new snakes to get Sirius’ scent off it, their tiny tongues flicking out to taste the air.

“*Go and find the man who smell-tastess like thiss, and protect him from the werewolvess,*” Harry ordered, and they slithered away obediently on their mission.

“How long will the snakes last?” Hermione asked. Dobby dumped a load of wooden splinters in front of them, and Hermione drew her wand and started transfiguring them to silver.

“I really don’t know, I haven’t practised it much,” Harry admitted. “Storm gets jealous easily. Maybe an hour or two at most, I think. Then they go back to wherever they came from. I’ve set them just to guarding us just against wolves, since they won’t be able to easily tell who’s a Death Eater and who’s an innocent bystander.”

Hermione nodded in approval. She started muttering to herself like she did sometimes when she was revising for exams. “Silver – easy. Banishing Charm – that’s Depulso, with a horizontal sweep. Shield Charm – focus on a wall.”

Confident in her revision, she started transfiguring more splinters as Dobby dropped off another small pile. After she’d accumulated a large pile of silver needles of various sizes, she stacked some behind Harry’s *klinai* barricade, and some more next to the tent’s entrance.

“Stunners and Expelliarmus on Death Eaters, and Accio on any Wolf’s Bane they’re wearing or on their wands if they drop them,” she stated determinedly.

“Oh! Good planning!” Harry said, impressed. He grabbed one of the larger silver needles to hold in his off-hand. “Which charms are you best at, would you say? We didn’t cover Depulso in Potter Watch.”

“No, but I like to read ahead too, and knowing the counter-charm to Accio is just common sense. I’m good at it, but my Shield and Stunning Charms still need work,” Hermione admitted rather shamefacedly, as if learning spells a year or more above her level simply wasn’t good enough. “You can be on defence if we need to split focus since your Shield Charms are better than mine, and I’ll go on attack.

“Harry, have you got your invisibility cloak?” Hermione asked. “You could keep watch without being spotted. See if anyone needs our help – they could hide in here with us.”

“Damn. No, I didn’t bring it – I left it in my trunk. But I can cast a Disillusionment Charm,” he revealed, to her evident surprise. With a tap of his wand on the top of his head and a murmured incantation, a cold prickling sensation spread over his body, blurring his appearance so there was little more to see than a heat shimmer in the air and blurry patches of colour that matched his
surroundings.

Harry peeked cautiously outside. People were running around like headless chickens now, not knowing which way to go with the howls and snarls of wolves in all directions. Some were dashing about, while others were picking tents at random and diving inside. He could see the distant dull orange glow of flames in the distance, and the air still reeked of smoke.

“Over here! Come inside!” Harry called, flapping the tent entrance to get attention as a panicked wizard ran close by, barefoot and wearing nothing but a pair of flannel pyjamas. Being Disillusioned was a bit of a barrier to getting people to notice him, Harry realised. Also, he didn’t want to yell too loud and attract the attention of enemies.

The young wizard gratefully dived into their tent. “Sanctuary!” he gasped out in quick plea.

“Sanctuary granted,” Hermione said from behind him, “but we don’t have time for pleasantries. Can you help me transfigure some more silver?

“I couldn’t find my wand,” the wizard babbled. “I was asleep, and then there was screaming, and my tent was knocked over and I couldn’t find my wand in the dark! They’re not making Portkeys – there’s no way out!”

The wizard’s ruffled black hair looked as wild as his eyes as he grabbed one of the larger dagger-sized silver needles and clutched it tightly in a fist as he hid behind the klinai with Hermione.

“There’s werewolves out there, ripping people apart! Werewolves. Merlin, I don’t want to die, I’m only twenty-nine! I’m too young to die!”

“Over here! Sanctuary!” Harry cried to some middle-aged witches dashing past to the south, one with blood streaming down one of her arms, but they either didn’t hear him, or they had another plan for what to do, for they just kept on running.

The growling was getting closer, and the screams louder. “Incoming!” Harry hissed back to his friends, closing the tent except for the tiniest crack to peek out of and point his wand through.

He couldn’t see the werewolves yet, but he could hear them. Then he saw someone he recognised – Luna was running towards them, rushing pell-mell down the path. She was clad in a white flannel nightdress trimmed with a lace hem down at her ankles, holding her wand in one hand and a stuffed plush unicorn in the other. She was followed by her father whose right arm hung limply at his side like an empty sack, forcing him to clutch his wand in his left hand. His long blue dressing gown was splashed with a large red bloodstain and flapped around him like a cape as he ran.

“Luna! Sanctuary here!” he called loudly as he pushed the tent flaps open again, and the duo sprinted towards their tent and dove inside. The nameless wizard who’d sheltered with them first let out a short reflexive scream at their sudden appearance.

“They’re right behind us, Harry!” Luna cried.

“Luna, get behind the barricade and make more needles. Harry, I’m coming to help you,” ordered Hermione, moving up to the entrance with a new pile of silver needles and dumping them on the ground in front of them.

“Hide, Luna,” Mr. Lovegood ordered. “Go further into the tent!” Luna seemed more inclined to follow Hermione’s instructions, however, and her father had to settle for crouching with her behind the klinai and pleading for her to hide better, while Dobby ferried more wood splinters to them. Judging by the switch to muttered spells, it didn’t take long for Mr. Lovegood to give up the effort
to convince his daughter to hide, as he switched to helping them transfigure silver. There were a few curses interspersed with the incantations – he seemed to be struggling to cast left-handed – but they grew fewer in number the more he practised.

As Harry stood watch at the tent entrance with a fiercely pounding heart, a large grey wolf loped into view outside, about five tent sites away. Blood covered its short muzzle and spotted its front paws, and its teeth were bared in an angry snarl. It sniffed at the ground and the smoky air, then turned to face their tent. Its hindquarters tensed as it prepared to leap in their direction.

“Now!” Harry cried. “Depulso!”

Hermione echoed him in casting the Banishing Charm with a textbook-precise sweep of her wand, and a rain of silver needles flew through the air like darts. It wasn’t quite as effective an attack as they’d hoped. Most of the needles weren’t flying straight, so many hit the werewolf side on. However, a couple lodged in its side, a few in its legs, and one stuck on its face just below its eye, eliciting a pained yelp.

The werewolf paused, however, the pain wasn’t enough to deter its approach. It turned in a circle and shook itself like a wet cat to dislodge as many silver needles as it could, but after that it seemed if anything more inclined to press its attack. It jumped over the detritus of silver on the ground and padded towards their tent, body low to the ground. It sped up its pace as it loped towards them again, and Harry’s heart hammered in his chest.

“Protego!” Harry cast determinedly, pushing a shield out in front of him with the maximum force possible. The snarling werewolf bounced off the shimmering magical shield in mid-stride with a heavy thud, then twisted in the air as it fell back down to the ground, landing gracefully on its paws. Its bloodstained lips were drawn back and its gums and sharp white teeth were bared as it snarled and growled angrily at them, pacing in front of Harry’s shield searching for a weak point.

Harry noticed his Disillusionment Charm had fallen at some point, but there was no necessity or leisure to renew it. Even if the werewolf couldn’t see him properly, it could surely smell and hear him. He needed to concentrate on defending everyone.

“More needles!” Hermione cried out desperately to the Lovegoods as the werewolf scrabbled at the shimmering wall of force keeping it from its prey. Harry’s brow gleamed with sweat as he kept his wand pointed at the wolf, focusing on maintaining his spell more strongly and for longer than he’d ever held it before.

Four snakes came out from their hiding places in the short grass and slithered determinedly towards the wolf who ignored them with blithe unconcern – animals usually ignored or avoided werewolves and vice versa. But its disregard was unwise, for the summoned serpents struck with angry hisses at its legs and tail.

“Protect the Ssspeaker!”

“Attack the wolf!”

Harry was pleased to see a cobra get in a good bite, sinking its fangs deep into one of the werewolf’s furry hind legs with a swift strike. The werewolf yelped in pain and turned furiously to attack the snakes, wounding the cobra with its swift claws. It bit another snake clean in half and shook the pieces about in a spray of blood and gore.

Still stationed behind the barricade where he was sequestered with his daughter and their other refugee, Mr. Lovegood used a spell to float over a new pile of ammunition to land at Hermione and
Harry’s feet with a tinkling sound as the silver fragments spilled to the ground.

Hermione called out, “Harry, drop your shield on 3…2…1… *Depulso*!”

Harry dropped his shield just in time, and Hermione banished the pile of silver towards the wolf. Mr. Lovegood had gotten more creative with his transfigurations than the children had, and some of the transfigured splinters were shaped into caltrops. Two or three needles were twisted together with all their ends sharpened, to make a spiky creation practically guaranteed to ensure a toxic silver spike would jab into their enemy.

As soon as their banished rain of silver hit, Harry quickly put a Shield Charm back up again.

The wolf howled in pain as it got a face full of silver at close range, and retreated from their tent, shaking its head furiously, dislodging most of the bits of silver and sprinkling the grass with a splatter of blood. A few stayed stuck into its skin, causing blood to run copiously down its muzzle.

Even wounded, with two snakes hissing at the entrance ready to attack it again not to mention wizards armed with silver, the werewolf seemed to hesitate for a moment as if considering renewing its attack. It stepped towards the tent, then stepped away again as gurgling screams rent the air from somewhere just out of sight behind rows of tents. It turned tail and went to lope away in search of easier prey. Limping badly now, possibly poisoned, and with a face full of blood obscuring its vision, Harry hoped it would be easy prey for other wizards and witches to defeat.

“It’s running for it!” Harry reported jubilantly, to cheers from Luna and relieved sobs from the young wizard who’d hidden with them. Mr. Lovegood didn’t say anything except a mumbled litany of “*Argentus, Argentus*…” as he repetitively transfigured more wood into silver until he had a new pile of caltrops to float over to their feet.

“No, it’s *not* over,” Hermione said sternly. “*Stupefy*!”

The werewolf stumbled as the jet of red light from her wand hit its furry hide, but it didn’t fall. A couple of witches ran into their view from between some tents, shrieked loudly when they saw the werewolf, and ran straight off again. They were utterly useless, apart from distracting the werewolf for a moment, and – unfortunately – granting it temporary cover from Hermione and Harry’s spells as one witch had run right between their tent and the werewolf.

“Merlin! Fine, *Ossio Dispersimus*!” Harry cast the Deboning Spell once the witch had gone past. He aimed carefully and hit one of the wolf’s front legs, which collapsed underneath it as all the leg bones disappeared. It let out a high-pitched pained whimper, then began a continuous echoing howl.

There was a chance – however slim – that the werewolf was innocent in this. It could have been forced into transforming and might be horrified to find later that it had been controlled into attacking people. Harry didn’t want to kill it. It could even be Mr. Lupin, for all he knew. He wished he knew that spell to tie people up, but Incarcerous was a NEWT level spell and Harry wasn’t *that* advanced yet. Not counting the Patronus. Or well… a few other spells, actually. Harry mentally added the Incarcerous Spell to the list of things he wanted to learn.

“*Diffindo*!” Hermione cast from beside him, slicing open a narrow cut in the werewolf’s pelt. Unlike the wounds caused by their silver missiles, this new injury didn’t bleed as freely. In fact, it seemed to be healing up rapidly.

From behind them, Luna could be overheard arguing with her father. “I could cast the Leg-Locker Curse on it! I’m very good at that!”
“If it comes inside you can, but not before! I can’t lose you!” her father argued, desperation making his voice grow louder at the same time as it cracked with fear. “I order you to stay here!”

Harry deboned another of the werewolf’s legs, and its anguished howls grew even louder, echoed by other wolves off in the distance.

But it wasn’t a fellow werewolf who came to its assistance first – it was a wizard, hurtling towards their location on a broomstick. Clad in a hooded black cloak over plain black robes, and wearing a featureless white mask with narrow slits to see and speak out of, the wizard was in full Death Eater regalia. He hovered over the injured werewolf (but notably out of range of its gnashing teeth) and sent a jet of red sparks into the air like a crackling noisy fountain of fireworks from his upraised wand.

“*Stupefy! Expelliarmus!*” Hermione cast at him bravely.

But as soon as she’d gotten out the very first syllable of her shouted incantations, the wizard’s head whipped around to face in their direction, and with a quick half-circle of his wand the sparks cut out and a shimmering Shield Charm sprang up to defend him from her attack. If he’d said the spell aloud, Harry didn’t hear it from over where they were hiding in the tent.

“*Accio,*” Harry cast more quietly, concentrating on summoning a log from a campfire lumber pile from *behind* the Death Eater. A lot of people only cast Shield Charms to protect in *front* of themselves, to create the most powerful and useful shield, and this Death Eater proved no exception. The log hit the Death Eater’s back and his broomstick causing him to let out a pained huff of air, and he distractedly let his Shield Charm drop.

“*Stupe-*” Hermione started again, but their opponent was too fast for her. Faster than she could say it – as fast as thought – the Death Eater’s wand was pointed at her and a streak of red light struck her unerringly. Hermione slumped to the ground, half-in and half-out of the tent, and her head hit the ground with a painful thunk.

Luna screamed in terror, high and shrill.

“Miss Hermione!” Dobby called, in a shocked, squeaky voice. “Dobby will help Miss!” Her unconscious body floated up into the air and zoomed into the tent.

“*Protego!*” Harry shouted in a panicked rush. He worried he might not be fast enough to get the incantation off, but he managed it. Perhaps his success was not due to any skill on his part, however. As much as he could tell with nothing but a mask to judge, the Death Eater just seemed to be staring in his direction, wand pointed but not casting anything at Harry.

Then he did cast at last – but not an offensive spell. Harry overheard a deep-voiced mutter of “*Fumos*”, then a familiar grey cloud of smoke spread out in an increasingly thick ring from around the Death Eater, concealing both himself and the injured werewolf from their sight. Harry worriedly kept up his Shield Charm while people bustled around behind him trying to revive Hermione. He could hear the whimpers and angry snarls of the werewolf for a moment, then all went silent. There was nothing but the continuing sounds of battle and screams from further away.

After a moment’s hesitation, Harry took a chance and cast a general counter-charm. *Finite Incantatem* cleared the smoke, but the Death Eater and the defeated werewolf were both long gone.

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Hermione had been easily woken with the Reviving Spell, and after some panicked self-
recriminations, she returned determinedly to her self-appointed station at the tent’s entrance, wand clenched tightly in her hand.

Eight more wizards and witches sheltered in their tent, called over in ones and twos as they ran past. Some were injured, while others were just frightened. All were willing to rally together for a better chance at defending each other.

Harry and Hermione moved away from their positions guarding the entrance when an older witch ordered them sternly to step aside.

“Let your elders take a turn and have a rest, children,” she insisted. She was an elderly witch with light brown skin, and loose silver hair down to her waist. She was wearing a long black nightgown and pink bunny slippers with such an air of authority that no-one dared be amused by her outfit. She reminded Harry a little of Neville’s grandmother in her manner – someone who expected to be obeyed due to years of habit.

“I have survived two wars, and I shall survive this one too. I know a trick or two,” she proclaimed, a determined light in her old brown eyes as they wrinkled up fiercely. “No mangy werewolf or jumped-up blood purist is getting past me. But remember, we don’t strike to kill.”

“They’re trying to kill us!” objected a dark-haired witch, and the older lady shook her head at her disappointedly.

“Imperius Curse. You never know who would be on your side if given a chance. Attack to disarm or capture only. Come on, you’re not hurt – you’re up the front with me now, girl!” she ordered the dark-haired witch.

Harry switched his focus to healing. Mr. Lovegood’s wand arm wasn’t as bad as he’d first feared – it had been deboned by a Death Eater’s curse, so Harry offered him a vial of Skele-Gro from his Healer’s bag. By magical standards, losing bones was a minor injury.

Harry warned, “It’s going to hurt, and will take hours for the bones to regrow. I’ve had it done myself. I’d actually recommend waiting to take it until after the attack is definitely over.”

“Why do you even have this in your bag?” Mr. Lovegood asked, eyeing the vial speculatively before tucking it away in his dressing gown pocket for later. “I would not have thought it was a common potion to carry around in case of emergencies.”

Harry shrugged, embarrassed. “I’m good at casting the Deboning Spell, but well… I thought it might be good to have a cure on hand to reverse it if necessary, like if I hit someone by accident. It’s good and fresh – I brewed it this summer. Are you alright apart from your arm?” he asked. “I can see you have some blood on you, but I can’t see an injury?”

“It’s not my blood. A Death Eater did it,” Mr. Lovegood said with a shudder. “He cut a rabbit open and banished it at me, so the blood splashed all over my dressing gown. Then he sent up a flare of green sparks, right on top of me. I fought him of course, and I kept Luna safe, but he took out my wand arm. The Death Eater laughed when we all heard those terrifying howls – the werewolf ignored him and came straight for us. That is when I realised what his strange attacks were for – he wasn’t trying to kill me, he was disabling me and marking me as a target for the werewolves. I am not as skilled with my wand in my left hand, so we just had to run for it.”

“You kept Luna safe,” Harry reassured. “You did everything you could.”

“The first enemy is always the free press,” Mr. Lovegood said shakily.
Harry used Episkey to heal some cuts on the bare feet of the first wizard who’d sheltered with them, who belatedly introduced himself as Hermes Jones. Harry decided to save his bottle of Essence of Dittany in case they encountered some werewolf victims later. Nothing would stop infection with lycanthropy, but powdered silver and dittany would make fresh wounds clot that could otherwise potentially cause massive blood loss.

Two more wizards and a young crying child entered their increasingly crowded tent. Dobby had opened up the curtains to the lounge area to make one big room to accommodate everyone. Harry immediately moved to clean the wounds on the back of a wizard with charred robes. The man explained that he’d gotten burnt shielding his young daughter as their burning tent collapsed around them. The other wizard accompanying them had cut a hole in the tent with a quick Diffindo and pulled them out.

“It was bad,” murmured the father, while his toddler clung to his legs and refused to let go. “I never knew it would be like that when the charms failed – I didn’t know what would happen. It was like a Portkey malfunction that went on and on, except the world was swirling and shrinking away like water down a plug-hole. I can’t explain it properly, but it was terrifying. Sometimes I wish I’d never stayed in the wizarding world. Perhaps it’s time to go back, or maybe I should let Phoebe go and live with her mother instead.”

Harry didn’t know what to say to that, and just kept silently treating the man’s wounds, washing them clean with a flannel dipped in a bowl of conjured and thus sanitized water. He picked bits of burnt fabric out of the man’s charred and magically-numbed skin with carefully precise Summoning Charms. Once he was confident the wounds were as clean as possible he smeared some Burn-healing Paste carefully on the wizard’s skin.

“I don’t suppose you have a child-strength Calming Draught for my daughter?” the father asked. “I will pay you back for all your help, of course.”

“Thank you, whenever you can would be fine. If you can’t, that’s alright too. I don’t want anyone to worry about money right now. I have a pewter-brewed draught, with the peppermint harvested at the new moon,” Harry said, pausing to rummage in his bag and passing a vial over. “That should be pretty mild but give her a half-dose to be safe.”

Their discussion was cut short by a shout of alarm from one of the witches guarding the door, and more screaming from outside. Harry wasn’t alone in rushing to the tent entrance and jostling for a spot where he could peek outside.

“It’s just the Dark Mark,” the oldest witch said, who’d eventually introduced herself as “Mrs. Smith”. “Settle down – it’s over. They never cast it more than twice – usually just the once. That will be their signal to retreat.” For all her reassurances that the worst was over, Harry noticed that she didn’t relinquish her post or encourage anyone to leave the tent. Rather, she stayed warily on guard. She seemed justified in her caution when a cry of “Werewolf!” went up, and a barrage of spells flew out from their tent to Stun and immobilize the approaching beast. There was a hearty round of congratulations and handshakes amongst the guards at the door, and Harry and Hermione joined them in going outside to check on their prisoner.

“I don’t think that’s an ordinary werewolf,” Hermione said as they approached the beast which was trussed up in so many thick ropes you could hardly see its body. “It’s black, and the tail’s wrong.”

“Oh, out of the way!” Harry called, as realisation struck. “I think that’s my godfather – he’s a dog Animagus!” He pushed his way to the front of the crowd and dispelled some of the ropes around the animal’s head. It was definitely Sirius – Padfoot – and he did not look at all well. There was some kind of yellow ooze covering his eyes, and his head was covered in cuts – one ear looked...
almost severed.

“Ssspeaker, I kept him sssafe,” reported a single green snake in the grass, unnoticed so far by the crowd who were focused on the “werewolf”. “The wolffs tried to hunt him, but the othersss and I ssstopped them from getting to him.”

“Good work, and farewell,” Harry praised, dismissing the snake back to wherever it had come from. A couple of people in the crowd flinched away from him in reflexive fear, as they noticed him chatting with the snake.

“This is definitely my godfather Sirius Black, and he’s not a werewolf! He’s just in his dog Animagus form. Get these ropes off him, alright?”

“Sorry about that, lad,” apologised Mrs. Smith, dispelling them layer by layer.

The more of Padfoot that was revealed, the worse he looked. In addition to the cuts on his head and the continuous oozing of pus from his eyes, there were nasty deep gashes in his sides, his right front leg was withered and desiccated, his tail looked like it had gotten singed, and Harry didn’t know what was going on with a patch of green foam bubbling away on his chest, but he was sure it was some kind of nasty curse.

“I’ll do what I can for Sirius,” Harry said, “but I think he might need a proper Healer. Can someone find out if there’s one around, or if the Anti-Disapparition Jinx is down yet? We need to get him to St. Mungo’s right away!”

Luna ran up to Harry and pressed his black Healer’s bag into his left hand, before scurrying back to the tent in response to her father’s worried summons.

Harry didn’t wake Sirius up yet – first he cast general counter-spells on everything that he could. He managed to take care of the eye infection, which stopped leaking pus, and he also stopped the green foam from bubbling further.

“Aguamenti, Tergeo, Tergeo” Harry cast, diluting the foam and pus and then siphoning them off. While it wasn’t his intention, the spells also had the side-effect of removing the drying blood coagulating on Padfoot’s fur. There was a large blotch of exposed skin with the fur completely gone where the foam had been bubbling, and the skin was tinted an odd sickly green, with patches of greenish exposed flesh where the skin had been eaten away as if by acid. Not knowing what curse it was, Harry decided that was all he could do at the moment for that injury. He felt sick just looking at the injury but looked away quickly and tried hard to stay focused on healing what he could.

He eyed the deep cuts, but was more worried about Padfoot’s laboured, raspy breathing. There was a bulging spot on one side of his ribcage – Harry felt it very gently and suspected it might be due to a bit of broken bone. Harry took a slow deep breath and concentrated carefully. He had to get this right – Sirius’ life could depend on it, because if his ribs were at risk of puncturing his lungs, he might not survive the trip to hospital, even if they found a way to get him there in time. He pointed his wand at Sirius’ side, focusing fiercely on the effect he wanted. The ribs needed to move back into place and the bone pieces needed to meld back together, including any stray chips, and they needed to do so slowly, not with a sudden snap.

“Costãs Emendo,” Harry incantated with careful pronunciation, and a soft blue light emerged from the tip of his wand and slowly sank into Sirius’ skin. The bulge in Sirius’ side shrank away, and his breathing became easier.
Harry let out a juddering sigh of relief and moved on to dealing with the bleeding. He wrapped up the large gashes (and the ribs, just to be on the safe side) by conjuring bandages, then moved on to the face. The partially-severed ear he instructed Hermione to hold in place while he cast Episkey, and then he dripped some Essence of Dittany over the ear and some of the smaller cuts on Sirius’ face, which would be the ones Sirius might be most worried about scarring. It bubbled away quickly, leaving healed skin behind.

Harry paused to think but wasn’t sure what else to try. He was still nervous about dealing with the green damaged skin from the unknown curse, or the larger cuts. It might be time to wake Sirius up now the worst injuries were dealt with. “Does anyone here recognise that bubbling green curse he got hit with on his chest?” he asked the little crowd around him. Unfortunately, no-one had any guesses as to what it might have been.

“Why did you use Episkey when you had the potion ready?” Hermione asked curiously. “Essence of Dittany doesn’t leave marks like the charm does, right?”

“Essence of Dittany will seal over wounds and encourage new skin to spread, but since his ear was half off the potion would have healed it in that state – new skin would probably have spread in from the sides. I had to get it started healing in the right place before using the Dittany, even if there’s a small risk of scarring that way. Magic isn’t good at regrowing severed body parts, so you have to work carefully but quickly, before things seal over.”

Hermione nodded her understanding, as Harry cast one last spell on his patient. “Rennervate.”

Padfoot’s eyes opened slowly, and he wagged his tail as he caught sight of Harry’s concerned face. He tried to struggle to his feet, but Harry shushed him. “Shh, Sirius, it’s alright. You’re hurt, but you’re going to be okay. But it’s very important you change back to your human form. Can you do that for me? I need you to. Right now.”

Padfoot nodded his doggy head, and then with a shifting of bone and flesh Sirius was lying wounded on the ground as a man rather than as a dog.

“Merlin, the bandages!” Harry cursed. “Finite! Finite! Fascia! Fascia!” He rapidly dispelled bandages that had shifted about when Sirius changed shapes, then rewrapped the wounds and ribs as quickly as possible. Sirius grit his teeth and let out a low hiss of pain as he was jostled about and sat up slightly so that Harry could wrap around his ribs properly.

“Harry… you’re alright?” Sirius asked urgently. “I came as fast as I could, I swear I did! He said – Pettigrew… No, it wasn’t him, not Peter at all. He laughed when I told him to stay away from you. He said he wanted you dead, or as a werewolf in his service. He said he had plans of his own and he wanted me alive, not dead. I tried to kill him – but I failed. That’s when he said that he didn’t need me whole. He looked and sounded just like Peter, but it wasn’t him at all, not really. There’s nothing of Peter left, I think. It’s just him. Lord Voldemort.”

There were some shrieks at the name from a few of the witches and wizards around them, and Hermione huffily told them it was just a name.

“You’re alright, aren’t you, Harry?”

“I’m fine, everyone’s fine,” Harry soothed. “There was a werewolf, but we fought it off, and no-one got bitten. It got away through – a Death Eater rescued it. Lie still, alright? You had at least one broken rib, and I’ve done my best, but your lungs might be injured.”

That would be the young Tom Riddle from the diary, Harry thought. He’s possessed Pettigrew, I’m
sure of it now. They said he was acting strangely at the Azkaban break-out too and reporting to someone else who called himself Lord Voldemort. What happened to that offer of a truce from the real Lord Voldemort? Are the two of them working together, or is the Dark Lord fighting with himself? Do the Death Eaters want Sirius dead or don’t they? Sirius said there’s a price on his head, but Tom didn’t want to kill him. Why not? Harry’s head spun with questions he didn’t have the answers to.

“The Jinx is down, it’s safe to Disapparate out if you can,” Mr. Lovegood announced, to a general cry of relief. Some of their group disappeared without so much as a by-your-leave, but Mr. Lovegood didn’t seem confident his ability to Apparate with a boneless wand arm, so he and Luna stayed with them, as did the bossy Mrs. Smith, and Mr. Jones who’d lost his wand. The father—carrying his daughter Phoebe—awkwardly shook Harry’s hand before he departed, promising he wouldn’t forget Harry’s help, and would be in touch with payment for the potions he’d used.

“I’m sorry I can’t take you to St. Mungo’s,” the father apologised to Sirius, “but I can’t do Side-Along Apparition with more than one person, and I have to look after my daughter.”

“It’s alright,” Sirius said. “Go. Someone else will help.”

“I shall take him there,” offered Mrs. Smith, and the wizard disappeared with his sniffling daughter in his arms, relieved someone else would be able to assist. However, Sirius didn’t think much of that plan, unfortunately.

“I beg your pardon, but I don’t know you, madam,” Sirius said stiffly. “I am not Apparating anywhere with a strange witch.”

The woman hmphed in irritation. “This is hardly the time to fuss about protocol. You are in no state to be getting up to bow and kiss my hand, and at my age you certainly do not need to worry about ruining our reputations by going off unchaperoned! I might be a widow, and in my nightdress, but you’re quite safe with me, sir! Margaret Smith, pleased to meet you, so on and so forth. Now, let us get you to St. Mungo’s.”

But Sirius refused to go, and his body started shaking as he limply tried to get away from her grasping hands. When it was obvious he was just too distressed to go with her Harry waved her off, since her well-meant interference was just making things worse.

“I could go and find someone he knows—maybe the Weasleys,” volunteered Hermione. “How does that sound, Mr. Black?”

“Good, yes. Thank you,” Sirius said gratefully, between gasps for air. “Arthur would be good. Or Amelia Bones if she made… if she’s alright. She might not be. Shacklebolt’s around here somewhere, I saw him Stunning Death Eaters—he has very dark skin and a bright purple African robe with a fez, you can’t miss him.”

“I’ll go with the girl, you stay with the boy,” Mrs. Smith ordered the nervous Mr. Jones.

“What can I do?” he asked plaintively.

“Just stay put and watch over the boy and that idiot,” she snapped impatiently, waving a dismissive hand at Sirius. On her way out of the tent she paused to transfigure a bit of wood, which she stuck with a charm to the top of the tent pole on the outside of their tent. She’d transfigured the kindling into a wooden plaque embossed with the image of a serpent wound around a staff—the Rod of Asclepius, the traditional wizarding (and Muggle) symbol for medicine. Then she cast another charm on it to make it glow green to draw attention—the soft lime-green of Healers’ robes rather
than the sickening vivid shade of the Killing Curse.

“I do not know how many Healers will be around,” she said in explanation. “For those wounded that are stuck here you might be one of the best options, Mr. Potter, young and untrained though you are. You know a few Healing charms and have a supply of potions, which I venture is more than many will be able to boast.”

“I hope there’s better mediwizards and Healers than me around!” Harry fretted. “There were some on the Quidditch field earlier, after all. But… they might have gone home after the match was over. I’ll do what I can, of course.”

Hermione dragged Mrs. Smith off, dashing off to the south in search of the Weasleys’ tent. Meanwhile, Dobby carefully levitated Sirius inside their tent and off into the wizard’s own bed, where he should be more comfortable while he waited for evacuation. Harry hovered over Sirius fretfully as the man trembled and apologised for yelling at Harry earlier.

“I didn’t mean it you know. I was just worried about you. I wouldn’t want to… part on bad terms,” Sirius said anxiously.

“Shh, it’s alright, you’ll be fine, I promise,” Harry soothed, feeding him sips of a foul-tasting, red Blood-Replenishing Potion.

Mr. Jones made himself useful tidying away the detritus of silver scattered over the floor of the tent and outside and escorting a couple of people inside the tent to see Harry for relatively minor injuries (by wizarding standards) including burns and a broken arm. After that the wizard wandered off in search of his missing cousin, whom he’d been separated from in all the hubbub. He promised he’d return soon, even if he found her.

Harry got Dobby to fetch him a pair of gloves and had made them waterproof with a household charm he’d read about that was usually used by witches and wizards doing the washing up. He didn’t know a great deal about how Healers dealt with infection and didn’t want to be catching or spreading any diseases while treating people. Wizards didn’t acknowledge the crazy Muggle ideas about germ theory, but Harry knew better. He got Dobby to go and sit with Sirius while he treated the trickle of new patients, and Dobby solemnly promised to fetch him if Sirius needed Harry’s help.

“Harry!” Hermione called out shrilly as she returned to the tent. “We found Mr. Weasley, but he’s badly hurt!”

A worried cluster of redheads pushed their way inside the tent, with Arthur Weasley’s tattered and unconscious body floating in the air, directed along by his son Bill’s wand. Bill Weasley himself looked injured, with a deep cut on his arm dripping blood as he walked, and another injury on his blood-covered leg that he seemed to be ignoring even though it was making him limp and blood was soaking through his pyjamas. For his father was worse, much worse. There were vicious deep claw marks all down the left side of Arthur Weasley’s face, and it looked like he might have an eye injury as well. His legs looked like they’d been gnawed on – they were bare under his tattered nightshirt, and you could see that chunks of flesh were missing from his calves. His legs were also spotted with unmistakable deep bite marks on the too-pale flesh, underneath the copious coating of blood.

“Oh, dear Merlin,” Harry said, recoiling in shock at the sight of the vicious injuries that had turned Mr. Weasley’s face and legs into raw meat.

Hermione looked like she was going to cry. “You have to help him, Harry!” she cried.
“Please,” begged Ron, tears and snot running down his face. “Please heal my dad.”

“You can save him, I know you can, Harry!” Ginny sobbed, clinging tightly to her brother Percy, who hugged her close to his left side.

“Any injuries besides the obvious? It was a werewolf, right?” Harry asked, rummaging shakily in his Healer’s bag for powdered silver and dittany. And a mild Calming Draught, which he chugged discreetly. People needed him. He didn’t have time to break down.

Bill, Percy, and Ron all tried to explain at once in a cacophony of noise. “Shut up!” Bill yelled angrily at his brothers. “I will explain. Yes, it was a werewolf. A Death Eater Stunned dad, then goaded the werewolf into attacking him. It jumped up on him, clawed up his face, then started dragging him away by the legs and trying to eat him. Dad and I got hit by a few curses as well, but I’ve countered those. I may have missed one, however, for he won’t stop bleeding – I can’t figure out why. Nothing I have tried has worked.”

“Werewolf wounds always do that,” Harry said, sprinkling silver powder over the wounds (except for the eye, as he wasn’t sure if it was safe to use there) and then pouring Essence of Dittany over the top. The Dittany foamed up like it normally did when in contact with a wound but hissed and crackled more than usual as it came into contact with the silver and the infected wounds. “This should help it clot. It’s not a cure, it just… it will stop the bleeding. The wounds can’t be charmed closed – they have to heal naturally. I’d recommend stitches, but I obviously don’t personally have the equipment or skill for that. I’ll just bandage him up tightly, so he can be stitched up properly at St. Mungo’s.”

“Stitched?” asked Bill puzzledly. “Like sewing? That kind of stitching?”

“Tergeo, Fascia, Fascia,” Harry cast, cleaning and wrapping up Mr. Weasley’s legs. “Yes, but with special medical thread and sterilised needles, of course. Don’t worry – they’ll know what to do at the hospital. They’ll take the stitches out once the wounds have healed.”

“Is he going to be okay?” Ron asked in a small voice, his face pale with his freckles standing out more than usual.

“Well… he’s definitely going to live,” Harry reassured. “I’d like to wake him up and get a Blood Replenishing Draught into him in a second, though.” He carefully folded up a bandage into a wad to pack gently against Mr. Weasley’s clawed left eye, before wrapping bandages around his head to hold the wounds on his face closed.

“But he… will he and Bill be werewolves?” Ron asked. “It’s not the full moon. That old hag tagging along with Hermione said they would be – she refused to Apparate them to St. Mungo’s when we asked for help. She didn’t even want to touch them! She just left – she took someone else to St. Mungo’s instead.”

Harry hesitated, looking at his white-faced friend worriedly.

“Come on Ron,” Percy said, putting his trembling arm around his brother’s shoulders. “Let’s wait outside and let Harry work – you’re distracting him. He needs to look after Bill too, let’s give them some room. Fred, George, Ginny – you too.”

Percy gave Bill a questioning look as they passed him, and Bill nodded gravely. Percy’s shoulders drooped as he left the tent with his younger siblings.

“Can either of you Apparate him to St. Mungo’s?” Harry asked Bill and Charlie, then cast a
carefully precise Severing Charm to cut the leg of Bill’s pyjama bottoms open so he could get a better look at his injuries.

“Merlin! I thought you were going to cut my leg,” Bill said, startled. “You’re lucky I didn’t move.”

“I was careful,” Harry promised, his attention on the parallel gashes on his leg that were bleeding heavily, “and we need to hurry. This looks bad, but it’s not too deep, thankfully. Your arm would be worse, but I think that’s from a curse, right?”

“That’s right.”

“I thought so – the wound looks too straight and tidy. Do you want me to treat it, or can you Apparate to the hospital?”

“Do what you can,” said Bill. “I’m not leaving until I know dad is safe, and I’m rubbish at Side-Along-Apparition.”

“He shouldn’t Apparate anyway,” insisted Charlie. “He’s too hurt to focus properly.”

Harry treated the claw marks on Bill’s leg, and Bill gurgled with pain and hung onto Charlie’s proffered arm fiercely. “Dear Merlin, that burns!”


He bandaged Bill’s leg up, then did the same for his cut arm. “Your arm wound’s too deep – I’ve only practised healing small bites and cuts, and I’m running low on Dittany, which is better for shallow cuts and bruises anyway. So I’m just going to bandage it up for now. Here, drink this.”

“What is it?”

“Blood-Replenishing Potion. Your father needs one too. I wonder… could you go to St. Mungo’s and fetch a Healer?” he asked Charlie optimistically. “Would they come to us?”

Charlie shook his head. “I don’t know St. Mungo’s well enough to get us there, and Bill’s too injured to Apparate-“

“I could try-” interjected Bill.

“-and he is going to stay put and wait for a Portkey,” finished Charlie. “With the number of injured, I don’t think we’ll have any luck getting a Healer to leave the hospital. You will stay here, and I will go find someone to get you and Mr. Black out of here. Did he uh… was he bitten too, Potter?”

Harry shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. But there’s at a couple of nasty curses on him I don’t recognise and couldn’t properly counter. He’s badly hurt and had some broken ribs. I did my best but… I’m just… I’m just self-taught. I don’t know… he’s breathing better, but there’s still internal injuries, I’m sure.”

“I’ll take a look at him,” Bill offered. “I’m not that hurt really, and curse-breaking’s my speciality. And I’m not a werewolf yet – they can’t take my wand off me until my first full moon. Go on Charlie, go find us a Portkey or someone willing to get us out.”

“Not that hurt-,” snorted Charlie. “You sound like me with a fresh burn from dragon fire.” Still, he agreed to leave in search of help.
“I can go help too – I could try find someone good at Side-Along-Apparition, or a Healer,” volunteered Hermione, who’d been waiting quietly at the side of the tent, just watching.

“If you see any of our friends who need help while you’re out there-” started Harry.

“I’ll send them here if they don’t have another way out,” she promised.

Before the two of them left, Charlie floated Mr. Weasley into Dobby’s room, gently placing his father down on the bare sheets. After that, under Harry’s concerned eye, Bill limped to Sirius’ room in the tent where Dobby stood watch.

“I could levitate you there. I think,” he offered tentatively. “Or Dobby could. You really shouldn’t walk on that leg.”

“I’m alright,” Bill insisted stubbornly.

Sirius had fallen asleep – Harry found an empty vial of Sleeping Draught next to the bed, with just a tiny smear of lavender potion left in the bottom of the vial. He must have been in too much pain – Harry was sorry he hadn’t offered to Stun him, which while not ideal probably would have been better than ingesting too many different potions.

After a consultation with Harry about the spell effects he’d observed, Bill quickly cast the proper counter-curse for the green curse on Sirius’ chest, and the skin changed back to a much more healthy-looking pink colour. “Nasty. That’s an acidic toxic curse that eats through the skin as well as leaving you feeling sick. He’s probably going to scar from that. It’s a good thing you counter-spelled as much as you could when you did – if it’s not countered or washed off fast it can eat through to the bone.”

Harry shuddered.

“I don’t know what to do about the dried-out arm though – it worries me,” Bill admitted, then limped away and into his father’s room, settling down into a chair next to the bed.

Harry trailed after him. “Do you know the curse at all?”

“Definitely Dark – nothing legal. It looks Egyptian – at a guess I’d say it’s a variant of the Mummification Curse. The flesh looks desiccated. But I don’t want to try dabbling with breaking it without my books to consult, and preferably someone who’s been doing this longer than I have. It’s stable – it’s not spreading. So I think we should wait on that injury. Find out if Sirius remembers the incantation or wand movements – that would help a lot for finding the proper counter-curse.”

Bill woke his father briefly with the Reviving Spell, coaxed him to drink some of Harry’s Blood-Replenishing Potion, and reassured him that the family was all fine. Then, as neither Harry nor Bill knew any pain-relief spells, Bill took the best option Harry had recommended as being available to them. He swiftly and efficiently Stunned his father into unconsciousness.

“Are you… alright?” Harry said, looking at Bill’s bandaged leg. Bill was easing it out slowly and carefully in a straight line in front of him, now his father wasn’t awake to see him favouring it.

“Honestly? I’m not great,” Bill admitted with a deep sigh. “But I would do it all again. The werewolf was going to kill dad, and it almost got Fred. He was charging in to rescue dad like a brainless Erumpent, with George about to try the same damn fool plan. Don’t tell them I said that, though. It was brave, just reckless. I’m glad I saved Fred – better me than him.”

“I won’t tell them,” Harry promised.
“Anyway, I have no regrets. Hopefully the goblins will find me some other job I can do. They’re not big on ‘wand wavers’ – there’s a lot of old bitterness there – so there might still be a few opportunities for me once I’m wandless myself, even if I can’t be a Curse-Breaker any longer.”

Harry escorted the other Weasleys in to see their brother and father. It was a relief to all of them to be promised that their father would definitely survive, and to see their brother looking a bit better all wrapped up in bandages.

“Harry?” a female voice called from outside the room, and Harry dashed out in a panic to relievedly find it wasn’t someone new who was hurt. It was Millicent and her family who’d stopped by to visit – they’d come to confirm a rumour that Hermione had made her way to Harry’s tent.

“I am most grievously sorry we lost her,” Millicent apologised tearfully. “I assure you it was not on purpose! She just… stopped to look at things while we kept going, and there was such a crowd. Is she here? Is she alright?”

Harry reassured her that all was well, and successfully enlisted Mr. Bulstrode’s help in evacuating the wounded via Side-Along-Apparition. While the Bulstrode family waited in the Black tent, he popped back and forth a few times, transporting out first Arthur and then Bill Weasley, then a wizard with burns whom Harry had treated who insisted on going next, then the rest of the Weasley family who were eager to stay with their father.

Hermione returned with help in tow while Harry was still dithering about whether to respect Sirius’ wishes about only being taken to St. Mungo’s by someone he knew, and Harry tiredly handed over Sirius’ care to Andromeda Tonks with a sigh of relief. She promised to keep Harry updated, and Apparated away with him immediately. Millicent and Hermione hugged in tearful reunion, apologising to each other for getting separated in the crush.

The Bulstrodes then departed themselves in dribs and drabs, and Hermione hugged Harry and made him promise to keep her in the loop about everything, before Millicent’s father popped Hermione away to her home. Sweat was beading Mr. Bulstrode’s brow at the repetitive strain of so many long-distance Side-Along-Apparitions in a row with only minimal rests in between. Mrs. Bulstrode (being less proficient at Side-Along-Apparition) took Millicent home with her once everyone else was away, to save her husband one last trip.

Harry looked around as the tent emptied out of everyone except himself and Mr. Jones who’d returned from his roaming, and in the sudden silence he tiredly realised that he’d forgotten to arrange transport for himself. Oops.

“I couldn’t find my cousin anywhere, but I found a Ministry worker outside who knows what’s going on,” Mr. Jones said hesitantly. “Basil said they’re doing Portkeys out in the morning for those who can’t make their own way home but who aren’t injured. There’s Aurors on site patrolling, including some from overseas looking after their own citizens. There’s no sign of any werewolves or Death Eaters so we should all be safe now. If you don’t mind me staying here tonight, I can help you pack up in the morning? You should probably get to bed.”

Leaving Dobby to arrange somewhere for Mr. Jones to sleep, Harry obediently went to bed, exhausted and silently relieved to have someone to tell him what to do.

Chapter End Notes
Please note that while the vast majority of the time I work hard to stick to book canon – or a plausible re-interpretation thereof – I ignore any movie canon at will, and I pick and choose which part of post-canon writings (e.g. from Pottermore) to accept that suit my story. Some of which were written after I began work on this series – like the new information about James’ parents – and are thus largely ignored.

In this fic series werewolves thus look almost identical to wolves, as per book canon (and unlike movie canon where they’re more humanoid). In my story they can voluntarily transform and also can be infectious at times other than the full moon as hinted at in book canon (and mentioned previously in “An Abnormal Godfather”), however, the latter part of that statement is rebutted by post-canonical writings on Pottermore (and has been deliberately ignored for the purposes of this story).

The reference to “Cugoano” will be elaborated on early in the next fic in the series, when Greg and Pansy will present Hermione with a copy of her expanded family tree as a birthday gift. If you’re very impatient you can google the name to find the fascinating historical figure I’ve picked to be one of Hermione’s ancestors. :)

John – Thanks for being my helpful consultant about dog body language this chapter.
Recovering Isn't Easy

Chapter Summary

Harry returns to Grimmauld Place, where he and Lupin read the Daily Prophet’s coverage of the attack while awaiting Sirius’ return. Friends check in on Harry.

Saturday 27th August 1994

After a half night’s restless sleep, at the crack of dawn Harry had a visitor. Snape showed up at Harry’s tent to call him an idiot and a clod-pated simpleton, and to take him back to Grimmauld Place.

“I gave. You. An emergency. Portkey,” Snape snarled through angrily gritted teeth, as he packed up the tent with angry slashes of his wand. Harry’s guest had been abruptly sent on his way, complaining about the rudeness of the wizard who hadn’t even introduced himself before kicking him out. Harry guessed Mr. Jones must be older than he looked if he didn’t recognise Snape, who’d been teaching at Hogwarts for a decade.

“Well yes,” agreed Harry, “and I do appreciate it – very much so – but there was an Anti-Disapparition Jinx up, and I didn’t want to get Splinched.”

“Portkeys are not Apparition, you troll-brained child!”

“Oh. It would have worked? Sirius said Portkeys wouldn’t work.” Something to research when he got time, perhaps.

“Yes,” Snape hissed. “Mine would have functioned as intended – it is no lazily-crafted Ministry-issued piece of rubbish.” Snape shrank the bundled tent up and passed it to Dobby, who silently popped away with it and Harry’s satchel, presumably to Grimmauld Place. Harry didn’t say a word about shrinking the tent potentially messing with its charms but kept a tight hold of his Healer’s bag himself, just in case Snape had any thoughts about shrinking it too.

“Sorry, I didn’t know that,” Harry admitted. “I haven’t read up on Apparition for ages, since I decided the Splinching risk wasn’t worth practising it.”

Snape pinched at the bridge of his nose, looking pained. “Why didn’t you use it to leave once the jinx was down?”

“Well, it’s for dire emergencies – that’s what you said. And it wasn’t an emergency any more. But uh… mostly because I wasn’t thinking about it then,” Harry admitted. “I was too busy helping people. I probably wouldn’t have left even if I’d remembered I had one.”

Snape snorted in disbelief.

“I thought of it earlier! Honestly! I just didn’t think it was safe,” Harry mumbled apologetically. “I’m really sorry. I did have it – I carry it everywhere. Well, I didn’t have it when I was in my pyjamas of course. So, I guess not quite everywhere.”
“It will work for you and only you, even if there’s an Anti-Disapparition Jinx in effect, and you will keep it on you at all times, Potter,” Snape instructed sternly, with a disdainful sneer on the word “Potter”, as if it was synonymous with “idiot”. Then he grabbed Harry’s arm and with a whirl of colour and a nauseating sensation they suddenly appeared across the road from number twelve Grimmauld Place, right next to the tree-filled fenced park.

“Won’t the Muggles notice us appearing?” Harry asked, looking around worriedly. A lady in trainers was jogging past with her dog on a leash but she didn’t react to their sudden appearance out of thin air.

“The old curses and charms on the park distract and confuse them. It is perfectly safe, I assure you. Black’s paranoia in warding his home like it is a Gringotts vault has made several such trips necessary, and Muggles never notice us appearing here even if they are looking straight at us.”

“Thanks for bringing me back here.”

“Do not mention it. Literally. I would ask you not explain to anyone that I fetched you here. Also, remember not to discuss your Portkey with anyone. That includes that pathetic excuse for a wizard you are currently staying with.”

Harry tilted his head curiously. Snape’s thin-lipped face and stern demeanour suggested he was being perfectly serious. “Alright, if that’s what you prefer.” He didn’t admit he’d already told Sirius about it. Sirius had been quite distracted at the time, and might not remember, anyway.

Snape nodded, and chivvied Harry to head inside to “the dubious oversight of a temperament werewolf of questionably flexible morals”, who was very relieved to see them both, even Snape. The feeling clearly wasn’t mutual, however.

Lupin asked a rush of eager and anxious questions about how Sirius was doing, what Snape had heard about the attack, and if Harry was alright, in that order.

To which Snape snippily replied, “He’s still alive and in St. Mungo’s but they aren’t keeping me updated on his condition, you lackwit. I have heard nothing I can tell you about. And you should have asked your last question first.”

Harry got a short bow from Snape and a muttered warning to stay safe, but Lupin got a very curt and cutting farewell. “I shall see you at tomorrow night’s meeting, since it has been postponed. If you are permitted to attend any of it, that is.”

With a swish of black robes Snape left the house, closing the door behind him.

“Ouch,” Harry said, with a sympathetic glance at Lupin.

Lupin just sighed. “I’ve heard worse. Come on, let’s get you some breakfast, and then if you don’t mind I’d appreciate it if you’d Floo St. Mungo’s and ask how Sirius is doing. I can’t do it myself, obviously.”

-000-

St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries was swamped with patients and anxious families, and Harry couldn’t get an update about Sirius from the harried staff member who answered the Floo apart from a confirmation that he was alive and a patient. However, Andromeda Black Flooed Grimmauld Place later with news – Sirius was recovering well and was eager to be discharged, he had no lycanthropy infection, he’d asked for no visitors, and he should be home by evening at the absolute latest.
Lupin told Harry that the planned Order meeting for the evening had been postponed by a day due
to the terrible attack at the World Cup. It would now be held on Sunday night rather than that
evening. Harry and Lupin spent the morning reading Lupin’s copy of the *Daily Prophet*, where
Rita Skeeter had barely needed to sensationalise anything for her readers to make the news
dramatic and heart-rending.

She led with a discussion of whom to blame for the “massacre” – escaped former Death Eaters, led
willingly or otherwise by their fellow Death Eater, the traitorous Peter Pettigrew, who’d loudly
proclaimed at the Quidditch World Cup that he was the “new Dark Lord”. For the werewolf attack
itself, Skeeter blamed “Pettigrew’s staunch ally, the alpha werewolf Remus Lupin, insane servant
of You-Know-Who.”

“It wasn’t me, of course,” Lupin said tiredly, scrubbing at his unshaven face. “I was home all
evening with a book and a mug of warm milk. However, they won’t let that fact get in the way of a
tidy story, since I set it up so nicely for them earlier. Ha!” He finished with a short burst of laughter
that startled Harry. “The one tiny bit of silver lining here is that Fenrir Greyback is going to be *livid*
that his pack’s rampage is going to be credited to *me* instead of him,” Lupin said with a toothy grin.
His momentary happiness didn’t last, however, and the smile fell off his face quickly as he
continued reading.

“They’re quoting Picardy again,” he muttered unhappily. “Saying how lycanthropes suffer from a
permanent loss of moral sense.”

“Picardy? Who’s he?”

“Professor Emerett Picardy. His book *Lupine Lawlessness: Why Lycanthropes Don’t Deserve to Live* is far too popular in certain circles,” Lupin said absent-mindedly as he continued reading.

“That toad Umbridge has been quoting him a lot lately when she’s been interviewed for the paper.”

Lupin’s face became even graver as he turned the page. “There’s a list of the known fatalities,” he
said quietly, “as well as some of the most grievously injured. If you want to hear it?”

“I’d rather know than not,” Harry said, lifting his chin high in the air with a determined expression.

Lupin nodded gravely and read the names out slowly, with a little personal commentary interjected.
“Kingsley Shacklebolt – a good man and a fine Auror, he’ll be sorely missed. Saul Croaker is
missing and presumed dead – he’s an Unspeakable with the Ministry. Old Cuthbert Mockridge –
Head of the Goblin Liaison Office since before I was born. Bartemius Crouch – Head of the
Department of International Magical Cooperation.”

“Percy’s boss,” Harry added, brow wrinkling with concern.

“Eustace Montgomery – just five years old the poor lad, so I don’t expect you’ve heard of him.
Hestia Jones – damn, another Order member. Looks like they might have targeted us… them.
Amos Diggory-”

“Cedric’s father?” Harry gasped. “Is Cedric alright?

“Yes, that would be him. ‘Survived by his wife and son’ it says, so your friend should be alright.
Poor fellow, I remember teaching him – very talented lad. Nigel Wolpert – the eldest son in his
family, he was due to start Hogwarts this year. There are a few more foreign names of people I
doubt you know, and a couple of Muggles from the camp manager’s family – Mrs. Roberts and her
youngest child were both attacked by werewolves and passed away. Muggles don’t often survive
werewolf attacks, even when the wounds are minor.”
Harry shuffled his chair closer to Lupin with a loud scrape on the hard floor so he could lean over to read the article too. He skimmed the long list of the wounded, looking for familiar names. Sirius was there of course, and Arthur and William Weasley were listed too. Amelia Bones – Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement – was listed as wounded but uninfected and expected to pull through. Her niece Susan Bones was, however, not quite so lucky and was listed as one of over a dozen people confirmed as having been infected with the curse of lycanthropy, a few of whom were children even younger than Susan.

“Poor Susan,” Harry groaned. “Will she get to come to Hogwarts, still?”

Lupin rested a comforting hand on Harry’s shoulder and squeezed gently. “I don’t know. I only got to go because of Dumbledore’s cooperation in hiding my status as a werewolf. If they’d followed the law strictly, I never would have been allowed to learn to use a wand. I’m sure he will do what he can to help, though. He’s very sympathetic in such cases. This will be another case of Greyback getting revenge and trying to influence politics through infecting the children, just like he did with my father. It’s hard for a parent or relative to help pass laws against a group when a child from your family is one of the afflicted.”

Harry and Lupin spent the day waiting for more news and for Sirius to return. Lupin spent the morning hovering near the fireplace in case it lit up green with a message or a visitor, and skulking across the road in a hooded cloak, in hopes that an owl unable to get past Grimmauld Place’s wards would arrive with a message. Periodically Lupin devoted himself to frenzied bursts of house-cleaning, aided by the house-elves. Two motivated house-elves hadn’t left him much to do – the house still looked old, but it wasn’t grimy any longer – so he concentrated on mending tears and holes in the old curtains with repetitive charm work.

Lupin sternly instructed Harry not to try talking to Walburga Black’s portrait. “I’ve already told her about her son’s injury, and her opinion on the matter is not one fit for your ears to hear. Her curtains stay drawn closed until further notice.”

Harry stayed out of Lupin’s way and spent the morning writing a handful letters to friends asking after their health, including one to the Weasley family as a whole. He also sent a sympathetic letter offering to help Susan Bones if there was anything he could do to assist, and saying that he hoped they’d still see her at Hogwarts. He also prewrote a number of identical letters assuring people he himself was fine with blanks to fill in the names, expecting a flood of enquiries that evening once the incoming owls made it past his personal wards. In the afternoon he grabbed some books and retired to the potions room to brew up some replacement potions for the ones he’d used at the World Cup, their utility proven beyond all doubt.

It was starting to grow dark outside by the time Harry emerged from the potions room hours later with his Healer’s bag restocked, except for the powdered silver which he’d have to order in from an apothecary. His dark hair was lank from the potions fumes, his fingers stained green from chopping ingredients, and a faint scent of sulphur clung to his robes. He headed quietly downstairs to the kitchen, led by his grumbling stomach which sternly reminded him that he’d missed lunch (having not spotted a now dried-out sandwich quietly left for him by a house-elf) and was fast approaching missing dinner as well.

He paused at the top of the stairwell down to the basement level as he overheard an angry voice talking loudly in the kitchen.

“They’re supposed to be the best Healers in England,” he overheard Sirius scoff angrily, “yet they can’t cure a simple Dark curse, and had nothing better to offer than amputation, which I am not interested in. Oh, and another repeated recommendation of ‘purging’ me of my presumed excess of
black bile to deal with my melancholic humour.”

Since Sirius wasn’t angry at him, Harry began to head in to the kitchen but hesitated and remained just out of sight on the stairs when he heard Lupin say his name in his response.

“Did Harry make a mistake with his spells? Why can’t they counter it? He told me he did his best but was worried he’d gotten something wrong. And young Bill Weasley countered some ‘green foam’ on your chest – an acidic curse.”

“They did fine,” Sirius assured him. “It’s not Harry’s fault, or the Weasley boy’s. They say I probably would have died if Harry hadn’t fixed my ribs. Oh, they still needed a bit of a fix up to get some loose bone chips he missed, but it was well done, and they say it most likely kept me alive. It’s the arm that’s the real problem!”

“Perhaps if you had stayed there longer-”

“For what? They knew almost nothing about the curse – they said there wasn’t a cure! Of course I wanted to get out of that tiny room as fast as I could!”

“Did it happen again?” Lupin asked gently. “Athena’s Curse?”

There was a pause in the conversation, and Harry held his breath in the sudden silence, not wanting to be caught eavesdropping outside the door.

“…Yes. Merlin help me, yes,” Sirius admitted at last, in a hushed voice that was thick with shame. “I wasn’t strong enough… I was weak! So weak. I thought… it was a hospital, I’ve been there before, and it wasn’t so bad last time. Then they said I couldn’t leave until a Healer came to see me and I was properly treated, and the Mediwitch closed the door to my room when she left, and I was all alone. Hurt and trapped in that bare, little hospital room, with just a single tiny window to look out of… It felt like the Dementors were back again,” Sirius said to Lupin in a choked voice. “Every time it’s like I’m reliving things all over again. I feel like my mind is cracked into pieces, like I’m broken and I’m trying to Reparo the pieces back together, but it just keeps coming back together wrong, and then I break all over again…”

“You’re not broken,” Lupin soothed. “Just give it time.”

“I don’t want to see those memories again and again for the rest of my life! James’ body lying so still on the stairs, his eyes so blank. Poor Marlene screaming with her last breath as I got there too late. My mother screeching about how she is going to disown me for betraying everything the family stands for, and that she hopes the Dark Lord tortures and kills me for spurning his offer. Peter killing all those people, with the body parts just flying into the air then coming down again in a rain of blood and I am drenched in it and the smell, Moony! The smell! Then he hits me with a Cheering Charm so I can’t help but laugh even though I’m screaming inside…”

“Shh, it’s alright…”

“I will never be alright, and now I cannot even fight! I lost my wand, and even if I had it, my arm is useless. For good! I am useless. Don’t you dare say that’s alright!”

There was a pause, then Lupin’s voice said calmly, “It’s not alright. You’re a lazy prat and you should go and get a new wand to suit casting with your left hand. I think this is just another one of your pranks to make me do all the hard work for you.”

There was a long pause, and Harry froze again, still and quiet. Then he heard twinned voices laughing together.
“That was just the one time!” chuckled Sirius. “Man, I can’t believe you fell for that old arm-down-the-shirt trick. As if Snivellus could hex my arm off, honestly Moony!”

“He might have!” Lupin’s amused voice said. “And it was twice actually, if you count the so-called ‘dragon pox’ that stopped you doing your summer History of Magic assignment.”

Things seemed to be at a safe point to interrupt now, so Harry tromped loudly down the stairs and was enthusiastically greeted by Sirius who looked good as new… except for his dried-out right arm which was still hanging limply from the shoulder, not much more than wrinkled veiny skin stretched tight across bone, with the muscle almost entirely withered away.

“I want to say again how sorry I am that I yelled at you back at the campground,” Sirius apologised. “I just wanted you to stay safe.”

“I don’t mind,” Harry assured him. “I know you weren’t angry, just scared.”

Sirius huffed. “Concerned. I was concerned,” he insisted, as Lupin smiled thinly at him, humour dancing in his eyes.

“Of course, sorry, my mistake,” Harry said. “Have you had dinner yet? Do you need me to cook?”

A choked sound came from the direction of the sink where Kreacher had been slowly washing up some teacups with a long-suffering air, standing on a tiny three-legged stool. “No, young Master! Kreacher and Dobby will cook! Dobby!”

Dobby popped into the kitchen and looked around for Kreacher, called by the sound of his name. Kreacher and he quickly settled the matter between them in quiet whispers, while Harry waited patiently, and the older wizards watched the goings-on with amusement.

“Kreacher will finish the dishes and clean the potions room if young Master is finished, and Dobby will cook steak and vegetables,” Kreacher announced. “Master Harold will be fetching his letters as young Master likes to do when it is dark.” He turned back to the sink after his pronouncement, scrubbing twice as hard as he had been before.

“Bossy little thing now, isn’t he?” Lupin said with a laugh. “Still, Harry being here has really perked him up tremendously.”

“It reminds me of how he was with Regulus,” mused Sirius. “Devoted, but bossy.”

“It’s a good suggestion though,” Harry said defensively. “Well, if you don’t mind I’ll head out across the road to await the evening’s owls. Why is the park warded, by the way? If it is a park – I never see anyone in there, and it’s all fenced off.”

Sirius shrugged. “The Muggles think the hillock in there covers a historic water reservoir. Important enough to preserve untouched, but too boring to bother investigating. It’s actually the old Black Barrow. It used to be in wizard space or mist-hidden or something, but the charms failed. Now it just has Muggle-Repelling wards on it, and a Confundus Charm or two, I believe. It’s an old barrow the family has used for centuries as a burial site. It predates this house. As a matter of fact, the barrow is the reason the Blacks own the house – some ancestor conned a Muggle out of number twelve precisely because it was adjacent to the barrow. He ‘persuaded’ the Muggle occupants to leave this once-lovely house, then hid it from their sight with a number of spells.

“But remember,” added Sirius, “when I die I’d rather be buried in the Godric’s Hollow graveyard. It’s in my will in case you forget.”
If,” said Remus.

“What?”

“If you die,” Lupin said. “Don’t talk like it’s inevitable. I don’t like to hear you talking like that.”

Sirius blinked and looked at his friend for a brief moment, then plastered on a smile. “Of course not. It’s just that it happens to us all eventually – that’s all I meant.”

“Weren’t you going to go get your letters, Harry?” Lupin said, and Harry took the hint to leave.

Since apparently Muggles would be dissuaded from noticing anything odd in the vicinity of the park that was actually a barrow, Harry awoke Storm to keep him company outside. Harry plonked himself down on the footpath outside it under a street light to await the evening’s owls, with his pre-written “I’m fine” letters ready to pawn off to any owls agreeable to carrying outgoing mail after delivering their own missives. With an ink-dipped quill he scrawled a few postscripts on a couple of them about Sirius’ release from hospital while the sun slowly set in a glorious display of reddened clouds. As the sky darkened and the first stars began appearing, the first owls of the evening swooped in silently, landing on the fence behind him to be relieved of their letters.

Hermione’s friendly barn owl, Diana, was happy to wait around for Harry’s reply to Hermione’s letter checking in on him. She also hooted agreeably and nibbled gently at his fingers when he asked if she would take some extra letters for him. He gave her a baby mouse to eat while she waited, and then got a second one out of the preserving box to give to Storm, since his snake was envious of the owl’s snack.

The Weasley family had sent a joint letter via Percy’s screech owl Hermes, with a variety of handwriting styles showing that a few family members had contributed to the letter. Harry read with interest about how Mr. Weasley was recovering in St. Mungo’s, but had lost his left eye which had been replaced with a prosthetic. His wounds weren’t healing well, as was typical for werewolf injuries, and his primary Healer had been willing to write them off and leave them to scar horribly. But Apprentice Healer Augustus Pye who was interested in “complementary medicine” had put some stitches in Arthur and Bill’s wounds. According to Ron’s description this had horrified Mrs. Weasley who had “turned into a living Howler” and yelled at both Apprentice Healer Pye and her husband. Mrs. Weasley added her own commentary on the letter (which must have embarrassed Ron), and first lavished praise on Harry for “saving” her husband and eldest son. She also defensively added that she “had nothing against Muggle-borns”, it was just that she hadn’t liked seeing her husband and son “darned like old socks with experimental Muggle healing”. Bill wrote with a message more directed more at Sirius than Harry, recommending that Sirius write down what he remembered of the Mummification Curse’s wand movements and incantation, and to use a Pensieve to retrieve the memories if they weren’t fresh in his mind.

A few people had sent thank you letters accompanied by tiny money pouches with a few coins inside, to repay Harry for the potions and healing he’d given them or their family members at the World Cup. The Weasleys weren’t one of those offering him repayment, but he knew their family wasn’t well off and wasn’t at all offended. If Mr. Weasley couldn’t work, then their family’s finances were about to get worse. Their expressions of gratitude were more than enough for him – Harry was just happy he’d helped his friends’ family.

Various friends and hangers-on wrote to check on him, and to share their own stories. The Malfoys had allegedly all been hiding in their tent during the hubbub – a claim that Harry was a bit suspicious of. Perhaps Draco hadn’t been, but he suspected that Lucius might have been outside in a
mask and hooded cloak.

The Parkinson family had evacuated the site as soon as the first screams had started, thanks to a Portkey swiftly made by Pansy’s grandfather Trophonius. Harry guessed that meant Snape had been right and Sirius had been wrong – Portkeys could work fine when an Anti-Disapparition Jinx was up… at least on that particular occasion they had.

Millicent’s father wrote to double-check in a cautiously polite fashion that Harry was satisfied that his efforts in evacuating people was a favour sufficient to balance their lapse in properly safeguarding Harry’s client, Miss Granger. Harry politely replied in his return letter that he considered the scales balanced in that regard.

There were a couple of re-routed letters from the Muggle world sent via an owl dispatched from a Hogsmeade Owl Office address. The first of those was a letter from Dudley with an outraged complaint about how his mum had thrown his Playstation out the window after she caught him smuggling “just three” doughnuts into the house after a very long day of nothing but salad. The second letter was Harry’s long-awaited IGCSE exam results. He’d gotten top marks – straight A’s in French, Latin, and Maths, just like he’d hoped. Three down, five to go. He only had a little bit of work left to wrap up for English and Biology this year (he wished again that he’d pushed harder when he’d had the Time-Turner and gotten them finished early too), but Chemistry, Human Biology and Business Studies were probably going to be a lot of work. He was already planning to leave taking the exam for Business Studies until the end of fifth year, but any others he didn’t finish this coming year would also have to overlap with his OWL year, and that wouldn’t be a great outcome. He’d started some of his assignments already and sent them in – trying to get a head start during the holidays.

Margaret Smith, the old witch who’d sheltered with him in his tent, wrote to ask how he was, and also to let him know that her great-nephew Zacharias Smith was in the year below him at Hogwarts and that the lad sent his best wishes too.

Hermes Jones also wrote to Harry, though his news wasn’t as good. While he was thankful again for Harry’s assistance, he sadly reported that his cousin Hestia Jones was one of those killed at the World Cup. Harry thought it was a real shame he’d lost someone and penned his best sympathetic reply. Harry had wondered, after Mrs. Smith’s announcement, if either of them were related to a Jones in his year who was in Hufflepuff (whom he didn’t know anything more about than her surname). Daphne was one of many who’d written to Harry to gossip about who had been killed or injured in the massacre at the Cup, and Harry added a postscript asking her about the Jones family. Daphne always seemed to know who was related to whom, as it was a point of pride with her to stay informed about family connections.

More and more owls arrived, a whole flock of them. Neville, Theodore, Macmillan, Luna’s father, Anthony, and Greg all had Harry’s stock “I’m fine” letter sent off in swift reply with their owls.

One particular person checking in on his wellbeing would need a more considered reply, however. Lord Voldemort had written to Harry again.

-Harry flopped down on the green coverlet on top of his bed, and slowly opened his most worrying letter.

“Tell him I ss[end greetings to him and Nagini],” Storm commented composedly. “What does he ss[say today]?”
“He’s asking if I’m alright, and he explainss in a sslightly apologetic way that Pettigrew was acting outside of the sscope of his instructionss and will be ‘chastised’ for his behaviour,” hissed Harry, “and that none of his followerss should have attacked me or even my friends while he ssawaitss word of my decision about a truce or alliance. He’s using wordss like ‘regrettable’ about the werewolf attack, and he ssays that his Death Eater showed ‘proper obedient restraint’ in not killing me despite Pettigrew’s orderss. He keepss saying ‘Pettigrew’ – I don’t think he wantss to admit that Pettigrew is possessed. His apologies are all very well, but I think the underlying message he’s hinting at is clear – if I don’t agree to a truce, I and those I care for might be deliberately targeted next time.”

“Anything else? Does he mention me at all?”

“No, not in thiss letter. The rest is just odd chatter, like we’re ssstill friends. He hopess I liked my birthday present, and askss if I would like to correspond about my problemss in Astronomy, since it’s the classs I’m doing the worst in. How does he even know about that?”

“I don’t know.”

“He mentionss a couple of bookss he thinkss might be helpful in putting it all in the context of harvesting herbs, astrology, and conducting ritualss, since Hogwartss ‘pays ssllust attention to the proper uses of the art, reducing it to a dull science rather than attending to the magical influencess of the ssstars’. It’s weird. In one sentence he’s indirectly threatening to kill me, then the next minute he’s worrying about my gradess.”

“I’m glad he doesn’t want to kill you. Warn him if he tries I will bite him. No – I shall attack him with lightning! No… don’t warn him. That way I can ambush him,” Storm said excitedly, refining his plan as he went along.

“I ssstill don’t know what to do,” sighed Harry.

“I don’t understand,” Storm admitted, clearly confused by Harry’s indecision. “I thought you planned this already and decided to not fight each other many moonss ago. What happenss if you sssay no, you shall fight him? Will you win?”

“He and his followerss will try to kill me. And my friends. I doubt I would win – people sssay only Dumbledore was ever a match for him in battle.”

“What happenss if you say yess to being friends? Will you be sssafe?”

“Well, I guessss he won’t attack me, and maybe not my friends either. But if people find out… I don’t know. People might assume I have an alliance with him, rather than neutrality. They’d think I should fight him just like my parentss did - I’d be hated for it, I guessss.”

“Hated by everyone?”

“Probably not,” Harry said, thinking of the Malfoys’ connections to the Dark Lord, and the pragmatic Parkinson family who always chose safety. Neville would surely be outraged, though.

“It ssseemss like an easy choice to me. Don’t get killed. And don’t tell people you are friends with him. I don’t want Millicent hurt. Wouldn’t you feel bad if she was dead? Who would send us bugss?!” Storm asked, showing the most animation on the topic he’d ever had so far, wiggling around unhappily as if the thought disturbed him.

Images flashed into Harry’s mind at those words – Millicent lying dead on the ground, ripped apart
by werewolves into so much meat. Neville sitting on a hospital bed staring blankly into the air with a vacant smile on his face, just like his parents. Hermione hit by a green ray rather than the red one she’d fallen prey to in the blink of an eye, swifter than either of them had been able to defend against.

He thought of Susan Bones, already a casualty despite her age. No doubt right now she was lying wounded in hospital – stitched up if she was lucky. She would spend the rest of her life as a werewolf and might never be allowed to return to Hogwarts or use a wand ever again. He imagined Hermione in a similar situation, breaking down at the news that her wand would be snapped – all her years of studying magic useless.

He couldn’t protect them. He couldn’t save any of them from any of that. He was good at defensive spells, but not that good. Even if he was, he couldn’t be everywhere at once. There was only one sure way to protect his friends.

“I’m going to do it,” Harry said, jaw jutting out determinedly. “I’m going to ask for a formal ssstance of neutrality between our Houses, and I’m going to ssstick to it properly thiss time, and I’ll protect all my friends if I can. I think it’s the only way I can definitely help them.”

“Good. Ask him for some sssnackss, too, if you’re going to be friends,” Storm hissed contentedly, slithering up Harry’s arm to wrap around his shoulders as Harry wrote his reply formally accepting the offer of a truce and opening negotiation on the terms, including protection for his friends.

Harry wondered guiltily if this was how Pettigrew’s betrayal had begun and swore to himself that he would never do anything that would harm his friends. There was a line, and he would never cross it.
The Order of the Phoenix

Chapter Summary

The Order of the Phoenix meets at Grimmauld Place.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sunday 28th August 1994

Sirius appreciated Bill Weasley’s relayed advice about researching the Mummification Curse and contacted Dumbledore to ask him to bring a Pensieve to the meeting that evening. Harry had another thought about researching the curse, as well as how to help the Weasleys in the process. He drafted a letter to Bill inviting him to quote his rates for discreetly doing curse-breaking on a box of old books about Dark magic in hopes one of them might reference Mummification or similar Dark curses. There was a “bin” full of such books culled from the Black library up in the attic, and Harry hoped one of them might have information about the curse afflicting Sirius, but he wasn’t game to look through them unless they’d been properly checked first. Kreacher had warned that some of them bit, while others were cursed in unknown ways. It seemed like a good way to covertly offer the Weasley family some charity, while Bill was still legally permitted to wield a wand. Heck, if they could keep it very quiet Harry would be happy to hire him even if he wasn’t legally allowed to use a wand – it was a stupid law.

While Sirius went out wand shopping, Harry spent most of Sunday in the library, researching and chatting with Phineas Black’s portrait. He quizzed Phineas about the finer points of etiquette for establishing the terms of truces, alliances, and feuds (without admitting to the real reason why he wanted to know). He also read though some of his books on healing charms and potions, looking for good options for pain relief, and charms for healing deep cuts that went into the muscles. He didn’t immediately find anything especially useful, and instead got distracted reading up on a wound-cleaning potion that stopped bad “miasmas” from causing infection, and excitedly made notes about what ingredients he’d need to buy to brew it. He eventually hauled himself back to less fascinating reading that would be more useful for school and spent a while reviewing his potions textbook. Sirius and Lupin checked in on him occasionally, and Sirius brought him up a plate of roast beef sandwiches with chutney for lunch, which Harry accepted with surprise and gratitude. He returned to his recreational reading about healing charms and potions while he ate his lunch.

Harry had a spot of luck when re-reading Common Magical Ailments and Afflictions in stumbling across a mention of the acidic green foam Sirius had been hit with, in a reference to Gunhilda of Gorsemoor’s potion that was a treatment (though not a total cure) for Dragon Pox. It seemed very likely that the curse Sirius had been hit with was called the “Dragon Pox Curse”, thus named due to a similarity of effects to the disease in causing pock-marked greenish-tinged skin and being potentially fatal. The potion that was helpful for treating the disease was of limited use in reversing the effects of the curse, and a counter-curse was recommended instead. With the curse’s name to look up, he quickly found the spell in Practical Defensive Magic and its Use Against the Dark Arts and read up on it and its counter-curse. The textbook didn’t explain in detail how to cast the curse (which seemed wise, since it was an illegal Dark curse), but it did list its spoken incantation and effects, and had a detailed description of the counter-curse including a moving picture.
demonstrating the proper wand movement. It also noted that a well-cast Protego or any physical barrier should also stop the curse from hitting.

The first Harry knew of visitors arriving for the ‘Order of the Phoenix’ meeting was from the cries of Walburga Black’s portrait screaming, “Filth! Half-breed! Begone from my house this instant, you mewling mangy Kneazle!” It was piercingly shrill – loud enough to be heard all the way up to the second floor.

Harry tucked some bookmarks in his textbooks to mark his places and headed downstairs to see what the hubbub was all about. He found Sirius yanking the curtains shut over his mother’s portrait, while Tonks was apologetically putting some umbrellas and walking sticks back into an ugly troll’s-foot umbrella stand. Harry still didn’t understand why Sirius hadn’t chucked that thing out – it deserved it more than most of the things he’d culled from the house. Trolls could talk.

“Hi Harry,” Sirius said, looking a little relieved to see him, shoulders relaxing from their formerly tense hunch. “Would you mind playing butler? Let the latecomers know we’re meeting downstairs in the kitchen today. Don’t let them go upstairs. I’ll send one of the house-elves to let you know when we’re ready for you to join us.”

“Sure thing,” he said agreeably, and Sirius headed off downstairs, closing the basement door behind him.

“Wotcher, Potter,” Tonks said with an embarrassed grin, putting the last items away in the umbrella stand. “This thing tripped me up last time, too. It sure is a creepy old house, isn’t it? Even without any assistance from mad old Great-Aunt Walburga. Snakes everywhere too. Sirius was talking about replacing them all, last time I visited.” She nodded in the direction of the door handles to the closed dining room, which were made of silver fashioned into the shape of serpents.

“Well, it’s less creepy than it used to be,” Harry said with an apologetic note in his voice. “We’ve done a lot of cleaning up and Sirius got rid of a lot of the more troublesome items. The house-elves even dusted and washed the chandelier so now it sparkles. I don’t really mind the snake decor, though. And you don’t need to worry - they’re just shaped like that you know. None of them talk or bite or anything.” He’d checked one dull grey afternoon by hissing at doorhandles and taps until Lupin had caught him at it and grinned at Harry’s suddenly bright red face.

“Not that you’d mind if they did want a little chat,” Tonks said with a grin. “The house is looking amazing, by the way, sorry I didn’t say so before. We haven’t met here for months, and the difference is incredible. Even the wallpaper looks cleaner! Say, in your big clean up did you find any snake statues to add to your collection?”

Harry tilted his head to the side. “How did you know I collect snake statuettes?”

“Well, I saw you got a few for your birthday, so I figured you collected them,” she said with a shrug. “Don’t you?”

“How did you see that? You weren’t at my birthday party,” Harry said suspiciously. Why wouldn’t she just admit to gossiping with some of the Slytherins?

Tonks winced, eyes and nose scrunching up dramatically. “I was there?” she admitted in a very small voice. “Cousin Sirius worried… that you didn’t want adults hanging around for your party, but then you’d be undefended if someone tried something. So, I went in disguise – like this.”

In a matter of seconds Tonks’ appearance changed from a dark-eyed young woman with short hot-pink hair, to a middle-aged woman with blue eyes, wavy brown hair, and the beginnings of
wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and around her mouth.

“Oh wow, that was so fast!” gasped Harry. “Can you change your whole body, or just your face?”

Tonks let out a surprised laugh. “That’s not the reaction I usually get! Well, maybe the second part.” She winked at him, and then laughed again as he looked put out rather than embarrassed or amused.

“I’m sorry if I was prying,” he said a little stiffly, not enjoying being laughed at. “I was just curious.”

“Sorry Potter, I didn’t mean any offence! It’s just… you were impressed that it was fast, rather than being surprised I can change my face in the first place,” Tonks said apologetically, cutting off her laughter and trying to answer him seriously. “It was nice, actually. And yes, I can shift my whole body – height and weight too – though it takes more effort to do so. It doesn’t take any more time, though – it’s just a matter of concentration and focus. Well, I’d better get down to the meeting.”

She left Harry brooding over whether to be upset or pleased that Sirius had gotten someone to discreetly guard him at his birthday party, and how to unsuspiciously ask Tonks how she’d trained her Metamorphmagus ability.

A short man in a mauve top hat and matching cloak was the next to arrive and introduced himself excitedly to Harry in a squeaky voice as Dedalus Diggle. He bowed and shook Harry’s hand and was thrilled to hear that Harry vaguely recognised him from being bowed to in a shop in Surrey years ago.

“You remember me, how remarkable!” he said delightedly, and bowed again in farewell before heading downstairs.

There was only one additional guest for Harry to greet at the door, whose appearance was so startling that Harry pre-emptively reached for his wand and pointed it at him as soon as he saw him in the doorway, which made the man laugh, and nod approvingly.

“Good instincts Potter, you can’t be too careful in times like this. Constant vigilance!” he added loudly. “But I’m not here to hurt you, I’m here for the meeting. Professor Alastor Moody’s the name, and we shall be seeing a lot of each other at Hogwarts this year as I’m going to be one of your teachers, so you’d better get used to this ugly old mug of mine!”

Moody’s grizzled face certainly was a sight, and not a pretty one. Framed by long grey hair, it was weather-beaten with scars criss-crossing every inch of it. Half his nose was missing, but his eyes were the most unnerving feature. One eye was small, dark and beady, while the glassy right eye was an electric blue, and moved constantly, rolling up and down and side to side, quite independent of the more normal eye which gazed into Harry’s eyes with an intent stare.

“Sorry, sir,” Harry said, lowering his wand and tucking it away in a pocket, embarrassed at having judged on appearance. “Everyone’s meeting downstairs in the kitchen.”

Moody clomped forwards with a Knocking rap on every second step, and Harry glanced down to see one of the man’s legs was just a wooden peg leg. It looked much like Professor Kettleburn’s – the retired professor for Care of Magical Creatures – who had also made do with wooden prosthetic limbs. The magical world clearly put more thought into prosthetic eyes than legs or arms.

“Tch,” clucked Moody disapprovingly as he hobbled past Harry. “You shouldn’t put your wand
away or look away from someone until you know for sure they aren’t an enemy. I could have summoned and snapped your wand by now if I was out for your blood. A shame, too, that you didn’t bother to check with anyone that I was actually invited. Poor form, Potter, even with the wards layered over this place.”

He was down the stairs while Harry was still deciding if he should do anything like call out to people or not. “Sorry?” he called plaintively after Moody. There were all kinds of spells on the house, including Fidelius. Theoretically, no uninvited enemies should be able to get in... but then… that’s what his parents had thought too. Harry summoned Dobby to briefly pop in and check on the meeting to make sure Moody hadn’t attacked anyone. Dobby reported back that everyone was fine, and that Dumbledore had started the meeting. So, Harry went upstairs to get his letter from Lockhart and wait to be called, which took about an hour.

The meeting was well underway when Harry entered the cosy kitchen. A dozen people were seated around the long rectangular wooden kitchen table, which was littered with goblets and teacups, and the remains of a picked-over platter of chicken sandwiches. Dumbledore and Sirius sat at opposite ends of the table, and along the sides were a handful of people he recognised, and a few he didn’t. Mrs Weasley and Bill Weasley were there and greeted him cheerfully as he entered, as did Diggle. They sat opposite Tonks and Moody, who were deep in conversation about a woman named Jorkins, from the Ministry, whom they were concerned was still missing, as was Andy Smudgley who was a reporter for the Daily Prophet. The two were busy tossing around ideas regarding who Tonks could impersonate in search of leads.

Fletcher grimaced slightly as Harry entered. Harry still didn’t really regret calling the Aurors on Fletcher at Privet Drive. Someone should have told him he had invisible guards. Kreacher seemed to be watching Fletcher very carefully, as he slowly shuffled around the kitchen tidying up in a desultory fashion. When Kreacher waited on Harry the table was always cleared much more promptly after a meal.

There were three people at the table Harry didn’t recognise – a stately-looking witch in an emerald green shawl, a wrinkled old wizard with blue eyes, with a moth-eaten red fez perched on top of his thinning silver hair, and a wizard with a square jaw and thick straw-coloured hair.

The meeting also included on person he recognised but was truthfully a little shocked to see at first. It was Professor Snape. Well, Master Snape now he wasn’t a teacher. When Harry thought about it, it seemed obvious – he’d already known that Snape had spied on the Dark Lord in the past. Also, Snape had clearly been talking with people about guarding him – he must be in their group. Yet… Harry knew he was a follower of the Old Ways, and his attitude about the fact the Malfoys had given Harry old political propaganda of the Dark Lord’s was suspiciously tolerant. If Snape was going to be at a meeting… well… Harry would’ve expected he would need a mask for it, and report to someone completely different. What was he doing here? Who was he really loyal to? Were his sympathetic statements about blood magic and old traditions just a façade to get Harry – and others – to incriminate themselves?

Harry’s absent-minded staring at Snape didn’t go unnoticed, and Sirius spoke up to reassure him. “Don’t worry about Snape, Harry. He’s a spy, he’s on our side. Or so Dumbledore vouches, at any rate,” Sirius said, making a valiant effort at trying to be reassuring, but his heart didn’t seem in it.

“I most certainly do vouch for him,” Dumbledore said, with a serene smile. “His loyalty is unquestionable.”

Dumbledore is many things, but a fool isn’t one of them, Harry thought. He must have a good
Snape scowled darkly down the table at Sirius.

Harry asked slowly and cautiously, “I don’t mean to be rude or anything, but isn’t that kind of... dangerous?”

“Oh, Harry dear – Mr. Potter – I promise you’re quite safe here,” Mrs. Weasley hastened to assure him. “Not a single person here would harm you, Professor Snape included – we’re all united in a common cause. We gather together to do what we can against You-Know-Who, since the Ministry is too incompetent or corrupt to even recognise that he’s back, and behind all the attacks.”

Harry shook his head. “I didn’t mean to imply that he’d be dangerous to me, that wasn’t what I meant at all.” Harry might not feel sure about Snape’s true allegiances, but he trusted that Snape wouldn’t hurt him.

“If it’s external threats you are fretting about, worry not. The wards are strong, and even if our enemies knew we met here – which isn’t for every meeting, just a few of them – they wouldn’t attack when we’re all together,” Sirius said with a sidelong glance at Dumbledore. “They are cowards, Harry. They usually prefer solitary targets, or crowds of innocents not ready for trouble.”

“No...” Harry said slowly, “that’s still not what I meant. What I’m trying to say is, isn’t it really dangerous for Master Snape if he’s... since he’s a spy?”

Snape – armed with his training as an Occlumens in appearing calm and collected in the face of surprises – was one of the few who didn’t look surprised by Harry’s question. The grizzled old Auror Moody was another – he grinned at Harry. “Dangerous business, being a spy. The boy gets it.”

Harry wanted to smack his hand against his forehead, but that wouldn’t be polite. They still didn’t understand what he was trying to say. It must be his fault – he was phrasing things badly. “Sorry. I mean, is isn’t it dangerous telling me he’s a spy and letting me see him here? I get that this is your core group, right? That you must have lots of other people in the Order who don’t know he’s a spy. Who aren’t in the leadership group here today... who don’t know his identity. And I guess you all know Master Snape and I get along fine and I wouldn’t betray him on purpose. But isn’t it still a risk for him? Openly telling me that he’s a spy? What if I give him away, or tell my friends about him? Or say something accidentally? I mean, I already suspected it, but confirming it is different. If too many people know about him, it’s a risk – it could ruin his cover.”

“Harry... this is practically the whole group,” Sirius said slowly. “Except for a small handful of others like Arthur who’s still in hospital, and a couple of others who couldn’t make it this evening.”

So few people, Harry thought in surprise. He’d been imagining a much bigger organisation.

“I trust you, Harry.” Dumbledore said solemnly. “I am confident you will understand and respect Severus’ need for secrecy about his true allegiances. The risk in telling you personally is minor, and it is vitally important that you attend some portions of our meetings despite your youth, so you can learn more about what we fight against.”

Snape stared at Harry, face expressionless and no clue to his thoughts showing in his dark eyes.

“It’s a bit hard to recruit at the moment,” Moody said conversationally, “though it’s nice Molly and her boy have come on board. The Order of the Phoenix used to be a lot bigger, back in the first war.
These days, it’s not so obvious what’s going on. People are still denying You-Know-Who is back! They refuse to believe it, even with Death Eaters and werewolves allying openly for an attack, and two of our best people dead on the ground. Damn shame, God rest their souls.”

Molly sniffled, and then thinned her lips determinedly. “And poor Arthur still in hospital.”

“Instead of You-Know-Who, it’s all being blamed on Pettigrew and Lupin,” continued Moody.

“Who is innocent, I will remind you again. It was Greyback,” said Sirius.

“Damn that man to the deepest level of hell,” hissed Mrs. Weasley angrily.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t Greyback,” insisted Moody.

Sirius glared at Moody. “Yet you still wanted me to vouch for where Remus was.”

“No-one was watching him here, were they? He could have joined in – it was a possibility we needed to consider.”

“All right now,” Dumbledore interrupted, “let us move on, for Mr. Potter has some news to share with us that I hope may be of assistance in puzzling out Tom’s plans.”

“Um, yes,” Harry said hesitantly, pulling out the vacant chair next to Bill and sitting down. “I brought Lockhart’s letter, in case you wanted to read it out to everyone?”

“We have already seen that,” Dumbledore said kindly. “Sirius shared a copy with everyone after you showed it to him. In any case, the information is now outdated. Professor Lockhart was found earlier this week in Africa.”

“Oh! That’s great news!” Harry said, relieved. He looked around the table, noting some people’s perturbed expressions. Mrs. Weasley looked like she might cry. “He… he was found alive, wasn’t he?”

“Oh yes, the poor man was alive, but… he’s… not well, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said hesitantly.

“It’s not pretty,” Sirius said with a shake of his head. “It’s not in the papers yet, but some of our people found him at a hospital in Ghana.”

Harry waited expectantly, but no-one seemed eager to volunteer more details, until Moody huffed impatiently. “I shall tell the boy, then,” he said. “Lockhart has been found driven mad by Fwoopers – he is not right in the head and barely knows his own name. He is also badly scarred, flyblown, and suffering from exposure and snake bites. He apparently had ‘Tumbu fly myiasis’ which is pretty horrible stuff I wish I’d never heard of frankly – his face and body were spotted with crusted and suppurating boils, and infected pock-marked holes. There’s something badly wrong with his feet too – he was found wandering around in the jungle, stumbling about with no shoes on and babbling to himself. Luckily for him some locals took him to a Muggle hospital, and when Snape’s spying told us roughly where to look for him, we located and picked him up and transferred him to some proper local Healers there.”

Snape nodded at the momentary acknowledgement of his contribution of information gathering.

Harry nodded slowly. “So, his story about fighting Fwoopers was true? Or did someone just arrange things so that it all looked like it was true? It’s just… with the message hidden in the letter… I’ve been thinking Tom would have been pretty angry about Lockhart’s book, you know, particularly the first draft. Lockhart fought off being possessed – Tom hated that. He would’ve
known that Lockhart would hate losing his looks more than almost anything.”

“The latter explanation is the true one, we believe. I think it was a terrible revenge, and not a natural consequence of Lockhart’s explorations at all,” said Dumbledore solemnly. “Tom was always such a cruel boy.”

“Such a tragedy to strike our brave hero!” sobbed Mrs. Weasley, and her son put a comforting arm around his mother’s shoulders for her to cry into.

“A brave hero,” sneered Snape quietly. “The man was a dangerous fraud.”

“His reputation was… somewhat inflated, shall we say,” said Dumbledore, trying to be diplomatic. “I had hoped the truth would out last year, as he proved his lack of knowledge about the subject he was teaching. Regardless, what happened to him is still a terrible tragedy.”

“He was not a fraud!” Mrs. Weasley cried shrilly. “He was a hero, he saved Ginny from a horrible death, and he was the finest teacher of Defence Against the Dark Arts the school has ever known! Right, Harry?”

“He certainly did help save Ginny’s life,” Harry agreed diplomatically. “But as to teaching, well… umm… actually… I preferred Professor Snape, Mrs. Weasley.” Harry’s endorsement made the man in question smirk proudly, and glance over at Sirius as he did so.

“Professor Lockhart unquestionably had his moments of bravery and heroism in his life, there is no doubt of that,” Dumbledore said soothingly to Mrs. Weasley, “but alas some of his deeds such as transforming a werewolf back to human form and dealing with a banshee were in fact carried out by others.”

Harry grumpily wondered, If you knew he was a fraud why did you hire him to teach us rubbish all year?

“No, they weren’t,” insisted Mrs. Weasley, sniffling miserably. “He is a martyr to our cause.”

“Now mum, don’t get yourself upset again,” her eldest son said, giving her a comforting hug.

“Well, we shall have to agree to disagree on that point, and proceed with the meeting for now,” Dumbledore said calmly. “Now Harry, please tell us everything you can about what happened in the Chamber of Secrets with Tom’s diary, sans the elaborations added by your erstwhile professor. For his version of events shared at our end-of-year feast was quite different from the rendition in his published book.”

Harry took a deep breath before he started. He’d worked on this – a revised version of the truth. Something that shared more information but shouldn’t count as breaking his nascent truce. Confirming some of the information many people already suspected to be true would help them without, he thought, harming his relationship with Voldemort. There were also a few things Harry could safely share that hopefully wouldn’t make him look too bad for lying to everyone all along.

“So, after Hermione was petrified Neville, Storm, and I searched Hogwarts, and Storm got the scent of a large serpent. I’d heard hissing in the walls, so it made sense that it was a snake. Neville and I then researched what kind of big snake might be Slytherin’s monster, and I figured out it was probably a Basilisk. I thought maybe it had lost its killing stare because it was so ancient, or it was a baby snakeling descendant of Salazar’s original pet. I went to tell Professor Lockhart about it. He was writing in a diary as I told him the details, which didn’t really seem odd, until he looked up with this blank stare, and he said I knew too much. He Stunned me, and I woke up tied up in the
“A little different to the book where Lockhart did the research himself,” murmured the white-haired man to Dumbledore, “but pretty close.”

“Neville Longbottom, Alice Tolipan, and Ginny Weasley were all tied up and unconscious in this ritual circle when I woke up. Lockhart wasn’t himself – he didn’t act or speak like he usually did. And he said he was the… You-Know-Who. He said he was a memory, part of his spirit. He boasted about being the greatest Dark wizard who ever lived – he wrote it out, actually. He did this spell that wrote in fiery letters in the air – ‘I am Lord Voldemort’.”

Diggle and the witch in the green shawl gasped, as did Mrs. Weasley. Fletcher and Snape shook their heads worriedly. “Don’t say his name!” Fletcher insisted.

“Fearing his name only works to his advantage,” Dumbledore said chidingly. “Don’t let him have that power over you, friends.”

“Fine fer you to say,” muttered Fletcher unhappily, pouring himself some wine.

“Big differences to the book there,” muttered the old wizard next to Dumbledore. “We both know Grindelwald would never have had a son with a Muggle woman, don’t we, Albus?”

Dumbledore gave a nod to his friend, looking slightly embarrassed. “Go on, Harry,” he encouraged.

“Uh, so, next he asked some questions about how I defeated You-Know-Who as a baby and threatened to kill Neville if I didn’t talk. I told him I honestly didn’t know how I’d done it, and he seemed satisfied enough with that answer. Not happy, but he believed me. He ranted a bit about how Ginny and I had ruined his plans—”

“She did?” Mrs. Weasley asked, fascinated. “I never heard anything like that!”

“Yeah, she did for a while. Ginny and the others were still unconscious then, and Lockhart was out of it, so I guess no-one heard that bit apart from me. From what the ghost said, he’d originally had plans to do a ritual around Yule, but she’d locked the diary away when she went home for Christmas. He found that pretty frustrating.”

“My good girl!” Molly said proudly.

“So, the next bit that’s interesting is when he started talking about how the ritual he was going to do would let him possess Lockhart more easily. Though it sounded like his body might eventually decay. And Lockhart started fighting him off – it was very cool! I encouraged him to keep fighting, and this cloud of black smoke came out of Lockhart’s mouth and he collapsed to the ground. It turned into a ghost, who called himself Tom Riddle – he still insisted he was You-Know-Who, though. He looked like a teenager, in Hogwarts robes.”

Dumbledore nodded knowingly at that and exchanged a glance with his white-haired friend. Harry knew it wasn’t new information for them – he’d told people in the infirmary (including Mrs. Weasley) about the spirit’s claim to be both Tom Riddle and the Dark Lord, way back in second year. Also, Lockhart had initially talked about the spirit being the ghost of a young Dark wizard, Tom Riddle, back in his big speech to the Hogwarts students before he’d left for St. Mungo’s. Lockhart had never publicly claimed anything about the spirit being the Dark Lord, though. Not out of modesty, but because it sounded too implausible… and perhaps out of fear.

Harry continued, “Then there was the big fight with the Basilisk – Lockhart wasn’t quite as brave
and competent as he was in the book and I had to help a lot, but the Basilisk was still dealt with. Storm helped to get me my wand and he distracted the Basilisk a lot, and I cast my smoke spell to hide everyone in the circle.”

Harry didn’t want to admit that Custos was still alive. People might try to hurt her.

“And the fate of the diary…?” Dumbledore asked intently. “Could you tell us the true version of what happened to it?”

Dumbledore seemed to suspect it hadn’t been destroyed. Harry looked at people who weren’t Dumbledore or Snape, as he spun his thickest lies. “Well, Lockhart tried to destroy it with an acid spell, but honestly it didn’t seem to do the trick. It just damaged the cover a bit, though the ghost was shaken for a while. I tried some spells on it too – Freezing, Burning, and Cutting Charms – but they did nothing. Oh, and Snufflifors. The diary was black leather, by the way. Quite plain, and old.”

Lockhart had described the diary in his book, and of course Miss Weasley knew exactly what it had looked like.

“Lockhart wrapped it up in a bit of silk lining from his cloak and promised he would take it away to be destroyed,” Harry continued. “That seemed to settle the spirit down even more – being all wrapped up like that. It didn’t bother us any longer once that had been done. Lockhart was talking about dumping it in the ocean or burning or burying it. He was very determined – he really didn’t want to get possessed again.”

“It wasn’t destroyed then. I thought not,” Dumbledore said thoughtfully. He didn’t sound at all surprised.

Harry was relieved – both glad that Dumbledore already seemed to know about the diary’s survival, and glad he could confirm it for him. It was scary, trying to guess what he could say without ruining his truce.

“No, I’m sorry. It wasn’t,” Harry apologised.

“Why didn’t he just tell the truth? Why didn’t you?” asked Sirius.

Harry shrugged embarrassedly. “Professor Lockhart wanted to be a hero. With a tidy, triumphant story with all the loose ends wrapped up. He also kind of… threatened me.”

Mrs. Weasley gasped, but Dumbledore just looked knowingly at him. “With an Obliviate?”

Harry startled. “How did you know that?!” He tried to remember who he’d told. Some of his Slytherin friends? He was pretty sure he’d only mentioned Lockhart’s attempt at blackmail, not the spell he’d attacked with. Had he told Neville? He couldn’t remember for sure, but he thought not.

“He has done it before,” Dumbledore said gravely, stroking his long beard.

“Oh Harry, why didn’t you tell someone?” Sirius asked sympathetically.

“I didn’t think people would believe me,” said Harry with a shrug. “He has such a reputation as a hero. And he kind of… he said he’d make up stuff about me being the Heir of Slytherin if I tried to tell anyone. He’d ruin my reputation, maybe get me sent to Azkaban. So, we cut a deal – I’d support his story where he was a brave hero, and he’d share some book profits with me.”

“I don’t believe it,” mumbled Mrs. Weasley. “I just don’t believe it…”
“He really did fight off the ghost, which saved Ginny and all of us,” offered Harry as consolation. “He fought the Basilisk too, if not quite as bravely and decisively as in the book. Without working together, we could never have killed it.” He mentally patted himself on the back for remembering to add that last part. He needed to keep his story consistent.

“Thank you, Harry, for trusting us with your story,” Dumbledore said. “I hope you will come to me in the future if such a situation ever arises again. Please rest assured that I will believe you and help you to the utmost of my ability.”

“Oh. Uh, thank you, sir,” Harry said. “I wish I had. I’m sorry. I was… scared.”

“Too young for all this business,” the witch in the green shawl muttered. “You poor thing. Your mother would’ve wanted you well away from all this.”

“We needed to hear what he had to say, Emmeline,” said Moody. “We’ve all heard the rumours that some ghostly creation of You-Know-Who is possessing Pettigrew. The more information we can gather about that, the better.”

Dumbledore then turned to Snape, and asked, “Have you managed to get a glimpse of this diary, Severus? Are there any unusual or precious books in Pettigrew’s possession that match Harry’s description? Also, are there any other odd artefacts in the possession of this other wizard who claims to be the older and original version of Voldemort?”

Severus nodded. “Yes, I have seen Pettigrew with the diary – he writes in it daily. It is bound in black leather and is stained on the cover with round discoloured patches, which presumably are from the acid damage. Pettigrew allegedly found it buried in the Forbidden Forest, and he took it to the Dark Lord – who had been possessing Quirrell until recently. I have also confirmed that Quirrell is, as we suspected, no longer possessed by the Dark Lord.

“I suspect Pettigrew has been ordered to regularly write in the diary, to place himself under its enchantments more firmly. I have spoken to the centaurs to confirm Pettigrew’s story, and they confirmed that Dementors were hovering around the site where the diary was buried for some time, as if in hungry search of a soul.”

Harry sat very still, staring at Snape. Snape stared back at him, and Harry glanced away. Snape was lying about the diary – there hadn’t been any acid spells, and the diary had been unmarred when he’d given it to Dobby to bury in the forest. Was Snape lying to back up Harry’s story? Or lying because he hadn’t seen the diary and needed to make something up for everyone? Harry had a feeling it was the former, especially if he’d really spoken to the centaurs, who knew about Harry’s visit to the forest. And Snape had overseen ‘Antares Black’s’ detention for being caught sneaking out of the Forbidden Forest. He also might have talked to Pettigrew about what the man had learnt when eavesdropping on Harry as a rat.

“What about this older fellow who also says he’s You-Know-Who? The new vessel for his soul?” asked Moody. “The man whose face you somehow can’t describe even though you’ve seen him quite a few times now?”

“He continues to wear a hooded cloak, and always casts a spell to shadow his face,” Snape said with defensive irritation. “I have not observed him writing in a diary or fussing over any unusual artefacts. Rumour amongst the Death Eaters is that older Dark Lord is the original one, and that he is possessing the empty shell of someone who had their soul removed by a Dementor – that alliance seems to be holding. His main vessel definitely isn’t Pettigrew – Pettigrew stands at the Dark Lord’s right hand. However, Pettigrew and the Dark Lord seem increasingly at odds of late, which should work to our Order’s advantage. I can assure you, however, that it definitely isn’t
Quirrell who acts as his current host – I have observed Quirrell grovelling to both of them.”

“With you on your knees beside him,” scoffed Sirius.

“Does your miniscule brain not grasp how spying works?” snarled Snape.

“Enough!” Dumbledore said loudly. “I think that’s enough for now, Harry, unless you had anything further to add?”

“Nothing I can think of, sir,” Harry said, head hung low. He was trying not to think about Voldemort’s letters, and was failing miserably. Avoiding eye contact seemed wise with his own amateurish attempts at Occlumency shields probably not up to an impenetrable standard. “Except that at the World Cup, it didn’t seem like the Death Eater who attacked wanted to kill me. He probably could have, but he didn’t. I don’t know if that’s useful information or not. In Gabon, at least one of them wanted to kill me, and at least one of them didn’t.” It was a matter of public record, insofar as at least half a dozen people saw those incidents happen. Safe information to share.

Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully. “Thank you, H- Potter.” Harry appreciated the correction on his name, as well as the fact that the headmaster seemed content with his breadcrumbs of information.

“Potter, don’t expect that consideration from Pettigrew,” Moody warned gruffly. “Whether it’s his own choice or due to the spirit possessing him, we have heard he wants you dead at any cost.”

“Don’t scare him!” cried Mrs. Weasley.

“He already knows about that!” Sirius said loudly.

“The boy should be warned about who to watch out for the most!” argued Moody.

“Thank you for coming, we shall see you back at school again soon, Potter,” Dumbledore said.

Harry nodded his head in polite farewell and left the kitchen, headed for the quiet sanctuary of the library.

Harry was reading through a copy of *Hamlet* for his English studies in the library under the watchful painted eyes of Phineas, with Storm leisurely hunting “tasty spiders” somewhere under the desk when he had a visitor half an hour later.

Professor Snape knocked briefly and entered in a sweep of dark robes.

“Hello, sir,” Harry said in surprise. “I thought everyone was leaving straight after the meeting?”

“That is correct. I only wished to linger a moment to assure myself of your good health, and to confirm that you are you carrying your Portkey as instructed,” Snape said smoothly. “Remember, I want you to use it only in an emergency situation, but do not hesitate to do so if it truly is a life-threatening occasion with someone attacking you, be they foe or deluded friend. If Black becomes a danger to you, I want you to activate it. Do you understand?”

Harry nodded. “Yes, sir. But Sirius wouldn’t hurt me.”

Snape’s eyebrows raised sceptically. “Are you completely certain? He is not fit to be a guardian of
any kind to you – I think he has proven that this summer, has he not?”

Harry was silent for a moment. Sirius wasn’t mentally well, that was for sure. But he had looked after him decently – Harry had regular meals, his own room, and almost no chores. Sirius had also tried to protect Harry when there was trouble, even if he went about it a little oddly. “He’s been alright, I think.”

Snape sneered. “Living with the Petunia and her corpulent husband has set your standards too low, then.”

“He has officially appointed Harold as his Heir, and additionally offered to adopt him into the Black family,” contributed Phineas, a little defensively. “He has been a most adequate guardian, even if admittedly a tad inattentive in matters of etiquette and tradition.”

Busybody portrait, thought Harry resentfully.

“I’m probably going to just stay with the Dursleys anyway,” Harry said. He wanted to ask, “Whose side are you really on?” But of course, there would be no way to judge the truthfulness of Snape’s answer, and thus no point in asking.

Instead, he changed the topic to something more comfortable and non-confrontational. “How is your potions research job going, sir?”

“Very well, thank you. I’ve been studying some old texts for references to obscure cauldron lore that may be of use in brewing rare potions to a high standard.”

“Any books I might have heard of?”

“I doubt it very much, as they have little to do with Healing, and only peripherally discuss potions theory. For instance, lately I have been reading Branwen Ferch Llyr, one of the branches of the Mabinogion. So, tell me truthfully, how have you found it living here with Black and Lupin?”

“It’s okay,” Harry said, “he’s pretty indulgent, and I can study as much as I want. I’ve done some gardening too – it’s looking lovely out there now. Say, can I ask you a question about potions theory, if you have a moment?”

“Certainly.”

“Professor Slughorn had us brewing the Wit-Sharpening Potion last year, and mine didn’t come out quite perfectly, so I’ve been reading Branwen Ferch Llyr, one of the branches of the Mabinogion. So, tell me truthfully, how have you found it living here with Black and Lupin?”

“It’s okay,” Harry said, “he’s pretty indulgent, and I can study as much as I want. I’ve done some gardening too – it’s looking lovely out there now. Say, can I ask you a question about potions theory, if you have a moment?”

“Certainly.”

“Excellent questions,” Snape said, with a thin approving smile. “The answer is that Arsenius Jigger is an imbecile, writing for incompetent beginners, and your textbook is riddled with errors. A silver cauldron would be the optimal choice, and the ginger should be thinly sliced and then finely diced for the best diffusion into the potion and improved control of the quantity of ginger. Grating is suboptimal as you would lose too much of the juice from the fresh roots. Never use old, dry roots for the potion.”

“Excellent questions,” Snape said, with a thin approving smile. “The answer is that Arsenius Jigger is an imbecile, writing for incompetent beginners, and your textbook is riddled with errors. A silver cauldron would be the optimal choice, and the ginger should be thinly sliced and then finely diced for the best diffusion into the potion and improved control of the quantity of ginger. Grating is suboptimal as you would lose too much of the juice from the fresh roots. Never use old, dry roots for the potion.”

Harry blinked. “But… you set Magical Drafts and Potions as our textbook…”
“It is the best text available from a bad lot, unfortunately. Jigger is a pure-blood. He is from a wealthy family with a long history of being Potioneers, and he has many influential patrons and well-placed clients. I attempted at one stage to offer my critique of some of the flaws in his works, for the benefit of future editions, and was dismissed as ‘needlessly nitpicking and slandering’ the work of my betters.”

“I would like to see your corrections,” Harry said optimistically.

“Perhaps I shall send some to you, then. It is better to understand the theory sufficiently that you learn to make your own amendments to recipes, however. Which admittedly may be more of a challenge for you, since you foolishly neglected to select Arithmancy as an elective.”

“I could send you some shed snake skin as a thank you for the information?” Harry offered. “Or some freshly dried henbane?”

“What kind of snake skin?” asked Snape, his interest piqued. “From your pet?”

Harry briefly considered offering Basilisk skin, but he wasn’t supposed to still be able to access the Chamber of Secrets. “Yes? Storm’s a Wonambi, a rainbow serpent. Is the shed skin good for anything?”

“Nothing that I know of, but it could be interesting to experiment with,” conceded Snape.

“About your corrections – couldn’t you write your own book?”

“In theory, perhaps. But in practice – no. I have not the popularity, wealth, nor reputation to get a book published, and have it be acceptable for the privileged position of being a school textbook, guaranteed to sell hundreds of copies per year. Or indeed at all. Jigger and a few of his allies spoke to the publisher after my ill-fated attempt to be of assistance to him, and I was black-listed. Many potions recipes have ‘belonged’ to a particular House for generations, and they can become quite possessive of any attempt to ‘steal’ or improve them.”

“You could publish overseas?” Harry suggested tentatively. “Or ask Dumbledore for support?”

Snape leaned against the doorway as he replied, “Dumbledore’s influence is why I had a secure job at all, despite my reputation being in tatters after the war. I had hoped to come out of the war lauded as a hero for my work as a spy. Yet in the end I was happy simply to be out of Azkaban, and my precocious qualification as a Potions Master meant nothing compared to the stories of working for the Dark Lord. Certain… connections helped pull strings to help me gain my Mastery early during the war. It had seemed like a good career decision at the time – many people rely on influence and favours to push things along, and this seemed little different. Oh, I had the skill despite my youth – innovative Potions research, and impeccable brewing skills. Yet it cast a shadow over my accomplishment. Some people assume my competence is in question – my Mastery just the result of bribes or threats.”

“Are you saying Lord Voldemort helped you get your Potions Mastery?” Harry said, tilting his head curiously.

“Don’t say his name!” Snape hissed, straightening up and clenching his fists. “Idiot boy! Don’t you know he might hear you?! Is the phrase ‘He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’ not obvious enough for you?”

“Umm. No, I didn’t know... can he hear me? Really? Can any wizard or witch do that, with the right spell? Wow. You could eavesdrop from across the country?”
Snape pinched the bridge of his nose with a pained wince. “You don’t know. Does no-one bother to teach you anything, Potter?”

Harry shrugged. People taught him a lot, but there was just so much to learn that everyone took for granted she already knew. “So, it’s a spell?”

“Not precisely, it is more of a natural ability. They discuss Taboos in advanced Arithmancy classes. Though as it is a NEWT level concept I suppose it is unreasonable to expect you to have heard of it even had you taken that subject. It is somewhat akin to the name-sense that post owls and house-elves have, in fact. Most people can do it to only a tiny degree, limited to people within their sight – often tied only to sensing their name being spoken with malicious intent – but the Dark Lord is special. More powerful.”

“It sounds weird. I’ve never sensed people talking about me,” Harry rebutted sceptically.

“Are you sure? Haven’t you ever felt like you knew somebody was watching you, or eavesdropping on you? That you knew people were talking about you even though your back was to them and you couldn’t hear a single word they were saying? Your shoulders hunched, or your fingers or scalp prickled, and you just knew it was all about you and so you turned your head and caught people quickly looking away from you, with guilty expressions?”

Harry nodded slowly. Yes, he’d had that happen, quite a few times. “I guess. And now you mention it, I do remember my friends talking once about how you don’t say the name of anyone powerful you’re wary of. They never really said why, though. I don’t think they knew why – it was just tradition.”

_The Slytherins always like to call the Headmaster things like Dumble-bore or Bumble-more_, he remembered. Also, he himself had also been murmured about with euphemistic pseudonyms, especially in second year when people had been scared of him. _The Boy Who Lived… The Heir of Slytherin._

“It may be tradition, but it is a magically justified one. You do not say a wizard’s name unless you want to draw their attention to you,” Snape continued. “That is the power of names. Of magic. I used to use that sense all the time in Potions class – you cannot train it to be stronger, but you can learn to pay more attention to it. However, even though everyone ‘knows’ you can’t enhance it, somehow the Dark Lord has managed to boost that sense beyond all reason – that’s why his name is taboo.

“Most people took the simple way out – they stopped saying his name. Dumbledore – more fearless and with a dash of cunning – tried the opposite strategy. He still does. He wants to flood the world with hundreds of people saying the Dark Lord’s name, so any individual voice is just one in a crowd. To his continued regret, his strategy has never caught on. So, anyone using the Dark Lord’s name is rare, and marked as foolhardy and a potential target. If you want to say his name, be sure to do it only while under the strongest of wards.”

“Are they strong enough here?”

“…That is not the point. It is a bad habit,” Snape said, effectively conceding that yes, Harry was right about that.

“Hello?” said Lupin from out on the landing. “Ah, Snape, I thought I heard your voice. You really shouldn’t be up here – everyone else has left, and it’s time for a late dinner for us.”

“Lupin. I was just discussing potions theory with Potter,” Snape explained smoothly.
“James’ son chatting about potions theory! Sirius says Harry reminds him a lot of James sometimes, and they certainly look alike, but I think he has more of Lily in him. Minus her temper!” Lupin said with a small smile. “He’s hardly ventured away from his books or the potions room while he’s been here, and he certainly didn’t get his knack for Potions from James.”

Snape seemed startled by the comparison, looking at Harry who was wriggling uncomfortably in his chair and smoothing his hair down, embarrassed by the attention. Harry had thought they didn’t mind him getting ahead on his studies, and now he was wondering if he’d done something wrong – missed some expectation they’d had of him to be more like his father.

“Well, it is time to come down for dinner, Potter,” Lupin announced. “Snape, if you could see yourself out – preferably without Sirius noticing you’ve been upstairs – that would be appreciated.”

Snape made a disdainful face at that request. “There was no harm done. Your overly paranoid friend should consider that you are currently more of a risk to him than I am, given your Vow.”

With a terse nod of farewell to Harry, Snape spun on his heel and left the library, pushing past Lupin who stepped aside to let him past.

Lupin and Harry followed him downstairs, trailing a little behind. Harry thought Snape might slam the front door behind him as he left, but Snape crept past Mrs. Black’s curtained portrait and opened and closed the door very quietly indeed, careful not to rouse her attention or ire.

“I’m sorry he said that,” Harry said. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think you’re a risk to me. Or to Sirius.”

“It’s alright,” Lupin said calmly. “For him that was practically polite. He likes to call me ‘traitor’ more often than he uses my name. We most dislike in others what we hate to recognise in ourselves. It’s not really me he’s angry at, I suspect. As a spy for both sides, his allegiances are questioned and judged by almost everyone he knows. Possibly even by himself.”

Chapter End Notes

Professor Moody – please note his description is based in book canon, not drawn from the movies.
Naming Taboo – If you’re curious to refresh your memory, Chapter 18 “Love is in the Air” of “Parseltongue is Really Very Ordinary” has Harry’s previous discussion with friends about avoiding saying the names of powerful wizards and witches you’re scared of.
Return to Hogwarts

Chapter Summary

Harry returns to Hogwarts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

31 August - 1 September 1994

On the evening of the last day of August, Harry was sequestered up in his room late into the night trying to get his trunk packed, since he’d neglected to do it earlier in favour of working on a Biology assignment all day, then fretting most of the evening over a new letter from Lord Voldemort accepting his proposed truce.

Under the swiftly negotiated terms neither of them was to face the other in battle or otherwise try to kill or capture the other, nor were they to directly or indirectly order any others (including followers, allies, clients, or animals) to do so on their behalf. Harry felt pretty confident the precise wording should cover any attacks by ‘Pettigrew’ too, unless the possessed wizard went completely rogue, and even then, he should theoretically be covered under ‘Lord Voldemort’.

Harry had clarified that he was allowed the right to self-defence should some rogue Death Eater or “other associate” attack him, provided that they made the first aggressive move, and conceded a matching exemption that if he attacked one of the Dark Lord’s followers first, they were at similar liberty to defend themselves to a level of ferocity matching his own attack. Attacking or destroying each other’s known properties or business interests was likewise forbidden. Their shared correspondence and details of their truce must remain confidential, and letters must not be shown to any other person or to the papers – the contents must remain secret between the two of them. Voldemort even taught him a charm that could be cast on parchment that was one of the two used in the creation of a Howler – it would ensure that the letter destroyed itself after it was read. However, Voldemort said he would be using different charms on his own correspondence that would merely prevent others from reading his letters to Harry, as Harry’s owl wards blocked all letters with the Howler charms on them. Harry wondered if this meant people had been able to send angry Howlers to Lord Voldemort, complaining about the attack at the Quidditch World Cup.

While Harry had been eager to secure safety for his friends and family as part of the truce, he had been stymied by the traditional etiquette that ruled that truces only covered those in one’s own House. It was doubly difficult for Harry, because he wanted safety for people who might vehemently oppose Lord Voldemort, given an opportunity to do so. The Dark Lord, who seemed eager to renew a friendly acquaintance and open to compromises, had proposed a solution which Harry had reluctantly accepted as the best offer he was likely to get: Harry was to maintain a cordial correspondence with him, and for each month the truce was maintained and his return letters kept regular, Harry could ask for safety for one additional person, so long as they were not a member of the Order of the Phoenix or otherwise working actively against Lord Voldemort or fighting his followers.

It felt like a trap. The Dark Lord would slowly accumulate a list of all the people most important to Harry, in agonisingly honest order. That information could be used against him, and them.
However, Harry was not so naïve as to assume that the Dark Lord couldn’t find out that stuff \textit{anyway}. Even if the Malfoy family was as innocent and lily-white as they liked to publicly claim, and none of his Slytherin friends had any family members who were Death Eaters (two propositions which Harry very much doubted were true), there was at the very least Snape standing ready to report on Harry’s associations. Whichever side he was truly loyal to, sharing information about Harry’s friends would be a painless bit of gossip to leak to Lord Voldemort to ingratiate himself further in his Lord’s regard. So what choice did Harry have? He wasn’t risking any information that the Dark Lord couldn’t find out for himself, and he couldn’t expect his friends to be protected if the Dark Lord didn’t even know who they were.

As Harry packed away his clothes and books in his trunk and hid his latest letter from the Dark Lord in its secret compartment, he pondered who to bargain for safety for first. Neville? Hermione? Or even someone he was less close to but who had been established as being at clear risk of attack, like Luna? Neville was a pure-blood and thus theoretically safer, but on the other hand, his family had a history of opposing the Dark Lord. Harry agonised over it all evening – he had a month to reach a decision, but he couldn’t stop thinking about it.

In the end he decided to ask for safety for Hermione first. If she got infected by a werewolf, she’d lose everything. She’d be devastated to have to leave Hogwarts and would lose her planned career in the Ministry. She might not even be allowed to return to live in the Muggle world with her family, for if they were unable to reliably source some Wolfsbane Potion and didn’t have a secure room to lock her up in for three full days and nights every month, she wouldn’t be permitted by law to live with them. She would also be totally banned from working in the Muggle world under the new laws Madam Umbridge had recently pushed through the Wizengamot, allegedly due to the higher fatality risk werewolves posed to Muggles.

When Harry had discussed the new anti-werewolf laws with Lupin, Lupin had crossly argued that the law wasn’t about safety for Muggles at all. He said it was just an excuse to cut off the primary way werewolves earned a living – working amongst Muggles where they could hide their condition and escape prejudice. Those who broke the law could now be arrested as criminals who posed a risk to public safety.

If Neville was infected, he could still potentially have a promising career in Herbology as it didn’t rely on wand use. He would be able to afford the potion and private tutors and could convert a room in the manor to a cell as required. As a Muggle-born, Hermione would be a more valid target, while Neville’s blood status and position as the last scion of his pure-blood House might make some Death Eaters hesitate to harm him. Harry would ask for Neville’s safety second. And really, what were the odds they’d be attacked by werewolves or cursed by Death Eaters at Hogwarts in the first month? Very slim indeed, he hoped. There should be time to get a promise of safety for both of them.

Harry packed up the last of his clothes, and then stood staring into the old wardrobe for a moment.

“Kreacher!” he called.

With a pop, the house-elf appeared instantly despite the late hour and gave Harry a servile bow.

“Yes, Master Harold?”

“Do you know if I should take Regulus’ old formal robes or the gardening leathers? I don’t remember if I’m supposed to keep them, or if they were just a loan.”

“Mistress said young Master may keep them,” Kreacher said. “Will young Master needs them at Hogwarts, or does young Master want to keep them here at home? Kreacher will looks after them until you returns at Yule.”
“I uh… I haven’t moved in, Kreacher. I’m just visiting. I’m probably going to stay with my aunt and uncle at Yule, though I might visit here again.” Glad as he was at this time every year to have the Extension Charm on his trunk, Harry packed one of Regulus’ formal robes and the green gardening tunic (which might come in handy if Herbology was tough this year), but left the other robes in the wardrobe.

Kreacher’s face fell into miserable lines. “Kreacher was wrong, please forgive Kreacher his foolish mistake,” he apologised, pulling unhappily at his ears. Then he added in a mutter under his breath, “The Heir should live here, not with filthy Muggles. Mistress says so. Kreacher will do better until young Master wants to stay. He will be a good influence on the Master.”

“You’re muttering again,” Harry said wearily. Kreacher gave a rote apology, but his heart wasn’t in it, for he wasn’t actually self-aware enough to realise he mumbled under his breath.

“Is there anything else Kreacher can do for Master Harold?” the house-elf asked with a woebegone face, eyes wide in his face like saucers. He wrung his hands anxiously.

Harry looked around the room for inspiration for something for the little house-elf to do, but there really weren’t any tasks left undone. The room was spotlessly clean now. Storm’s tank hadn’t been shrunk yet – he was out exploring the house one last time, looking optimistically for Doxy eggs to eat. Packing his tank needed to be left for tomorrow morning.

“You dropped off the box of books for William Weasley to check for curses, right?” Harry checked. “We agreed on a rate.”

“Yes, Master Harold. I has done this already. He is promising he will be bringing them back here the next time he visits, all secret-like, or getting Dobby to take them to Potter Cottage. All safe for Master Harold to read. He is saying he will makes a note if he is sees any useful Egyptian curses or counter-curses in them while he is checking them, so young Master can read them at Hogwarts or gives them to Master Sirius.”

Harry hoped he could find something useful, that would both help and impress Sirius, who was still intermittently gloomy about his cursed arm. Harry had proudly reported in a while ago about his discovery of information on the green bubbling Dragon Pox Curse in *Practical Defensive Magic and its Use Against the Dark Arts*, however, Sirius explained kindly that he already knew all about it from the Healer who’d treated him at St. Mungo’s.

Looking around his room for inspiration, Harry’s eye was caught by the swathe of black cloth affixed to the wall above the headboard of the bed, underneath the Black family crest Regulus had painstakingly painted on the wall. “You know,” he said slowly. “I must admit I’ve been a bit curious about what the newspaper articles underneath that are all about. Do you think you could unstick the fabric, so I can read them, then magically stick it back up again so it looks just like it did before?” He wanted to know what the old Order had fought against, and what Voldemort had been like in the war. He suspected that articles from the era might give a more accurate accounting than the patchy and sensationalised versions in the history books.

Kreacher looked delighted to have something to do, and with a snap of his fingers the fabric fluttered loose and fell onto the bed. “Kreacher will return to restore the fabric when Master Harold is calling for him,” he promised.

Harry climbed onto his bed to peer curiously at the collage of old yellowed newspaper cuttings. They were all about Lord Voldemort, and his followers. As Sirius had promised ages ago, there was nothing about his parents there – the clippings were all older than that. But there was a short article about the attack on Potter Manor, with an eerie black-and-white moving picture of smoking
ruins, with the Dark Mark floating above it in the sky. There was a quote from Harry’s grandfather from before his death, apparently said during the middle of a meeting of the Wizengamot where he’d been calling for more funding for the Aurors. He’d publicly described the “self-styled Lord Voldemort” as a “pretentious nobody with delusions of grandeur”. The manor had burnt down within a fortnight of that meeting. One witch interviewed for the article said that Charlus Potter “should have known to keep his Jarvey-mouth shut”, like he’d had it coming. Like he should’ve expected he and his wife would be murdered. Like he was to blame for the consequences, having publicly spoken out against the Dark Lord. That made Harry fume angrily.

There were stories of people going missing, reports of rises in the numbers of vampires and werewolves, fearful speculation about Death Eaters infiltrating the Ministry, and sensationalised stories of deaths – though not as many as he’d expected. Just one or two about “brave Aurors” fallen in the line of duty. References to “Muggle deaths” weren’t of as much concern and had been given little attention in the selected clippings except to number them.

There wasn’t much written about Lord Voldemort’s agenda at all except by inference, such as one clipping of anti-Voldemort propaganda urging people to stay firm in their faith and their loyalty to Queen and country, and not to “fall prey to the rising tide of Dark superstition”. Harry thought Regulus must have liked the sound of that last phrase, to have saved it within his collage of favourite clippings. Really, the best source of information about Lord Voldemort’s agenda – at least in his earlier days – would be found in The Knights of Walpurgis. However, now Harry knew it was propaganda by the Dark Lord rather than an interesting rambling treatise on magical theory and politics, it was much less appealing, and he wasn’t sure if he wanted to re-read it or not.

Harry found the most frightening news clippings weren’t the ones about murders. They were in fact the ones that seemed the most ordinary. There were a number of snippets from the Daily Prophet’s “Witches and Wizards Write” column. In most of the clippings there was a general attitude of indifference to the war from many of the writers rather than the terrified panic he’d expected to read about.

One week the topic of the column was focused on “so-called Ministry corruption”. One witch agreed that corruption in the Ministry was a problem, and went on to say that what she really wanted to know was if Lord Voldemort would fix the disgraceful problems with the Floo network, as she hadn’t been able to afford the “fees” to push her own personal case through. A wizard commenting on a question about politics said that he didn’t think the “so-called Dark Lord” was any worse than Minister Minchum with his deals with the Dementors, and that he liked the idea of having a proper Republic again based on real merit rather than a Wizengamot stuffed full of “Noble” families, so maybe that was worth a try.

Another week’s column contained responses to the reporter’s question posed in the previous issue: “What do you think about the disappearances of Muggle-borns?” One wizard was quoted as saying, “Good riddance. Only the criminals and trouble-makers trying to ruin our society are being weeded out, you know. The wizarding world will be all the better for it.” Another, expressing what the paper described as a “moderate” view, said, “It is not as dire a situation as some complain about – those Muggle-borns who assimilate and avoid provoking trouble are doing just fine and we should welcome them to stay in our society where they belong. My maid is a Muggle-born, and she is still hale and hearty. Some people always just want to complain about something, making mountains out of Niffler mounds. I think Minchum is doing a fine job keeping this Dark Lord’s feud with some of the Houses from spilling out of control.”

That was moderate. People with blinkered, bigoted views of the world were the moderates. When Lupin and Sirius talked about the last war – which wasn’t often – they had made it sound like everyone was running scared. No doubt some people had been – those who actively opposed Lord
Voldemort. If the picture painted by the clippings was correct – and of course it might not be, being selectively one-sided – a lot of wizards and witches were indifferent about the war or sympathetic to Lord Voldemort’s goals, willing to wait things out. In the meantime, the pure-blood and half-blood wizards and witches unconcernedly got on with their lives, ignoring what they saw as more of a feud between Houses than a true war.

It all reminded him a little of the Quidditch World Cup. A lot of people had been literally running scared – probably a big majority. The Death Eaters and werewolves had been few in number. If everyone had stuck together, they might not have posed much of a threat. But it hadn’t been just the actual attackers who were the problem – it was the cheering crowd. The laughing people happy to see Muggles bullied or even tortured, standing between the Death Eaters and those trying to stop them. How did you fight that? If most people didn’t think the Dark Lord was doing anything wrong, then the war was practically already lost.

Was he helping lose it, by standing aside? Harry hoped not. One fourteen-year-old boy’s participation shouldn’t really make a difference, surely? Unless… that prophecy Voldemort had mentioned said something about it. But no, it had been fulfilled when he was a baby. If it was still active, someone would surely have talked with him about it by now.

Harry got Kreacher to put the cloth back up on the wall and went to bed, trying not to feel like he was an old witch just worried about the Floo system, her head stuck in the sand like a proverbial ostrich. Was trying to keep his head down and stay out of things just another way of selfishly focusing on his own problems, just like she had done? Surely it wasn’t selfish to not want to die. It wasn’t. He wasn’t hurting anyone by his actions – in fact, he was actively protecting all his friends too, the best way he knew how.

He’d even tried to cautiously warn Sirius about Snape’s probable mixed allegiances, even though Snape was, if not precisely a friend, perhaps something like an ally.

Sirius had promised he was already suspicious of “Snivellus” and didn’t trust him with anything personal.

“I trust in his hatred of Voldemort, and we are certain that he wants vengeance for your mother’s death. She was his best and perhaps only friend when he was younger. He appears to be loyal to the cause and has gathered valuable information for the Order. As for anything else? Well… let’s just say that I haven’t told him where Remus spends the full moons when he’s not here with me. I also lay false leads about where I’m going and what I’m doing if I know Snape will hear about it. I’m not much inclined to trust, these days. Do not worry – I’m as careful as I can be, while still being involved in the Order.”

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It was a grey and gloomy morning with rain splattering the windows at Grimmauld Place in gusts when Harry awoke on the first of September, ready as he ever would be to return to Hogwarts. Sirius and Lupin seemed as dull as the miserable weather, Kreacher was burning toast for breakfast, and Dobby was sobbing inconsolably about how he would miss seeing Master Harry every day while he was at Hogwarts. Harry patted him on the back awkwardly, and promised he would see him again at Christmas, as Dobby snuffled snot and tears into Harry’s t-shirt. Only the irascible Mrs. Black was sanguine about his departure when he bid her a polite farewell on the way out the door to a Muggle taxi, but that was soon fixed when Sirius goaded her into frothing anger by informing her that Harry wouldn’t necessarily be returning for the Christmas holidays at all, as he liked living with Muggles.

“Harold Black Potter you vow to me right now that you will cast off those lowborn Muggles and
“Take your proper place here with your true family!” she screeched. “I shall not countenance another blood traitor in this household! It shall not be borne! Do you hear me?!”

“Goodbye Mrs. Black, I have had a lovely stay here, it’s a beautiful house and I promise I shall return,” Harry said vaguely, with a conciliatory smile. “Our taxi’s here so we really have to go, or I might miss the Hogwarts Express.” Harry pushed hastily past Sirius as he scurried out the door with his leather satchel (with Storm napping inside) over one shoulder, and his Healer’s bag in the other hand. The taxi really was waiting, ordered for and parked outside the neighbours’ house at number thirteen, since number twelve was invisible to almost everyone.

It was a rainy journey to King’s Cross station, and Sirius made awkward attempts at small talk about whether Harry was looking forward to going back to “boarding school”, which Harry answered with the vague affirmations necessitated by the presence of their Muggle taxi driver. Their driver seemed a curious fellow, who’d asked what had happened to Sirius’ right arm.

Sirius arm was eye-catching. It was still withered despite the Healers’ best efforts. It was just dry, papery skin shrivelled taut around the bones. The muscle tissue underneath was almost entirely gone, leaving his arm looking skeletally thin. The muscle had been desiccated away to a highly condensed and totally unusable thin layer. Sirius called it his “beef jerky” arm and tried to laugh about it, with a twisted smile. It always hung limp at his side – the only way Sirius could move it at all was to physically pick up his right arm with his left. He insisted he still didn’t want it amputated, however, a stance that Lupin and Harry both supported, being ever-hopeful that something might change, or a cure might be found.

“His arm was injured in a motorcycle accident, a few years ago. Lot of broken bones and some nerve damage,” Harry volunteered, as Sirius floundered with umms and ahhs as he tried to think of a plausible Muggle-worthy response.

“You still ride?” the driver asked.

Sirius’ face drooped in sad lines. “No. No, I guess I can’t anymore.”

“You can still ride a broomstick,” Harry whispered, leaning in close so he wouldn’t be overheard.

It seemed to cheer Sirius up nicely, and he cautiously reached out to ruffle Harry’s hair, which made him laugh and smooth it back down again.

Platform nine and three-quarters was crowded as usual and fogged up with clouds of billowing steam from the scarlet Hogwarts Express. Owls hooted from all around, families chattered their farewells and last-minute instructions, and new students exclaimed excitedly at the sights.

As he wished Harry a good year, Sirius offered Harry a farewell hug (with one arm), tentatively suggested and cautiously received. It was odd. Harry had never had someone say goodbye to him on the platform like that. Like he was family. _Wanted_ family. He decided on the whole he liked it and offered a shy smile.

“You had better get going, and secure a good compartment before they’re all taken,” Sirius said gruffly, then thrust a small cloth drawstring bag at him. “Here, some pocket money for sweets from the trolley, and a little extra for Hogsmeade visits. Don’t forget to come and visit me at my new house! It will be all set up for your chemistry practice, I promise.”

“Really? Oh, thank you very much. You really didn’t need to, but it’s very kind of you,” Harry said with amazement, peeking inside the purse and admiring the gleam of gold. There were more than enough Galleons for as many treats as he wanted. He wondered if Dudley felt amazed and
pampered like this every time the Dursleys gave him money for frivolities, or if one got used to it. It didn’t feel like something you could get used to, but Harry guessed you would eventually.

“Nonsense, of course I did. Off with you, now. Don’t forget to write!”

Harry was glad his trunk was enchanted to be feather-light, since he had that plus two bags to juggle as he shuffled down the train’s narrow corridor. He cheerfully greeted a few people he knew (and several he didn’t) as he peeked into compartments looking for his friends. He found Hermione after a little searching and settled his trunk and Healer’s bag up in the luggage rack, keeping his satchel with him so Storm wouldn’t get accidentally squashed while he was napping in there.

“Harry, I have great news!” Hermione announced excitedly, as he wrestled his trunk into position. “Rumihart Books has agreed to publish the book I wrote with Greg as a two-volume set! So, if Greg and I can make enough cuts and shuffle things around, they’ll publish what they think is key information in the first volume, then if sales are good all the stuff we have to take out will go in our second book! Isn’t that fantastic?!” She beamed a great big toothy grin that lit up her face with joy.

“That’s wonderful news!” he agreed. “I’m glad you could come to a compromise that works for everyone. It would have been a shame if you’d missed out on publishing your very own book! Say, am I going to get to read a copy at any point?”

Hermione promised he would, and then burbled happily about drafts, research she’d done with pure-bloods and fellow Muggle-born students, and how many advance copies she’d been promised once it was published. Then she repeated all her news twice more as Neville and then Luna separately found their way to their compartment.

When the trolley witch appeared, Harry bought a good stockpile of treats – half a dozen pumpkin pasties, a pile of cauldron cakes, and a whole box of chocolate frogs.

“I think you shall be sick if you eat all of those,” Luna warned Harry, with wide eyes. “Or are you going to share them with us?”

“Oh! Oh! I know!” Hermione said excitedly, practically bouncing in her seat with her eagerness to explain. Harry was frankly surprised she didn’t forget herself and wave her hand in the air. “They’re probably for a sportula – gifts of food or money to visitors making the morning rounds of salutatio to their patrons! Patrons have an obligation to ensure their visiting clients are well fed.”

Luna decided this meant she was entitled to a treat, and nabbed herself a cauldron cake, thanking Harry politely with a handshake.

“Did you hear how Harry saved my father and I at the World Cup?” she asked Neville. Neville hadn’t heard about that part of Harry’s adventures at all, and he listened with rapt attention to Luna’s retelling. Harry thought he and Hermione sounded a lot more glamorously brave than they’d really been, and the danger more intense than it was in real life. Still, the basic facts were all there.

Turning to Harry at the end of her account, she added, “Daddy wrote about it in The Quibbler, you know. Here – he sent you a complimentary copy.” Luna dug a copy of the magazine out of her dark blue shoulder bag for Harry to keep.

Hermione peered over Harry’s shoulder as he read through it curiously. “You’re front page news! Hmm. Right next to a report about the ‘Rotfang Conspiracy’ working to bring down the Ministry of Magic from within using ‘a combination of Dark magic and gum disease’. Luna… you don’t actually believe that, do you?” Hermione asked with concerned scepticism.
“Of course I do,” Luna replied with a serene smile. “It’s the truth. Daddy always prints the truth, even when people don’t want him to. He’s very brave, you know. He says when the press is silenced, tyranny has already won.”

“There’s nothing in there that gives you the *teensiest* bit of hesitation that maybe it’s not completely true? Have you ever met a member of the Rotfang Conspiracy?” Hermione asked, pleading for rationality.

“Not that I know of, but they are very secretive, after all. I don’t think you’re in it. Why, your parents are dentists! They’d be very opposed to gum disease, obviously,” Luna said, gently patting Hermione’s arm in a gesture of reassurance.

Hermione huffed in frustration and stared out the window at the passing countryside the train was chuffing through. There wasn’t much to see, unless you enjoyed watching heavy rain drenching houses, or paddocks with a few sad, wet cows.

“There could be some kind of conspiracy,” Neville said loyalty. “Stranger things than that have happened in wizarding society. Perhaps you could explain a bit more about it, Luna? Because I don’t understand what gum disease has to do with anything.”

“Oh, it’s a code of course,” said Luna, very casually. “You have to think about it more. Daddy doesn’t want just *anyone* to understand it.”

Hermione’s head spun back to her, mouth agape. “It’s a *code*? Why didn’t you say so?”

“You didn’t ask.”

Hermione immediately borrowed Harry’s copy of *The Quibbler* to carefully study the article about the Rotfang Conspiracy. Harry thought about it. It could be hinting at the Dark Lord’s followers – they were a secretive group that might be undermining the Ministry. “Is it Death Eaters?” he asked, looking for confirmation.

“Well obviously,” Luna said.

“Of course,” Hermione muttered out loud, not really paying attention or looking up from the magazine. “It’s like a cryptic crossword, isn’t it? Rot – meaning decay and death. Fang – indicating teeth, associated with eating. Death Eaters are infiltrating the Ministry! The ‘Dark magic’ part is obvious, but what’s this about them giving out toffees and cakes so Ministry workers get gum disease, Luna?”

“They want other people to get rotten teeth too, just like them,” she explained. “The taste is honey-sweet, but the consequences are horrible.”

“Ah, recruiting new members or sympathisers with bribes and favours, perhaps some propaganda people metaphorically swallow!” Hermione said excitedly. She seemed delighted to have puzzled out the magazine’s code and was focused happily on that as she pored over the article, rather than the actual content of the disturbing news that was revealed.

A second-year student stopped by while Hermione was still intently reading the magazine, to hand out parchment invitations for Harry, Hermione, and Luna to join Professor Slughorn for tea and cakes in his compartment a little later on for a “Slug Club” meeting. She left them happily having gained a chocolate frog in return.

“Snubbed again,” sighed Neville, but he didn’t seem genuinely upset about it. “I might go and visit Ron while you’re at Slug Club. He has been having a rough time of things. He wrote to me about
Neville didn’t need to venture out in search of the Weasleys, however, as they visited Harry and his friends before he had a chance to go looking for them. The twins, Ron, his sister, and their cousin Mafalda Prewett – whom Harry forgetfully called Amanda at first, to their mutual embarrassment, and a secretive little smile from Ginny – all stopped by to share thanks, gossip, and a few snacks from Harry’s offerings.

“Dad is healing well, thank Merlin. He sent his thanks and says he owes you a life debt. Mum says thanks again too and sent you a box of caramel fudge – here you go,” Ron said, handing it over.

“She’s been crying a lot, so I don’t care if it tastes like goblin dung, it’d be nice if you would send her a thank you letter to cheer her up.” Ron frowned worriedly, and Harry gave him a serious nod.

Ron took a deep breath and continued with his messages. “Bill said to say he’s busy with all kinds of work and thankfully still has a job with Gringotts, as least until the end of the month, and he will write to you again soon. Uh, let’s see… Percy had a long message and I don’t remember all of it, but it was all about how he’s doing well at the Ministry and hopefully in line for a promotion, and you should write if you need anything. If you thought he was a social climber before, you should see how he’s acting now he thinks he has to be the provider for the family! Mind you, Charlie says he’ll send part of his pay home now, so it’s not like Percy’s the only one helping. That’s the lot, I think.”

“Our own best wishes and continuing gratitude too, of course,” said one of the twins.

“You want someone pranked, you need anything at all, you let us know,” the other twin added, and they bowed in unison with a dramatic flourish of sweeping hands. Harry wished he could tell them apart – he never knew who was who.

“Charlie said he’ll see you soon,” their sister added shyly, “and all of us, too. But he wouldn’t explain why. Something to do with Hogwarts. I think he might be planning a visit.”

Perhaps he’ll visit for a Yule Ball?” suggested Hermione. “It used to be traditional for the senior years last century – it says so in Hogwarts, A History – and we did have formal robes on our supply lists this year. Professor Slughorn might have pushed for it to be brought back – he loves parties.”

“You’re all most welcome,” Harry said to the Weasleys. “I’ll note down all the favours. Which reminds me, I owe you a book for your mum, Ron!” Harry dug in his satchel, disturbing Storm who hissed at Harry crossly for waking him up, hissing in open-mouthed threat.

Storm got promptly dumped on Luna’s lap and Harry told him off sternly with a wagging finger in front of his snout. “Hush! I know I woke you up, but there is still no call for that kind of language! Cut it out right now! And you will not display your teeth like that at me or any of my friends, do you understand me?!”

“I’m sorry Commander, I didn’t truly mean any threat, I won’t do it again.” Storm sounded chastened and apologetic, and rather shocked by Harry’s rare rebuke on his behaviour, and it softened Harry’s temper instantly.

“Look, I know you’re tired, but you’re napping in my bag, Storm. I need a book from there, and you’re on top of it,” Harry explained. “Now, be good for Luna. I shall put you back in a second.”

Storm subsided obediently, coiling up quietly on Luna who hadn’t seemed at all disturbed by having an angrily hissing snake unexpectedly dropped in her lap. Mafalda was really the only one
in the group crowded into their carriage who seemed unnerved by the altercation and hissed exchange and was clutching Ginny Weasley’s arm tightly.

Harry retrieved the promised book and handed it over. “There you go Ron, one signed copy of Battles with the Basilisk like I promised you. It’s only signed by me, since Lockhart is… well… he’s still alive at least, and that’s something.”

“I don’t remember you promised that?” Ron said, scratching his head in confusion. “Thanks all the same, though. Mum will love it, and Ginny can read it when mum’s done. She’s been really wanting to know what’s in it too.”

“I wrote my promise down in a notebook, that’s how I remembered. I’m starting to lose track of favours and stuff, so I’ve been making notes,” Harry explained.

“The poor man,” Ginny murmured sadly. “He couldn’t help himself any more than I could. It’s terrible what happened to him.”

Neville asked curiously, “Am I in there? In your book of favours, that is. I know I’m in the Basilisks book, even with the changes.”

“Yep. One life debt owed to me for saving you from the Basilisk, and one promise from me to invite you along the next time I do something unbelievably dangerous,” Harry said, finishing with a grin. Neville looked pleased, and slightly nervous, as he returned Harry’s smile.

“What was that about Lockhart?” Hermione asked. “What’s happened to him? There wasn’t anything in the paper.”

Hesitantly, Harry said, “I heard a rumour that he’s just been found in a sorry state in Ghana, affected by Fwoopers and with various health problems from wandering around the jungle for too long. I think they’re transferring him to St. Mungo’s soon, so I expect the Prophet will write something about it once reporters catch wind of it.”

“Is that why he hasn’t been answering my letters?” gasped Hermione. “Oh no! What’s wrong with him? Is it life-threatening?”

There was some more sympathetic and worried chatter about Lockhart before the Weasleys and Miss Prewett went on their way.

“We’re going to visit Bones,” said a twin. “Werewolf victim solidarity, you know. We think she could use the support.”

“She is coming back to Hogwarts?’” Neville asked, frowning. “How is that legal? That is, I am happy for her but… won’t she get in trouble?”

The twins looked at each other, and both shrugged. “We don’t know,” they chorused.

“So, we’re going to find out, and do what we can to help,” one of them concluded.

After they’d left (Mafalda with a cheerful farewell to ‘Harold’), there was a steady trickle of visitors… or potential clients, depending on perspective. Macmillan, Theodore, and Tolipan made brief visits, while Colin Creevey lingered for a while to introduce his younger brother Dennis, who was a tiny little thing who was buzzing with excitement about getting to go to Hogwarts, and fiercely determined to get into Gryffindor like his big brother. Pansy, Daphne, Tracey, and Millicent visited as a group for a brief chat.
There were a couple of relatively new faces stopping by. First was Zacharias Smith, whom Harry only knew from the Junior Potter Watch group (and whom Harry quietly thought was a bit of a prat) as he was a year below them in Hufflepuff. He wanted to personally thank Harry for looking after his Great-Aunt Margaret at the Quidditch World Cup.

“Though fair’s fair, it sounded to me like she looked after you too, Potter,” he added at the end. It was perhaps a little ungracious, but Harry didn’t take offence.

Harry replied, “She was very capable – I think she would have been fine without me, but it was sensible for people to gather together for safety.”

Smith seemed very content with Harry’s modest summation, and went on his way in a good mood, munching on a proffered chocolate frog.

Another Hufflepuff stopped by too – Megan Jones from their year. Daphne had written a response to Harry’s enquiry to let him know that Hestia Jones who’d died at the Quidditch World Cup had indeed been related to their classmate – she had been Megan’s aunt on her father’s side. Harry made sure to offer his condolences to Megan, which were accepted gravely. She also expressed polite thanks for helping out a relative of hers, Hermes Jones, who was the fearful man who’d sheltered with Harry at the Cup after he’d lost his wand in all the chaos.

“He’s my first cousin once removed,” she explained. “It’s not a close relationship, but you know… he’s still family. So, I have a message that the House of Jones is grateful for your provision of Sanctuary for Cousin Hermes and would like to repay you. Are you a fan of the Holyhead Harpies, by any chance? I’ve got a second cousin once removed on the team – Gwenog Jones. She’s a Beater. We could get you Top Box tickets to a match?”

“Hmm!” Harry said interestedly, thinking of Millicent who was a fan of the Harpies. “I wouldn’t say no to a couple of autographed photos I can give to friends as gifts, or a signed poster of the team or something. That would repay the debt nicely. For I was happy to help, you know.”

They shook hands on it, and Megan went on her way.

“Are you going to visit anyone?” Luna asked Hermione. “I am going to go and visit MacDougal, before Slug Club starts. She is the only girl in Ravenclaw who has really been nice to me – Harry asked her to. So really, he is my patron, not her, but I think it would be polite to visit anyway, don’t you?”

“Well it wouldn’t hurt, so you may as well, especially if you don’t have many friends in your House,” Hermione said sympathetically. “I thought about it a lot, and I’m just going to visit Greg. I’m still cross at him for grabbing me and trying to haul me around like a sack of potatoes at the Quidditch World Cup, mind you, but we’re pretty good friends now and I understand why he did it.”

“He was just scared for you, I guess?” Harry said.

“He grabbed you when he took you to Harry’s tent? He should not have done that, it’s a dreadful breach of etiquette,” Neville commented with a frown. “Did he apologise properly?”

“He only grabbed my hand,” explained Hermione, causing Neville to look relieved. “And no, I don’t think it occurred to him that he did anything wrong. I’ll have a quiet word with him about it later. I’m not a damsel to rescue! I’m twice the dueller he is! But I’m not really mad about it because I get how he was thinking. The world was all out of order – everything was chaotic with rules out the window. He hates situations like that. So, making sure I was safe, following the old
pure-blood etiquette – it wasn’t just because he was scared and wanted to help me. It was his way of restoring a bit of order to the world.”

“He did not have to help you, however,” said Neville. “Surely, he could have remained with his family, like Malfoy did. I think it was very gentlemanly of him to seek you out and escort you to safety.” He gave Hermione a soft smile, which made her look embarrassed for a moment, before a distracted frown crossed her face.

“Malfoy,” she hissed crossly. “You were quite right about his family, Neville. They’re nasty pieces of work. I don’t want to associate with him any longer, Harry, so please don’t try and push me to do so.”

Neville looked surprised but pleased, while Luna seemed indifferent, but Harry was quite upset by her pronouncement.

“Hermione!” Harry said rebukingly. “Look, if this is about the Malfoy’s garden party or the ball, Draco really wanted to invite you, it was just that his parents said no, alright? He didn’t mean to snub you. He tried his best to include you, I promise.”

She scowled. “I heard about all about that from Millicent. But no, it’s not that, though being left out of everything didn’t help. Harry, I don’t know if you noticed – I only heard about it from Ron as it wasn’t in the paper – but there wasaconite at the front door of the Malfoy tent. Wolf’s Bane – like the Death Eaters were handing out to all their supporters who laughed at a spot of Muggle torture. To help deter werewolves from attacking them.”

Harry thought about it and remembered there had been some flowering in the planters next to the Malfoy’s tent entrance, admittedly along with a bunch of other plants as well. “Yes… I think there was, but it could have been a coincidence. Those planters had a few other magical and poisonous plants in them. Maybe give him a chance to explain?”

“I don’t believe it’s a coincidence, Harry. I really don’t. Not with his attitude to Muggles and Muggle-borns, and his father’s record.”

Harry sighed. “You can’t blame him for what his father did. Draco didn’t even necessarily know the Wolf’s Bane was even there, even if it was positioned there with foreknowledge of the evening’s events.”

“I didn’t know the Malfoys were part of the Rotfang Conspiracy,” Luna said worriedly. “I thought they were nice. Draco has always been friendly to me.”

“Well, you’re a pure-blood. I’m not even allowed to be on a first name basis with him,” Hermione said.

“What about Pansy?” Harry asked. “And the others?”

“I’m not going to visit her like she’s a potential patron, but I’ll still associate with her, and the others. But just so you know in case it wasn’t clear - I don’t like Pansy, Harry. Being courteous isn’t the same thing as being actually friendly, and she can be very selfish, and catty at times – though I don’t see her do it as much while you’re around. We tolerate each other, but that’s about it.”

Harry sighed. It was probably true. He stared out the window at the pouring rain.

“I think your cousin is nice,” Luna said comfortingly to him. “There are three other girls in my dorm and they are all much meaner than her.”
“Well, I’m just her token Muggle-born friend when it’s convenient for her, and it’s annoying. She’s a fair-weather friend,” Hermione said. “Don’t you remember how she and Millicent dumped you when it looked like Sirius Black might be hunting for you last year, Harry? They barely even talked to you for months and didn’t even bother to visit when you ended up in the Hospital Wing after the Dementor attack!”

“They both had family pressure to do that, it wasn’t their fault. Pansy and Millicent talked to me last year more than you probably realised because they were sneaky about it,” Harry explained defensively. “They both snuck in to visit me in the Hospital Wing right before curfew, when no-one would see them, and brought some chocolate frogs. They hung around after everyone left at the end of Potter Watch meetings too, sometimes. Are you mad at Millicent too? I thought you liked her.”

“Oh, I never heard about that. Well I do like Millicent – we’re becoming proper friends,” Hermione said, as an apologetic concession. “She’s got hidden depths – still waters run deep and all that. I feel like I’m only just getting to know her, even though we’ve been socialising for over a year. Did you know that in the past couple of weeks she’s traded away just about every favour she’s accumulated for the past few years to secure herself a practical guarantee of getting to be on the Slytherin Quidditch team this year? She’s that keen to establish a Quidditch career and avoid getting pressured into settling down right after school to be a good little mother of the next generation of pure-bloods. She’s stressing out a lot over not knowing who the Slytherin Quidditch Captain is going to be this year though – neither Derrick nor Montague got sent the team captain badge, and neither did that prat Malfoy for that matter.”

Harry sighed. “Language, please. He’s still my friend, even if you don’t want to be friends with him any longer. I don’t want you insulting each other – at least not in front of me.”

Hermione thought about it a moment, then nodded. “That’s fair.”

Thankfully for Harry’s peace of mind, the topic was then dropped, and they engaged in a peaceful discussion with Luna about what she could expect from her new third year elective classes – Care of Magical Creatures and Divination. Their group scattered after that, with an agreement to meet up at Slug Club – Luna left in search of MacDougal, while Hermione went hunting for Greg, muttering unhappily about how he always stuck to Malfoy like glue.

Draco made an appearance not long after that, accompanied by Greg and Vincent. They’d run into Hermione just as they were leaving their compartment, and she’d said hello and chatted briefly to Greg before she’d hurried away.

“She said she had other people to see before Slug Club,” rumbled Greg, “and that she didn’t want to be late.”

“I thought we might all go together,” said Draco to Harry, “but she just scurried off. I did not even get a chance to share my news. Harry, you will never guess what I learnt from father just this morning! The Triwizard Tournament is coming to Hogwarts!”

Chapter End Notes

All done! I hope you’ve enjoyed this rather lengthy account of Harry’s summer. The next fic in the series will cover Harry’s fourth year at school, as the Triwizard Tournament comes to Hogwarts. As it will be another novel-length fic and I don’t like
to post WIPs, it will be another long wait until it starts coming out, so you’ll have to be patient. After I finish one of my long works I also give myself ‘time off’ to write other assorted fics. But rest assured this series will continue! As of Dec ’18 I’ve just finished the draft of chapter five of the next fic, and the ending is already plotted out. You can peek at my writing progress by keeping an eye on my fanfiction dot net profile page, or you can follow my author blog on Goodreads. You might like to follow me as an author or subscribe to the “Perfectly Normal” series as a whole if you don’t want to miss out on an alert about the next fic when it’s eventually posted, many months from now.

Gwendolyn McCormick, mirabilos, and ladyofsilverdawn – thanks for your discussion about the train ride for this final chapter.

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Last but by no means least, thank you to all the wonderful people who’ve written reviews – both short and long – on this fic and others in the series, and/or who’ve left kudos. Your support is encouraging to me as a writer and greatly appreciated.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!