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| Additional Tags: | Book 2: Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, Blind!HarryPotter, Basilisk - Freeform, Making up spells, Floo Network, Major Character Injury, Blind Character, Hurt/Comfort, Vomiting, Knight Bus, Canon Compliant, Blind Harry, Number Four Privet Drive (Harry Potter), Parseltongue, Snakes, Owls, Magical Artifacts, Basilisks, Book 3: Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Albus Agapantha, Chores, Guidance staff, anagnostis, Parselmouth Harry Potter, Room of Requirement, London Underground, Deaf Character, Wheelchairs, Disabled Character of Color, BSL, Muteness, POV Harry Potter, Amputation, mermaid, Jiäorén, Canon compliant except for the use of accio by a first year, HMS Eden, Vanishing Sickness, Spattergoit, Travel by painting, Fernando Po Island, Fanart inspired by Burdge, Mosquitos, Africa, Ocean, Beaches, Hurricane, Portals, The Owlery (Harry Potter), cross-posted on ffnet under the same username, sketches posted on deviantart under hegemonemilo, Magical eye prosthetics not yet explored as an option, Magical levitating chair, Werewolves, Lycanthropes, Magical Prosthetics, Goblins, Braille, protactile bsl, Pensieves, Muggles, Exploding Snap, Dolphins, gelato,
Basilisk Eyes

by Hegemone

Summary

As he slays the Basilisk, Harry is doused in blood and venom . . . some gets in his eyes.

Notes

J.K. Rowling owns the rights to the story and the characters. I'm just doing this for fun.

I'm so grateful to nebulababe for generously offering to beta this story. We're working through what I've already written (109 chapters at this point) and replacing the beta'd chapters as we go. I'll indicate which ones have been beta'd as I upload (and no doubt you'll be able to tell because they'll be a lot cleaner!). Thank you, nebulababe! You are very skilled!

See the end of the work for more notes
As Harry thrust the sword into the roof of the serpent's mouth, blood spurt from the wound, drenching him, and he felt a searing pain just above his elbow. One long, poisonous fang sank deep into his arm. It splintered as the basilisk keeled over sideways and fell, twitching, on the floor.

Trying to blink the stinging basilisk’s blood from his eyes, Harry slid down the wall to the floor. He grasped the fang and wrenched it from his arm, screaming as a white-hot pain tore through his body. Dropping the fang, he tried to clear the blood from his eyes with his good hand so that he could see the wound, but it didn’t help. My eyes! Tears poured down his face making tracks in the serpent blood that was smeared across his face. He heard a soft clatter of claws on the stone beneath him. “Fawkes,” said Harry thickly, his tongue heavy in his mouth. “You were fantastic.”

He felt the bird lay its beautiful head on the hole in his arm where the fang had pierced him.

Echoing footsteps approached him and a dark shadow moved in front of him. Harry blinked trying to clear his eyes so he could see Tom, but he just remained a dark shadow towering over him.

“You’re dead, Harry Potter,” Tom taunted. “Even Dumbledore’s bird knows it! He’s crying.”

Harry tried to look, but Fawkes was just a pinkish blur.

“I’m just going to sit here and watch you die, Potter! Take your time. I’m in no hurry!” The dark form sank to the floor in front of him.

“So ends the famous Harry Potter!” Riddle crowed and Harry found it hard to focus on his words as Tom blithely described Harry’s predicament, dying alongside Ginny in the bowels of the school on the cold, wet floor of the chamber. Harry’s thoughts raced to Ron trapped in a pile of rocks and Hermione petrified in the hospital wing and then to the warm fire in the Weasley’s kitchen. He sank into the feeling of what it would be like to be embraced again by Molly. But then the cold of the chamber started seeping back and he felt as if he were waking up. Tom’s voice came back into focus. He was talking about Harry’s mother, calling her a mudblood. The vile word shook him and he opened his eyes, blinking trying to bring the world back in focus and take the stinging away, but everything was still shadowy.

If this is dying, Harry thought, it’s not so bad. The pain was receding from his arm and he felt stronger. He straightened his back and wrigged the fingers in his hurt arm. It didn’t hurt anymore. He ran his fingers over the spot where the fang had gorged him, but his skin felt smooth and whole. There was no wound.

“Get away, bird,” Riddle shouted. And Harry felt the air shifting and heard Tom scrambling to stand up as he lunged for the phoenix. Harry flinched against the wall as he heard the wings flapping and
an explosive bang. “Phoenix tears!” Tom shouted in exasperation. “Fucking healing properties.” Tom’s shadowy figure loomed over Harry again.

“But it makes no difference,” his voice controlled again. “In fact, I prefer it this way. Just you and me, Harry Potter. You…and…me…”

Harry heard Fawkes overhead again and felt something land on his lap. He grabbed it. The diary. He leaned forward and felt the fang roll under his knee. He seized it and kneeling, plunged the fang into the diary over and over again. He felt sticky liquid pouring out of it as he turned it over to plunge the fang into it from the other side. Tom let out a piercing wail as if he was the one being stabbed, not the book. And then his shadowy form blended into the other shadows of the chamber and he was gone. Only the echo of his scream reverberated off the walls of the chamber, until it, too, faded away.

Harry dropped the oozing book and started crawling forward on his hands and knees, feeling the ground in front of him for Ginny, blinking hard, trying to see through the tears that kept filling his eyes. *God, how they sting,* he thought. His hands found the cold body of the serpent instead. It rose like a wall next to him and he pulled himself up, running his hands over the scaly skin. He heard Ginny gasp for air as if she had just surfaced from underwater and started hurrying toward the sound along the basilisk's body. Her moan drew him closer and he dropped to the floor again moving away from the serpent, reaching out with his hands until he felt her robes.

“Ginny, Ginny! Are you okay?” His fingers brushed over her face and hair until he found her shoulders, and clasped them.

“Harry! What happened? Are you hurt? You’re covered with blood!”

“I’m okay, Ginny. It’s the basilisk's blood. I’m okay. Are you okay?”

“I’m so sorry, Harry. It was me. I tried to tell you. I swear I didn’t mean to do it. Riddle made me do it. The last thing I remember is him coming out of the diary…” she sobbed.

“He’s gone, Ginny. You’re okay now.”

“Harry, how did you do it? How’d you get rid of him and… kill the snake?” She had twisted toward him and then shuddered, Harry imagined, when she saw the serpent’s body.

“I had help. Fawkes brought me the sorting hat and the sorting hat gave me a sword. And I stabbed the diary with the Basilisk fang. That made Volde-, I mean, Riddle vanish.”

He sat up and pulled her off the floor, hugging her to him, feeling her warmth against his chest, and her hair tickling his face. He trembled as he held her body against his, relief flooding his senses. Ginny is okay! She held onto him, shuddering with sobs until she was done, her breath more even and she pulled away to wipe her face.

Harry wiped at his eyes, too. They burned.

“What’s wrong with your eyes, Harry?” Ginny asked.

“I got something in them. Basilisk blood and maybe venom. Can you help me wash it out? Is the pool close by?”

Ginny stood up and pulled Harry up, too. “Come on. It’s over here.” She pulled him a few steps over to the pool and knelt down by it. He dropped next to her and reached for the dank water, splashing it up onto his face. He realized that his glasses were missing. He hadn’t even noticed when he lost
them. Not that they’d help now. His vision was worse than when he first woke in the morning, before putting them on. In fact, it was worse than when he first got the blood in his eyes. Blinking through the steady stream of tears, he could really only make out vague shadows, light, and dark, he wasn’t even sure if he was seeing actual shapes any more, but it was hard to keep his eyes open to even see that.

Phoenix tears! Harry thought suddenly. “Fawkes, can your tears help my eyes?” He asked the bird who had hopped over next to him by the pool of water.

He lay down on the cold, wet floor again and turned his head toward the bird. Fawkes laid his feathery head on Harry’s face and he felt the tears sliding into his left eye, then turned his head so that they’d slide into his right eye. He blinked to spread the tears and felt immediate relief. The terrible stinging stopped. “Thank you, Fawkes. You are amazing.” Harry sat up and looked around. He could open his eyes now, but the chamber was still shrouded in dark shadows, with flickering blurs of light. He rubbed at his eyes again and looked again, but it was the same.

“Is it any better, Harry?” Ginny asked softly.

“It stopped stinging, but I still can’t see anything really - just shadows,” Harry said gravely. He shook himself and tried to focus.

“Ginny, do you see my wand anywhere? Riddle took it. Maybe he dropped it when he vanished?”

“I’ll look for it,” she said as she jumped up. Her steps clattered away from him, echoing off the chamber walls. He heard the distinctive sound of the hardwood of a wand on stone and knew she’d found it and sighed with relief. Her footsteps started coming back to him as she approached him, then stopped.

“What is it?” he asked.

“The diary. Let’s take it back.” She sounded sad and yet a bit fierce.

“Careful of the venom, Ginny,” Harry called to her as she approached him.

“Yeah, right.” She said. “I’ll wrap it in my cloak.” He could hear the rustling of her cloak and then there was a pregnant pause.

“Um, here’s your wand, Harry.”

He realized she must have been holding it out to him, expecting him to see it and take it. He stood up slowly, reaching forward and felt her place it across his palm. He tucked the wand in his cloak pocket.

“How are we going to get out of here?” Harry wondered, squinting as he tried to see through the shadows and orient himself. Could he even find the tunnel he’d followed here? And then there was the caved-in portion of the tunnel. He heard Fawkes’ claws scrape on the stone and his wings flapping as he launched into the air.

“Fawkes is flying this way. Let’s follow him.” Ginny grabbed his arm and pulled him with her. He stumbled alongside her, then pulled up short. “Wait, what about the sword and the sorting hat? Where are they?”

Harry felt Ginny turn as she looked around the room, tugging his hand with her as she moved.

“I see the sorting hat. Wait here. I’ll go get it.”
She ran across the chamber. Harry moved forward toward the wall of the Basilisk’s body and started following it toward the head, keeping his hand on the cold scaly body.

He tripped and stumbled over stones that had been knocked loose in the struggle with the serpent, but managed to stay upright. The serpent's body tapered as he neared the head and he heard Ginny join him.

“Oh,” she gasped.

“What is it?” Harry asked.

“The sword is really stuck up far in the roof of the mouth. Here. Let me get it.” She moved past him.

“Careful of the fangs. The venom!” Harry called out as he listened to the sickening sound of the sword moving out of the flesh of the Basilisk’s mouth. The sword clattered to the ground.

“I’m okay,” Ginny reassured Harry as he found her back and gripped her shoulder.

She bent down and heaved at the sword.

“Here, let me get it,” Harry said. He reached around her, following her arm to her hand, then took the sword from her. It was heavier than he remembered during the struggle with the great snake. He fumbled with the edge of his robes and then wiped the blade against them, cleaning it off and stuck it through his belt so that it hung by his side. He tightened his belt so that the sword wouldn’t pull his trousers down.

Fawkes had settled on the serpent’s body as they sorted out the sword - he could hear his little chirps. He took off again, leading them to the tunnel.

“Here, let me hold onto your shoulder,” Harry told Ginny as she grabbed onto his arm again to lead him. “That’ll be easier.” She was about a head shorter than him. He didn’t like being pulled along.

“Any chance you see my glasses around here?”

“No,” Ginny said. Then he heard her reaching into her robes. “Accio glasses!” she called and Harry heard a whooshing noise.

“Here they are, Harry, but they are all busted.” She pressed them into his hand and he felt their contorted form and cracked glass.

“Hey, isn’t that a really advanced spell? How do you know it?” Harry asked.

“Don’t tell anyone. I’m not supposed to use it, but Fred and George use it all the time at home when they think no one is watching and I figured it out, too,” Ginny confessed.

“You mean before you had a wand?” Harry wondered.

“Well, I would sneak my brother’s wands when they weren’t using them,” Ginny said … it was as if being in the Chamber of Secrets had made her want to confess all of her secrets.

“Crap,” Harry sighed, stuffing his glasses into his pocket. He tried to open them up to place over his eyes, but one of the earpieces broke off. Holding them up to his eyes, they didn’t make a difference. Nothing.

He grasped Ginny’s shoulder.
“Let’s get back to Ron,” he said.

“Where’s Ron?” Ginny exclaimed. “Why isn’t he here with you?”

“Lockhart tried to blast us with a spell and made a part of the tunnel cave in. Ron’s okay, just trapped behind the rubble. Let’s try to find him. He was trying to move the rocks so that we’d be able to get back through once I found you.”

“Lumos,” Ginny said and her wand lit up as the shadows of the tunnel swallowed them up. He shut his eyes against the harsh, blinding light.

"Oh, ow," he yelped.

"You can see that?" Ginny asked.

"Yes, it's just so bright… it hurts."

The light from her spell was all Harry could see and he had to keep his eyes closed against it and just following her blindly through the tunnel.

After a bit, they could hear the sound of rocks being moved and picked up their speed. The sword slapped against Harry’s hip as he moved.

“Ron! Ron!” Harry shouted, “Ginny’s alright!”

They could hear Ron’s muffled cheer.

Ginny stopped close to the wall of rock and Harry slipped and slid over the loose bits of rubble strewn over the floor.

“You did it, Harry! You saved Ginny!” Ron’s gave a strangled cry mingling both jubilation and relief. His voice sounded like it was coming through a pipe.

“Come through the tunnel. Here, Ginny, you first.”

Harry felt Ginny being pulled forward and heard her scrabbling through the rocky tunnel that Ron had made. He heard Ron helping Ginny through.

"Why are you wearing the sorting hat, Ginny?" Ron asked in awe.

Harry felt around the rock pile until he found the entrance and then started climbing through after her. He had to climb back out and take the sword out of his belt because he couldn’t climb through the tunnel with it on. He tried again, holding the sword in one hand in front of him. It was tricky crawling through the hole with it. Cool air blew across his face as he emerged from the small tunnel feeling his way forward.

“Can someone take the sword?” he called out, afraid that he’d accidentally stab someone with it.

“Whoa! Where’d you get this sword? It’s so cool,” Ron exclaimed as he took it from Harry.

“The sorting hat gave it to me,” Harry explained, but he was distracted. He could hear Ginny sniffling. He pulled himself through the hole, stumbling as he tried to find his footing on the rocky ground.

“You okay, Harry?” Ron asked perplexed, grabbing him by the arm to steady him.
“Not really. I can’t see. I got venom in my eyes. I can’t see anything - just shadows and light,” his voice cracking. “I bet Madam Pomfrey can sort it out.”


“Harry killed it with a sword! And he got rid of Riddle, too!” Ginny burst out, grabbing Harry by the other arm and helping him navigate through the rubble. He noticed that her voice was full of tears and that she was trembling.

“Riddle? How was he down here?” Ron questioned.

Ginny gasped in a sob in response and before he could answer, Harry heard Fawkes’s claws scrabbling through Ron’s tunnel and his wings flap as he rose into the air. “Hey! Where did that bird come from?” Ron cried in surprise.

“Fawkes helped us. Dumbledore’s Phoenix. We wouldn’t have made it, except for Fawkes.”

Ginny started crying more audibly and Harry slipped an arm around her, trying to comfort her.

“Ron, I’ll tell you everything later. Let’s get out of here. Where’s Lockhart?”

“That old git,” Ron muttered. “He’s over there.”

Harry guessed that Ron was pointing. He squinted, but couldn’t distinguish any human-like shapes in the shadows in the tunnel. In fact, he couldn’t see any shapes.

“No, this way. Man, you really can’t see, can you?” Ron uttered, horrified.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. I mean we’ve got magic, right?” Harry tried to reassure Ron. Ginny cried harder.

“Ginny, what’s wrong? Why are you crying?” Ron turned toward his sister.

“It’s all my fault. I did it. I’m going to be expelled. Mm-mmum and Da-ad are going to be so mad. And now Harry’s blind because of me.” Ginny wailed.

“What do you mean - ‘you did it?’” Ron questioned. Harry spoke over Ron. “Ginny. It is not your fault. And I’m going to be fine. I’m not blind. I just can’t see right now.” He pulled her close and smoothed back her hair from her face. It was wet - from the chamber, from her tears - he wasn’t sure which.

“Okay, let’s get Lockart and get out of here,” Harry tried to sound more confident than he felt.

“Mmm ‘kay, he’s over here. He’s in a bad way. Come and see… uh, well,… you know what I mean,” Ron corrected.

“Funny, Ron.” Harry jostled his arm as held onto Ron moving through the rock-strewn tunnel. He could hear Fawkes’s song leading them through the tunnel. He closed his eyes again because Ginny’s Lumos was too bright. He was so tired… and hungry… and thirsty.

Harry could feel the cool air blowing through the tunnel - they must have reached the pipe that they traveled down from the girl’s bathroom. They stopped and Harry heard Gilderoy humming to himself.

“His memory’s gone,” said Ron. “The Memory Charm backfired. Hit him instead of us. He hasn’t got a clue who he is, or where he is, or who we are.”
“Hello,” Gilderoy’s voice seemed cheerful. “Odd sort of place, this, isn’t it? Do you live here?”

“No,” Ron said and Harry snorted as he imagined the face Ron was pulling.

Harry pulled out his wand and charmed a stream of water to come out of it and aimed for his mouth. He missed at first and shot water up his nose, “Geez.” Finally, he got it in his mouth. At last satisfied, he tucked his wand away, wiped his face, and crouched down holding his hands out in front of him. He could feel the breeze from the pipe stronger now and leaned forward until he found the exit they had fallen through.

“Ron, have you thought about how we’re going to get back up the pipe? I think it is too slippery to climb,” he said as he felt the surface, his voice amplified as it moved up the pipe.

He could hear Fawkes hovering near and feel the wind his wings made.

“What is Fawkes doing?” Harry asked.

“It looks like he wants you to grab a hold of his tail feathers…” Ron said, sounding perplexed. “But you’re much too heavy for a bird to pull up there…”

“Fawkes,” said Harry, “isn’t an ordinary bird.” Harry reached back trying to find Ginny until her small hand grasped his. “We’ve got to hold on to each other. Someone hold Lockhart’s hand.”

“Who’s Lockhart?” Lockhart said.

“He means you,” Ron said with exasperation.

“Is everyone holding on? Ron, you still have the sword?” Harry asked, not bothering to turn around to look. Ron confirmed that they were all linked and that he had the sword. Harry moved his hand through the air in front of him until he found Fawkes’s feathers. They were strangely hot and an extraordinary lightness spread through his whole body as he grasped them. Suddenly they were floating up the pipe.

Lockhart’s voice came up from below as he shouted, “amazing, amazing! This is just like magic!”

Harry was jarred as he felt the wet floor beneath his feet and he stumbled trying to get his footing. The others gathered around him and he heard the sink behind them sliding back into place. Moaning Myrtle gurgled somewhere in the air above him.

“You’re alive,” she said blankly.

“There’s no need to sound so disappointed,” he said grimly, squeezing Ginny’s hand. She sniffed in response.

“You would have been welcome to share my toilet,” Myrtle chortled as the group left the bathroom. Harry breathed a sigh of relief as he put his hand on Ginny’s shoulder again.

“Where now?” Ron asked then stopped, “Oh, Fawkes is leading the way. Let’s go.”

They followed Fawkes through the deserted corridors and then stopped.

“Where are we?” asked Harry, confused.

“We’re outside Professor McGonagall’s office,” Ron said as he rapped on the door, and then pushed it open.
I'm so grateful to nebulababe for generously offering to beta this story. We're working through what I've already written (109 chapters at this point) and replacing the beta'd chapters as we go. I'll indicate which ones have been beta'd as I upload (and no doubt you'll be able to tell because they'll be a lot cleaner!). Thank you, nebulababe! You are very skilled!
They stood silently in the doorway for a moment, then Harry jumped as he heard a loud scream and squeezed Ginny’s shoulder in alarm.

“Ginny!” someone shouted and Ginny was pulled away from Harry.

He stumbled forward, knocking into Ron and Ginny and he didn’t know who else. He was suddenly being pressed on all sides by bodies. He realized that it must be Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, but with all the voices and arms and legs, it seemed like more. He was pulled into a tight embrace… with Ron and Ginny and Mrs. Weasley, he guessed. He wasn’t sure.

“You saved her! How did you do it?” Mrs. Weasley shrieked in his ear. It wasn’t quite the warm, comfortable hug he imagined as he was slipping toward death in the chamber below, but it was still good.

“I think we’d all like to know,” Harry heard Professor McGonagall’s voice from across the room.

Mrs. Weasley let go of Harry. He stood still for a moment trying to gather his thoughts. He reached out, trying to find Ginny and Ron. They grabbed his hands.

“Harry? Are you okay?” Mrs. Weasley asked tentatively.

“It’s nothing. I’ll be okay,” Harry said, flapping his hand as if to wave her question away. “Ron, you still have the sword? Ginny, the diary, and the sorting hat?” He waited and then realized they must of nodded.

“Um, oh, yes, Harry. We have them.”

He felt Ginny tugging at her robes to extract the diary. Ron and Ginny moved away from Harry and he heard the sword clunk against wood, guessing that they were setting the items down on a table. They returned to Harry and Ginny slipped her hand in his again and squeezed. He stared down at the floor and started telling them everything in an even voice. He could feel the tension in the air as his story unfolded. He told them about the voices in the pipes, how Hermione figured out that he was hearing a basilisk, the spiders in the forest (he felt Ron shudder next to him) and learning about the victim in the bathroom and figuring out that it was Moaning Myrtle, and then finding the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets…

“Very well,” Professor McGonagall sputtered when he paused, “so you found out where the entrance was - breaking a hundred school rules in the process! - but how on earth did you all get out of there alive?”

So, Harry, his voice growing hoarse from so much talking, told them about Fawkes swooping in with the sorting hat and how it dropped the sword on his head.

He rubbed his head, remembering the blow and faltered here. He could feel Ginny’s shuddering
breaths and hear her gentle sniffles. *How can I talk about Riddle’s diary without getting Ginny expelled?*

Dumbledore’s voice broke the silence and Harry started. He didn’t know he was here, too. He wondered who else was in the room.

“What interests me most,” said Dumbledore, “is how Lord Voldemort managed to enchant Ginny, when all my sources tell me he’s currently hiding in the forests of Albania.”

Harry felt his knees weaken as relief washed over him. Ginny’s hand in his felt more steady, less tremulous. *She won’t be blamed. Dumbledore knows,* Harry thought.

The room erupted in voices again, all talking over each other.

“What? You-know-who possessed Ginny?” Mr. Weasley’s voice stood out among the others.

“It was the diary,” Harry stated.

He heard the swish of robes and footsteps going toward the table Ron and Ginny had laid the items out on.

“Riddle wrote in the diary when he was sixteen,” Harry said.

The room was quiet. Harry wondered what was happening and cocked his head to the side as he listened for clues.

“Brilliant,” Dumbledore said softly. “Of course, he was probably the most brilliant student Hogwarts has ever seen.”

There were mutters of disbelief.

Dumbledore continued, “… very few people know that Lord Voldemort was once called Tom Riddle and went to school here. I taught him myself about fifty years ago. He disappeared after leaving school… traveled far and wide… and utterly transformed himself with his meddling in the dark arts so that no one recognized him as the once clever, handsome Head Boy.”

“But what has this to do with Ginny?” Mrs. Weasley demanded stepping over to Ginny and pulling her away from Harry. Harry let go of her hand.

Ginny’s voice sounded muffled as she sobbed, “His diary! I’ve been writing in his diary… and he’s been writing back all year!”

“Ginny!” Mr. Weasley shouted. “What have I always told you? Never trust anything that can think for itself if you can’t see where it keeps its brain! The diary was clearly full of dark magic. Why didn’t you show it to me?”

“I’m so sorry, Daddy!” she wailed.

“Miss Weasley should go to the hospital wing now. This has been very hard on her!” Dumbledore insisted.

His voice grew more gentle as he said, “Ginny, you will not be punished. Older and wiser wizards than you have been hoodwinked by Lord Voldemort.”

Harry listened as Dumbledore strode over to the door, saying, “Madam Pomfrey is still awake - she’s just started administering the Mandrake juice…”
“So Hermione’s going to be okay?” Ron asked brightly.

“But, Harry…” Ginny protested. “Harry needs to go, too. He’s hurt.”

“Yes. I’ll send Harry up, too, but I need to talk to him and Ron a little longer,” Dumbledore consoled.

Harry felt Ron brush up against him again and surmised that he was feeling as nervous about an extended interview as Harry.

Harry listened as Mrs. Weasley fussed over Ginny as they left the room, Mr. Weasley’s footsteps following after them.

Harry was so tired that he was starting to sway on his feet. He was finding it was really challenging to have this intense of a discussion with so many people when he couldn’t read anyone’s body language or see their emotions expressed in their faces. He wished he knew the charm for conjuring a chair… and maybe some sandwiches.

“You know, I think this merits a good feast! Professor McGonagall, would you be so kind as to pop down to the kitchens to make the arrangements?” Dumbledore said, cheerily, making Harry worry that he had spoken his wishes aloud.

“Of course,” said Professor McGonagall as she walked to the door. “I’ll leave you to deal with Potter and Weasley, then.”

“Certainly,” said Professor Dumbledore amiably.

Suddenly Harry wondered if he should have been more worried about his own future at Hogwarts. He heard Ron shifting nervously next to him and knew he was having the same thoughts. Dumbledore had said they’d be expelled if they broke any more school rules after the Whomping Willow incident. He wondered how many they had broken in their quest to save Ginny. He really wished he could look into Dumbledore’s face and read his expression, or at least see if his eyes were twinkling as they often did when he was amused. All he could do was wait for Dumbledore to address them.

“I seem to remember telling you that I would have to expel you if you broke any more school rules,” said Dumbledore.

Ron made a gasping noise which reminded Harry of a fish out of water.

“Which goes to show that the best of us must sometimes eat our words,” Dumbledore went on. “You will both receive Special Awards for Services to the School and - let me see - yes, I think two hundred points apiece for Gryffindor.”

Harry heard Ron’s mouth snap shut. He was relieved, but also a bit bothered by the fact that now he had another thing to add to the list of similarities with Tom Riddle… Special Award for Services to the School…

In the meantime, Dumbledore had turned his attention to Professor Lockhart (who didn’t even remember that he was a professor!). “Why so modest, Gilderoy?”

Harry had forgotten that Professor Lockhart was even in the room - he was so quiet.

“Professor Dumbledore,” Ron said quickly, “there was an accident down in the Chamber. Professor Lockhart tried to do a Memory Charm on us, but the wand backfired.”
“Dear me,” said Dumbledore, “Impaled on your own sword, Gilderoy!”

“I haven’t got a sword,” quipped Professor Lockhart, “but that boy does.”

Harry imagined he was pointing at him.

“Ron, would you mind taking Professor Lockhart up to the infirmary? I’d like a few words with Harry…” Dumbledore confided.

“But, sir, Harry’s got to go to the infirmary, too,” Ron implored.

“Yes, it’ll just be a little bit. I’ll send him along soon,” Dumbledore pacified.

Harry rocked back on his heels; he was definitely having a hard time standing.

Ron leaned near him and said quietly, “Okay, see you in a bit, mate.”

“Yeah,” Harry sighed and listened as Ron and Lockhart closed the door behind them.

He heard Dumbledore’s robes swish as he walked toward the crackling fire. It sounded like he had his back to Harry when he spoke, “have a seat Harry.” He was fiddling with something small and metallic by the sound of it.

“Sir, I’m really dirty. I don’t think I should be sitting on Professor McGonagall’s furniture,” Harry protested.

Besides, how am I supposed to find the chair?

“Oh, it’s nothing that a quick Scourgify Charm won’t fix, I’m sure.”

Too tired to argue more, Harry took some tentative steps in the same direction, trying to remember the layout of McGonagall’s office from when he, Hermione, and Neville were caught out of bed in the wee hours in their first year. He wondered if she had redecorated since then. Apparently not as his outstretched hands found the back of an armchair, and he gratefully, and a bit clumsily, sank down it while Dumbledore continued to talk. “First of all, I want to thank you. You must have shown me real loyalty down in the Chamber, Harry. Nothing but that could have called Fawkes to you.”

At his name, Fawkes voiced a soft squawk and Harry heard Dumbledore sit down in the chair across from him and heard the bird hop down onto his lap, feathers rustling and claws scratching on fabric.

“And so you met Tom Riddle,” said Dumbledore thoughtfully. “I imagine he was most interested in you…”

Harry’s thoughts about what Tom had said about them having strange likenesses burst out of him in a torrent of emotion and confusion. He wasn’t like Tom, was he? The whole Parseltongue thing really worried him.

“Harry, you can speak Parseltongue because Lord Voldemort can. He passed his gift to you the night he tried to kill you. I’m sure he didn’t mean to.”

Harry put his head in his hands and leaned into his knees. “So I should be in Slytherin?” he moaned.

“The Sorting Hat put you in Gryffindor, Harry.”

“Well, that’s only because I asked not to be put in Slytherin,” Harry blustered.
“Exactly. If you want proof, Harry, take a look at this.” Harry heard the sound of sword being dragged off the table and felt the weight of it being placed in his hands as he sat up.

“I can’t exactly… see … anything right now, Professor.”

“What do you mean, Harry?”

“I got some venom in my eyes. Fawkes helped me with his tears and it stopped the burning, but I still can’t see.”

“Oh dear,” uttered Dumbledore, in a voice that seemed more shaken by this than by any of the night’s events.

“I’m sure Madam Pomfrey will be able to fix it, right? I mean, she can regrow bones!” Harry laughed weakly. “Could we go see her now, sir?”

Dumbledore took the sword back from Harry and he heard it being placed on the table again. Then Dumbledore’s cool hand was pushing his head back as he muttered, “lumos,” and Harry yelped, closing his eyes and grimacing in pain from the bright white light in his face.

“You can see that light?” Dumbledore asked hopefully.

“Yes, but hurts and that’s all I can see.”

Dumbledore stood back, turning off the light with a soft “nox” and released Harry’s head as the door burst open violently.

“Good evening, Lucius,” Dumbledore said pleasantly as if he hadn’t just been examining Harry. Harry heard other soft footsteps advancing with Mr. Malfoy’s and a squeaking noise that put him in mind of Dobby.

*Is Dobby here, too? Why is he with Mr. Malfoy?* Harry wondered.

“So! You’ve come back to Hogwarts!” Lucius fumed.

Harry was trying to figure out what Dobby was doing. As Dumbledore placidly explained that the other school governors had insisted that Dumbledore return upon hearing that Arthur Weasley’s daughter had been killed, Harry could hear the little elf moving around on the floor near Lucius’s feet making weird noises.

“So have you stopped the attacks?” Lucius sneered, “Have you caught the culprit?”

“We have,” Dumbledore said with utter serenity, “It was the same person as last time, but this time Lord Voldemort was acting through someone else by means of this diary.”

The noises by Mr. Malfoy’s feet were getting stranger… as if Dobby was slapping himself in the head.

*Why would he be hurting himself?*

“A clever plan,” continued Dumbledore, “because if Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley hadn’t discovered this book, Ginny Weasley may have taken all the blame…”

The noises continued and seemed to be getting more ferocious as Dumbledore explained the possible repercussions if Ginny was mistaken as the Heir of Slytherin.
Comprehension dawned on Harry. *Dobby serves the Malfoys.*

Harry stood up and faced Mr. Malfoy, his righteous indignation at what Mr. Malfoy had tried to do to the Weasleys giving him courage.

“Don’t you want to know how Ginny got that Diary, Mr. Malfoy?” Harry said forcefully and not waiting for Mr. Malfoy’s response, “At Flourish and Blotts, you picked up her Transfiguration book and slipped it inside, didn’t you!”

Mr. Malfoy hissed, “prove it, boy!”

“Oh, I don’t think that anyone will be able to do that now that Tom Riddle has been forced out of the book.”

While Dumbledore went on to muse about what Arthur Weasley might do if more of Voldemort’s old school things were found, Harry was wracking his brain for a way to save Dobby. He heard the elf’s terrified squeak as Mr. Malfoy kicked Dobby toward the door and suddenly Harry knew what he had to do.

“Professor, may I give that diary back to Mr. Malfoy, please?”

“Certainly,” he said as he thrust it into Harry’s hands. Harry kicked off his shoe and pulled off his filthy, blood soaked sock and stuffed the diary into it. He pulled his shoe back on and was grateful as Dumbledore guided him to the door.

Harry passed through it yelling, “Mr. Malfoy!” He could hear their progress down the corridor. Trailing his hand on the corridor wall, he walked as confidently as he could manage toward the sounds of the whimpering house elf, thankful that Dumbledore had the good sense to let him do this on his own.

“Mr. Malfoy, I have something for you,” Harry said as evenly as he could.

“What is it?” Mr. Malfoy responded; his voice was closer than Harry thought it would be.

Harry turned to face him, holding it out.

Mr. Malfoy snatched it from his hand and then cried out, “What the - ?” Harry heard the sound of the sock being ripped off and hoped hard that Dobby had caught it.

“What is the meaning of this?” Lucius said furiously, stomping his foot. “Come, Dobby!”

Dobby didn’t make a sound. Harry cocked his head, holding his breath as he listened.

“Master has given Dobby a sock,” said the squeaky voice of the elf. “Dobby is free!”

There was a scuffling sound and then a loud bang and a thud.

Harry felt Dobby’s small body press against his legs.

“You shall not harm Harry Potter!” Dobby boomed in a voice that seemed much larger than his body could possibly produce. Harry heard Lucius groaning from the floor a ways down the corridor and realized that the elf must have cast a spell to protect him.

“Go now. You shall go now!” Dobby ordered fiercely and Harry listened to Mr. Malfoy’s footsteps as they retreated down the corridor, then down the stairs, and faded into the sounds of the castle.
“I am free!” Dobby exclaimed as he hugged Harry’s knees nearly toppling him. “You freed me, Harry!”

“It’s the least I could do, Dobby! Just promise never to try to save my life again.”

The elf laughed in response.

“I promise. Is there anything I can do for you before I go?” Dobby asked.

“Could you lead me to the hospital wing, Dobby? I need to get my eyes sorted out.”

“Right away, Harry Potter!” he answered delightedly as he grasped Harry’s hand and apparated them to the hospital wing. Harry swayed feeling nauseated and disoriented, but smelled the antiseptic potions of the hospital wing and knew they were, indeed, there.

“And farewell, Harry Potter. You are even greater than I ever imagined.”

With a loud crack, Dobby was gone.
Getting sorted out

Chapter Summary

This chapter has been beta'd by the talented nebulababe! Thank you!

Harry stood for a moment on the spot, not really sure where he was in the room. He felt a bit nauseous from the unexpected jump through space in the corridor outside Professor McGonagall’s office to the hospital wing. He let the familiar odors of the hospital wing wash over him (Madam Pomfrey must have given Ginny a pepper up potion - the smell permeated) and listened. He could hear people talking quietly at the end of the wing, near Madam Pomfrey’s office. The familiar ache of not having parents of his own to comfort him enveloped him, and he felt his throat tighten. He shook his head to get rid of the self pity.

*That doesn’t help*, he told himself firmly.

He squinted trying to make out the shadows, but couldn't see anything except a low, hazy light that must be the fireplace - he could smell it, too, and hear it pop occasionally. It was indistinct - the essence of light without any shape or form.

He thought about how the wing was laid out with rows of beds and a long corridor down the center and reached out trying to find the nearest bed. His hand passed through empty air, so he took a few steps. His foot without the sock felt funny - his trainers were slippery with who knows what… mucky snake pond water, Basilisk blood, his own sweat.

He took another pass with his hand and softly hit a metal bar with his fingers. He grasped it. It was the cool metal tube that made the foot of a bed. He ran his hand over it, feeling the hooks where a chart would hang if someone were in the bed being treated.

His stomach gurgled as he walked in the open space between the beds; he was feeling a little lightheaded; he was so hungry. He reached, guessing where the next bed would be and found it. *How many hospital beds does this school need?* It put him in mind of photos of infirmaries during the war. *Seriously, what are they expecting?! Are there more monsters loitering in the dungeons?*

At the next bed, his foot collided with the metal foot of the bed and made a ringing sound. The murmured conversations at the end of the wing stopped suddenly. Harry imagined people looking at him and flushed.

“Harry!” Ron’s voice rang out. Harry listened to Ron’s feet slap on the stone floor as he grew nearer.

“Hermione’s about to get the potion!” Ron exclaimed, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him away from the row of beds that he was making his way along. Harry stumbled after Ron, trying to get his footing.

“Wait a sec, Ron,” Harry said impatiently. “Let me hold onto you. I don’t like being pulled.” He put his hand on Ron’s shoulder as he had with Ginny earlier, and walked a little behind Ron. Ron seemed to tense and his gait was unnatural, as if he wasn’t sure what to do. Harry blushed, imagining how silly they must look walking down the corridor like this. Everyone was still pretty hushed and he felt like all eyes were on him.
Swishing skirts or robes (Harry wasn’t sure which) and footsteps approached along with a familiar scent that put Harry in mind of a warm and bustling kitchen.

Mrs. Weasley started wailing as she pulled Harry into another fierce embrace, “Oh, Harry! Ginny told me that something happened to your eyes down in the Chamber!”

Her voice was thick with tears. Over her shoulder, Harry could tell that the smoggy light of the fire was brighter but maybe that was because he could feel its warmth.

“Let’s get you to Madam Pomfrey. I don’t know why Professor Dumbledore kept you so long. And why are you here on your own? Surely he didn’t leave you to find your way here by yourself… not able to see… and who knows what wandering the corridors at this time of night?” Molly effused as she pulled him alongside her, arm around his shoulders, and walked closer to the fire.

“It’s okay, Mrs. Weasley. Dobby brought me up here,” he reassured.

As much as he wondered the same thing about Professor Dumbledore, he hated anyone doubting his intentions.

Harry could hear someone moving around clinking glass jars and imagined that Madam Pomfrey was mixing potions at her potions station nearby. He wondered why he couldn’t see people’s distinct shapes anymore, like the dark shadowy form of Riddle that he had seen in the dungeons. He wondered if his vision was getting worse.

Why did I wait so long to come up here?

“Poppy!” Mrs. Weasley called.

The clinking of glass bottles stopped and the clipped footsteps of Madam Pomfrey approached. “Can you take a look at Harry’s eyes? Ginny said that he got venom in them.”

“Oh, yes!” Poppy exclaimed.

She gently guided Harry to a nearby bed and asked him to lay down.

“Lumos,” she said as a bright light exploded into the space in front of Harry’s face. Again he yelped in surprise and pain as he shut his eyes tightly against the piercing light.

Why do people keep doing that to me?

“Hmmm,” Poppy murmured and a soft “nox” eclipsed the light that shined through his closed eyelids.

“What?” Harry asked, daring to open his eyes again.

“Nothing dear,” she hushed. “I’m just going to run some diagnostics.”

He felt the air moving around his head.

After a moment of this, punctuated by grim mutterings from Madam Pomfrey that made Harry’s stomach clench in dread, she queried, “Ginny said that Fawkes used his tears on you. Did he cry in your eyes, too?”

“Yes, Madam Pomfrey, down in the Chamber. Dumbledore said they had healing properties and Fawkes had cried on the wound I got from the Basilisk fang in my arm and it went away completely. See?”
He lifted up his arm, pulling back his robes to show her where the wound had been. He ran his fingers over his forearm, not able to discern any difference in the skin.

“But it was later. I didn’t think of it right away… about asking Fawkes to use the tears on my eyes… that is.”

“Oh, well,” murmured Madam Pomfrey, absentmindedly. “You were lucky to have Fawkes nearby. It doesn’t take long to die from Basilisk venom. I can’t believe that a monstrosity like that has been lurking in the dungeons of this castle for so long.”

The venom in her voice made Harry want to shrink away from her.

“Alright, I’m going to get you cleaned up,” Madam Pomfrey stated calmly as if she hadn’t just been speaking in murderous tones.

Suddenly things began to move around Harry and he hoped that one of the sounds he heard was of curtains being placed around his bed because his clothes had been whisked off (despello vestimentum), his body scrubbed (corpus purgadum), and he was suddenly dressed in clean hospital robes (vestimentum hospitum togae). He heard his wand and broken glasses clatter on the top of the small table by his bed (carpit inanis).

It wasn’t as restorative as taking a hot bath, but it did feel good to be in clean clothes. He wiggled his toes and relaxed into the bed, his limbs so weighty that they seemed submerged in the soft mattress. His eyelids were heavy and he fought against the sleep that was overpowering him.

“Is Ginny okay?” he asked Madam Pomfrey who was still close by, he could hear the scratching of her quill on parchment near the foot of his bed.

“Yes, dear. She’s fine. Just resting now after her pepper up potion.”

“And Hermione? Is she okay?” Harry asked anxiously.

“Oh, yes. I was just about to give Hermione her Mandrake potion when you showed up. The others are doing well.”

“So…” Harry asked tentatively, he wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the answer. “What about my eyes?”

“Oh, well. I’m… I’m still looking into it,” Madam Pomfrey stalled. “You rest while I consult with the healers at St. Mungo’s. We might need to send you there.”

“Oh,” said Harry, his apprehension mounting. He had been so confident that Madam Pomfrey would restore his eyesight with a flick of her wand. He didn’t feel hungry anymore. In fact, he felt like he might be sick. He moved to his side and felt around the sides of the beds to see if there was a basin that he could use, just in case. He found one sitting on the table by the bed and felt reassured. He laid back on the pillow trying to calm his stomach.

He could hear the others talking in low voices nearby. Madam Pomfrey had walked away from his bed and he heard the glass vials being moved around again.

Footsteps approached his bed, Ron’s heavy slapping feet. Harry felt a smile play at his lips. He heard Ron fumbling with curtains and was relieved to learn that he hadn’t been exposed to everyone in the room when Madam Pomfrey cleaned him up.

“How are you, mate?” Ron asked.
“I’m fine,” Harry lied.

“Right,” was Ron’s sardonic reply.

“Well, I’m alive and I’m not petrified, so that’s a good thing. I know who I am. I wasn’t eaten by a monstrous snake or Avada Kedavra ’d by Riddle.”

“Okay, but why didn’t Madam Pomfrey fix your eyes?”

“What - you can tell?” asked Harry surprised.

“Yeah. Your eyes don’t look right. They are bloodshot and puffy and kind of darting around, not fixing on anything.”

“Oh.”

“Oh, I think she’s going to wake up Hermione now. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay, I’m not going anywhere,” Harry sighed and laid back on his back, staring at the ceiling. Except he couldn’t even see that.

It sounded like the folks in the room had gathered around another bed, a few beds down from his on the other side of the corridor. He was trying to figure out who was in the hospital wing. He knew that Ginny was in a bed just two or three down from him and he could hear Mr. Weasley speaking softly to her. He wondered if other people were here to see the other victims of the Basilisk… Colin, Justin, Penelope, and Nearly Headless Nick. Was it just Hermione left? Had the others gone?

He wondered if anyone had summoned Hermione’s parents. Did they even know she had been petrified? He wished he had asked Ron to stay with him and describe what was going on. As much as he wanted to just go to sleep, he was also desperate to know that Hermione was going to be okay. He got out of bed, grimacing when his feet came in contact with the cold, stone floor and felt around on the table by his bed until he located his wand that had rolled next to the basin.

He wished he knew a spell that would help guide him through the obstacles in the room without stubbing his toes.

“Posuit soccis,” he muttered pointing his wand at his feet and was relieved when his slippers magically encased them. He smiled gratefully for that one, remembering when Neville had taught it to him first year. Castle floors were too cold to manage without slippers.

He moved to the end of the bed, fussed with the curtains until he found the opening, and then moved down the aisle from bed to bed toward the voices.

“Is Hermione waking up?” he asked, hoping that Ron would hear him.

“She’s just starting to depetrify,” said a girl’s voice that he didn’t recognize.

“Oh,” said Harry, wanting to move in closer, but not really sure where closer was.

He could feel and hear people jostling around, but he imagined that they were all looking at Hermione and didn’t see him. He stood awkwardly outside the group trying to glean what was going on by the conversation.

“Is Ron nearby?” Harry asked the girl. He waited, but she didn’t answer so he figured she hadn’t heard him. He asked again, a little louder.
“He’s right in front of you,” her voice laced with irritation and incredulity.

“Oh, thanks,” Harry said blushing, realizing that she must have gestured before.

“Hey, Ron?” Harry reached forward, his hand coming into contact with someone’s back. He hoped it was Ron.

“Hey, Harry! What are you doing out of bed?” Ron asked, grabbing Harry and pulling him forward. Harry stumbled and caught himself on the bed that everyone was clustered around.

“I wanted to see Hermione. Is she okay?” he asked.

“She’s just starting to come back,” Ron’s voice was thick with emotion and his hand squeezed Harry’s upper arm. Harry felt around gingerly on the bed in front of him, trying to figure out where he was. He found Hermione’s hand, still cold and hard where it had lain before with the page about the Basilisk scrunched into her fist. He held onto her hand and marveled as it gradually warmed beneath his.

“Hermione?” he asked, wondering if she could hear him.

Her hand twitched almost imperceptibly.

“Harry? Ron?” Her voice was weak.

“We’re here, Hermione!” they said in unison, trying to crowd closer to her bed.

“Did you find the Chamber of Secrets?”

“Yes, Ginny’s okay.”

“What?”

“The Basilisk is dead.”

“Oh, thank goodness… Are you okay?” Hermione shifted in her bed. “Harry, what’s wrong with your eyes?” Hermione’s worry made her voice squeak.

“Oh, I got some venom in them. Madam Pomfrey’s working on it. I’ll be okay,” he tried to reassure her, squeezing her hand which had returned to normal while he was holding it.

“How are you going to study for your exams if you can’t see, Harry!” Hermione exclaimed horrified.

“No idea,” he said smiling a bit at her response. He was more worried about other things… like fending off an evil git who kept popping up in the most unlikely of places, scaring the crap out of him. But for now, he was really relieved that Hermione was okay.

“Hey, Ron. Can you take me over to see Ginny?” Harry said as he found Ron’s arm and laid his hand on his shoulder.

“Sure.”

They moved through the crowd of people who were filling Hermione in on all the events that had taken place while she was petrified.

“Hi, Harry,” Ginny said, her voice floating softly up from the bed where she was reclining.
“Hi, Ginny,” Harry said gently as he found the edge of the bed and sat next to her. “You doing okay?”

“Yeah,” she hiccuped.

He was afraid that he’d set her off again. He felt around for her hand and found it, squeezing it gently.

“Hey, we’re going to be okay, you know?”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “What did Madam Pomfrey say about your eyes? Why hasn’t she fixed them yet?”

“She’s got to talk to healers at St. Mungo’s,” he said matter of factly, trying to put a brave face on.

“Oh. Okay.”

“Ginny, you know this isn’t your fault, right?” Harry pushed the question out, hoping it was gentle enough.

“Yeah. Dad’s been talking to me. He was so mad at first, but he’s just sad now. And he’s been telling me about all the people who You-Know-Who possessed and made do things that they didn’t want to do… and I guess, I’m just one of those people now.”

“Okay. I just wanted to make sure you were okay,” Harry said, sighing.

Turning to Ron who was fidgeting by the bed, he said, “Ron, do you mind leading me to my bed. I’m so tired.”

“Your hospital bed or your bed in Gryffindor tower?”

“Good question. I think Madam Pomfrey wants me to stay here tonight. Keep an eye on me, and everything. Maybe she’ll put a “silentium” charm over my bed so I can sleep.”

Harry and Ron walked over to his bed and Harry climbed in.

He decided to try out the charm - he had heard her cast it enough, “Silentium”

All the bustling sounds of everyone in the room were suddenly cut off and Harry realized that it was too much for him to handle. He didn’t like not being able to hear nor see anyone and quickly he muttered, “Finite” and the sounds flooded back. He was relieved. He realized that he was tired enough to fall asleep despite all the noise and conversations.

Maybe they’d all head to the feast soon, anyway, he thought as he nestled into the soft pillows and let sleep take him.
Harry woke with a start and opened his eyes, blinking against a bright light. He closed them quickly again. It was too bright.

Something had woken him up, he realized - a loud noise. Then he heard, at the end of the wing, Hagrid’s booming voice, except he was clearly trying to whisper.

“How’s Harry doin’?”

“He’s sleeping,” Madam Pomfrey responded with emphasis on “sleeping.”

Harry grimaced. Not anymore, he thought.

“Hiya, Hagrid,” Harry sat up and groggily called out to his big friend. Then he tried to look around the room to see if he was waking anyone up, but he could barely open his eyes against the bright light.

And he remembered. He hadn’t seen anything since his encounter with the Basilisk, well, not much anyway. Just bright lights and shadows. Today. Today we’ll get it sorted out. Madam Pomfrey will talk to the healers at St. Mungo’s and find someone who knows what to do, he reassured himself.

He swung his legs out of bed and felt around with his feet for his slippers. Not finding them, he located his wand and muttered the slipper spell.

He tried to open his eyes again and decided just to keep them closed.

Hagrid’s steps shook the floor as he approached Harry, Harry heard him settle into the bed next to his.


“It’s too bright in here to open them,” Harry stated, turning toward Hagrid. It occurred to him that he must be “looking” right at Hagrid’s belly, so he angled his head up a bit to line up with Hagrid’s face.

“Oh, yeah. I heard you got venom in yer eyes,” Hagrid said sadly. “But wait, does this mean you can see again? You can see the sunlight comin’ through the windows?” He got excited as he spoke and seemed to rise up off the bed.

“Naw,” Harry made a calming motion with his hands. “It was like this yesterday, too. I can see some lights and really bright lights hurt, but I can’t see anything except the light. People kept lumos -ing their wands in my face yesterday…”

Talking about his lack of vision made his stomach seize up, so he cast around for another subject, “so, you were released!”
“Yeah,” Hagrid sounded defeated. “I bloody hate that place,” he said with a quiet vehemence.

“Wizard prison?” Harry asked.

“Yeah. Sucks the life right out of you…” Harry could hear Hagrid rubbing his big hands together as he said this as if to warm them.

“So, why’d yer kill the Basilisk fer? Couldn’t you have spared his life? Harry?” Hagrid’s voice was thick. “The poor creature,” he bemoaned.

“Hagrid, the monster was trying to eat me!” Harry nearly shouted, indignant.

“Well, yes,” he acknowledged reluctantly.

Harry was certain that Hagrid was entertaining fantasies about frolicking with the huge serpent in the dank tunnels beneath the castle.

“So, you goin’ down to breakfast?” Hagrid seemed like he wanted to change the subject.

Harry’s stomach rumbled in response. He had heard Madam Pomfrey swishing around in her robes and guessed that she was close by.

“Madam Pomfrey, may I go down to breakfast?” he asked politely.

Her clipped footsteps approached him and he turned to face her expectantly but kept his eyes closed.

“Yes, Harry. We’ll be going to St. Mungo’s at 7:50 am. I set up an appointment. Hagrid can take down to the great hall for breakfast, then you need to be back here so that we can floo from the fireplace at 7:45 am.”

“What time is it now?”

“It’s 6:25 am on Monday, you slept through Sunday,” she said brusquely, “and your clothes are cleaned and folded at the end of your bed. You were missing a sock, so I duplicated the one you had. I’ll put up the curtain again,” she paused murmuring “*sagum in loco*” and Harry tried opening his eyes to see if the curtain helped.

“Does the curtain help with the bright light, then?”

“Yes. That’s better.” Harry sighed. For whatever reason, he felt more comfortable with his eyes open, even though they didn’t give him much more information than when they were closed. He could feel the air better with his eyes open, he realized. He could feel the gentle currents of air as people moved their hands and wands in his vicinity.

“Let me fix up your glasses, then. I can make the lenses opaque.” She bustled by him and he heard her tapping his glasses with her wand. She was quiet for a moment, and there was a pregnant pause. He looked up at her questioningly, wondering what she was doing.

“Oh, right. Here you are, Harry.”

She seemed a bit embarrassed. He realized she must have been holding them out to him. He grasped them and put them on.

He was glad to have his glasses back on as he always felt a bit naked without them. He rose and went to the end of his bed, felt around for the curtain opening, and stepped into the corridor to see if the opaque lenses helped with the intense sunlight. He was relieved that they did.
“That’s great. Thanks, Madam Pomfrey!”

Hagrid touched him on the shoulder as he passed Harry and Madam Pomfrey also left the curtain enclosure.

“Okay, good. Harry, don’t eat too much or too fast. Take it easy, okay? And I’ll see you at 7:45,” she said as she walked away.

“I’ll just wait out here while you get dressed, Harry.” Hagrid seemed a bit teary.

“Hey, Hagrid, is anyone else still here in the infirmary?” Harry was curious.

“Naw, just you. I’ll be betting that everyone’s still sleepin’. The feast yesterday went on for a while. Lots ter celebrate,” Hagrid said solemnly.

Harry went back through the curtain to his bed and found his clothes. It took him a bit longer than normal to put them on, but once he stopped thinking too hard about it, it was easier. He realized he just needed to pretend that he was getting dressed in the dark to sneak around the castle in his invisibility cloak. That brought a smile to his lips.

“Okay, I’m ready, but can you take me to the loo?”

“Sure, Harry. It’s right over here.”

Hagrid turned Harry by his shoulders and shoved him forward. Harry stumbled and then found his footing and started walking forward until his outstretched hands found the door. He was glad it was a small bathroom and he was able to find his way around it pretty easily. Harry got a little unnerved, though, when he wondered if Moaning Myrtle was watching him from the U-bend. He didn’t like the idea that people could watch him and he wouldn’t know it.

He emerged from the bathroom and asked Hagrid if he was ready to go to breakfast. Harry was dreading it a bit, but maybe there wouldn’t be many people down yet.

“Yep, let’s go,” and Hagrid started walking down the corridor. Harry started following behind, walking from bed to bed as he had last night. He heard Hagrid stop.

“Here, let me help you, Harry,” Hagrid said as his big hand clasped Harry’s shoulder making him lurch forward.

“Let me hold onto you, Hagrid,” Harry said as he reached for Hagrid’s shoulder, then gave up and settled for his forearm. He ended up just holding onto the fabric of Hagrid’s shirt, his forearm too broad for Harry to get a hold.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief when he remembered that the hospital wing was on the first floor and that he didn’t have to navigate the moving staircases or the trick stairs just yet.

Harry held his breath as Hagrid opened the doors to the Great Hall and waited to hear if anyone noticed them coming in, but it seemed pretty quiet. He could tell there were at least a few people in the room from the sound of silverware and quiet conversations, but no one seemed to stop when they came in.

Hagrid led Harry over to the Gryffindor House table and his usual spot.

“Thanks, Hagrid,” said Harry as he found the table with his hand and lowered himself down onto the bench, swinging his legs over.
“You alright here, Harry?” Hagrid asked, “I’ll be headin’ up to the High Table.”

“Yeah. Is anyone else at the Gryffindor table?” Harry asked quietly.

“No, just you. Though Percy’s sitting at the Ravenclaw table with that Prefect who was petrified. Not many other folks down here. Like I said, they’ll be lyin’ in today. Okay, I’ll be leavin’ you now.”

Harry nodded and listened as Hagrid clumped toward the High Table.

Harry waited for a second and listened for the pop of breakfast magically appearing on the table before him. He felt around for his plate and silverware, then carefully slid his hands forward on the table to locate the dishes. He could smell bacon and kippers and tried to discern other foods by their odors, but the kippers were drowning out all the other aromas. His fingers collided with his goblet and he grabbed it quickly before it toppled, though it splashed a bit of pumpkin juice on the table. He found his napkin and tried to mop it up as best he could and get the stickiness off his fingers. He sipped his pumpkin juice and put it down carefully to the side so that he could try finding the other food again without knocking it over.

He found a dish and pulled it close to his plate and felt around the rim until he found the serving spoon. He poked around the dish with the serving spoon and leaned close to sniff to see if he could figure out what it was. It smelled like fried tomatoes. He tried to spoon one onto his plate, but it kept slipping off the spoon. He finally gave up and shoved it back, casting around for another dish. He found the bacon and gave up trying to use the tongs to get a couple pieces and just fished them out with his fingers, hoping no one was looking. Next, he found toast. He wasn’t willing to try getting the fried tomatoes again and settled on plain toast. At least with toast and bacon, he reasoned, he was less likely to end up wearing his food.

Nibbling on bacon and toast, he listened as footsteps echoed through the hall nearing him. He felt the bench rock as someone sat down near him.

“Hello?” Harry asked, curious about who had joined him.

“Good morning, Harry,” said Percy in his usual formal manner. “How are you doing this morning?”

“I’m doing okay. How about you?” Harry asked politely. He wasn’t used to Percy talking to him.

“I wanted to thank you for what you did for Ginny,” Percy said in a grave voice.

Harry shrugged and made a half-hearted attempt at a smile. He wasn’t sure what kind of response he should give. He was saved from having to come up with words by thundering footsteps.

“Blimey, Harry, you missed a crazy feast yesterday!” Seamus’ voice exploded into the scene, as he rocked the table sitting down.

“Say, why are you wearing sunglasses?” Seamus blurted out, his mouth already full of food. It sounded like he was dragging half the platters toward himself and piling all sorts of food on his plate. Harry had eaten across from Seamus enough to know what was going on.

“I got some venom in my eyes last night, and it made my eyes really sensitive to bright light…” Harry explained.

“Wicked!” Seamus exclaimed through a mouthful. “I heard you killed a Basilisk! With a sword!”

Yep… Say, Percy are you going back to Gryffindor tower,” Harry turned toward Percy.
“Um. Percy’s gone, Harry,” Seamus said soberly.

“Oh, right,” said Harry, embarrassed.


“I’m not blind,” Harry was indignant, “I just can’t see right now, okay?”

“Sorry, mate. I didn’t… ” Seamus’ response was eclipsed by a high pitched squeal.

“Hair----rrry!” Harry was relieved to hear Hermione’s voice as she came running toward him, her hair swishing into his face as she embraced him clumsily from the back and settled onto the bench next to him, knocking him sideways in her hurry. She clung to him.

“Did Madam Pomfrey fix your eyes, then?” she asked in a rush.

“No, we’re going to St. Mungo’s this morning,” Harry replied heavily. “Say, what time is it?”

“Just a little after 7,” replied Hermione. He could hear her dishing food on to her plate.

“Hey, Hermione. Can you put a scoop of fried tomatoes on my toast? I couldn’t manage it earlier,” he asked quietly.

“Sure, here you go,” she said. “Do you want me to cut it up, too?”

“Nah, I think I can handle it,” he said poking around his plate with his fork and knife, locating the slippery tomatoes on top his toast and cutting through them to stab them. He managed alright, though a few bites fell off his fork, he leaned forward hoping they fell onto his plate and not in his lap.

Seamus and Dean (who had joined them at the table) were bombarding Harry and Hermione with questions about what had happened in the Chamber of Secrets. He could hear other students coming into the Great Hall, too. Harry did his best to recount the events, but it was hard to do and eat at the same time. He resorted to nibbling on bacon and sipping pumpkin juice. He was distracted, though, thinking about the trip to St. Mungo’s.

As the Great Hall filled up with students, it was harder and harder to hear the students around him or follow the conversation.

Ron finally joined them, sitting on his other side and was really enjoying talking about what happened in the Chamber, even the parts that he didn’t witness.

Everyone was super excited that final exams had been canceled (well, except for Hermione) and that Professor Lockhart had left to try to restore his memories. Gryffindors were even more elated because they had been awarded the house cup with the addition of the 400 points earned by Ron and Harry.

Ginny, sitting next to Hermione, was pretty quiet, though, and Harry was worried that she was still blaming herself for what happened. Especially as Ron’s descriptions got more and more dramatic.

Harry leaned forward, hoping to catch Ginny’s attention and said, “Hey, Ginny. Could you take me back to the hospital wing? I need to go to my appointment at St. Mungo’s.”

Harry wasn’t sure Ginny had heard him and he was about to ask Hermione to get Ginny’s attention for him, when she answered in a small voice, “Sure, Harry.”

He heard her sliding off the bench and felt her small hand on his shoulder.
“Your sunglasses look nice, Harry,” she said with a sniff.

Harry hoped she wasn’t going to start crying again.

“Thanks. Madam Pomfrey changed them so that the sun doesn’t hurt my eyes so much.”

He stood up and she guided his hand to her shoulder.

Out in the corridor, Ginny turned her head toward him and muttered, “Harry, I’m really sorry about your eyes.”

Harry squeezed her shoulder gently. “Ginny, please stop blaming yourself for this. I’m going to be okay… they’ll be able to sort it out at St. Mungo’s, okay? And even if they can’t,” he faltered here at the thought… and for Ginny’s sake, went on, “it isn’t your fault. You didn’t ask to be possessed by Voldemort or taken captive in the Chamber of Secrets. You have to forgive yourself, okay? I think we’re all just lucky to be alive right now, you know? It could have been much worse. Will you promise me you’ll stop blaming yourself. Please?” he pleaded.

“Okay, Harry, I’ll try. But if they can’t fix your eyes, it’s going to be really hard,” she said honestly.

They had stopped and Harry guessed it was because they were outside the door to the hospital wing. He pulled Ginny into a clumsy hug, “I was scared we’d lost you, Ginny. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks, Harry,” she said uncomfortably and pulled open the door.
Madam Pomfrey seemed nervous as she gathered her medi-bag, Harry’s chart, and prepared for their departure to St. Mungo's. A student had just come in needing attention after a disastrous (it sounded like it at any rate) attempt to jinx a cold away and the interruption seemed to unsettle Madam Pomfrey. Which struck Harry as odd, since she never seemed flustered on the other occasions when he (or Hermione or Ron) had shown up unexpectedly in the hospital wing for their various mishaps (missing bones, puking slugs, or partial cat transfiguration).

Her nervousness made Harry anxious and he rolled the hem of the sleeve of his robes between his fingers as he waited. He didn’t like not being able to see what was going on around him. It was unnerving. Now he was starting to worry that it wasn’t the delay to their departure that was making Madam Pomfrey apprehensive - that it had something to do with the appointment at St. Mungo's and his damaged vision.

Not being able to see was not good, especially for someone who seemed to attract evil monsters. He wanted to be able to see whatever was coming at him. Seriously! Hadn’t the universe thrown enough at him already? Orphaned at 15 months, sent to live with the Dursleys of all people, targeted since his infancy by some crazy, death-defying evil genius who kept showing up in all the strangest places (a teacher’s turban and a discarded diary) to try to finish the job. Didn’t he have enough to be going on with as it was?

Harry shifted from foot to foot as he waited.

“Oh, you should take off your glasses, Harry. Don’t want to lose them in the floo network,” Madam Pomfrey seemed to have her items sorted out.

“Right. I really don’t like traveling by floo network,” Harry said nervously as he tucked his glasses into an inside pocket.

“Have you traveled by floo powder before, dear?” Madam Pomfrey asked absently as she nudged Harry closer to the fireplace.

“Yes, just twice with the Weasleys this summer.”

“Oh, well. It’s just one way to travel since we can’t apparate from within the school grounds. You remember how to do it, right? We just throw this powder in the fireplace like this…” Harry jumped as a loud bang erupted from the fireplace in front of him; it was hard to hear Madam Pomfrey over the hissing the fireplace was making. “And state clearly where you want to go - St. Mungo's!” she shouted in a firm voice, “then step in like … ” The hissing noise had stopped abruptly.

Harry stood there, head cocked to one side. He could hear the ticking of a nearby clock, the rustling of sheets no doubt made by the student recovering from the misused charm in the bed nearby (regrowing a nose, by the sound of it)… and nothing of Madam Pomfrey.
He wondered if she expected him to follow her into the fire. He stepped back from it. He really didn’t want to do this again. His first experience traveling by floo powder had gone really wrong. Besides, he had no idea where the floo powder was. Even if he did find a container of powder, he wouldn’t be able to tell if it was the right powder. He could be tossing baby powder into a fire and then catching his trainers on fire. He wasn’t that stupid.

So he waited.

Finally, the fireplace hissed again and Madam Pomfrey stepped forward, exclaiming, “Oh, dear Harry. I thought you’d follow me. But how could you? Silly of me. I’m so sorry. Let’s try that again, shall we? This time you go first.”

“But, but…” Harry sputtered as she pulled him near the fireplace, a cloud of dust tickling his nose making him sneeze, as Madam Pomfrey announced the destination and shoved him into the fireplace.

He felt like he had been tossed in a washing machine, tumbled around, his elbows and knees and back and head knocking into bricks and stones until he figured out how to hold himself still in the eye of the tornado. He’d shut his eyes against the bright lights that flashed before his eyes and closed his mouth to avoid inhaling soot, swallowing his screams instead. He was completely disoriented, banged up, and not knowing if he was up or down or sideways. The sensation was worse than the first time he’d traveled by floo powder, worse than the tilt n’ hurl at the local fairgrounds, worse than falling off his broom stick. It kept going and going and he wondered if he was stuck in floo hell for eternity. Finally a hand grabbed his wrist and pulled him forward onto a stone floor. He vomited violently again and again, still not sure which way was up or down, but thankful to be on solid, still ground.
Creature-Induced Injuries

Chapter Summary

This chapter has been beta'd by the talented nebulababe! Thank you!

Slowly, Harry pushed himself to sitting as the sick around him was being spelled away by a flustered Madam Pomfrey. Her charm infused the area with a peppermint aroma that was gradually overtaking the vomit stench. For a fleeting moment as he thought about what he’d eaten that morning, he was glad he couldn’t see. His head was still spinning and acid burned his throat. He kept his hands splayed on the floor in an effort to settle the rotating room.

Gradually he became aware that he was in a hub of activity - people were rushing around him, some almost tripping over him.

A white-hot fury built in his stomach. “Why did you just push me in there? How can I know when it’s time to exit the bloody fireplace if I CAN’T BLOODY WELL SEE?!” His fear and embarrassment had boiled up into a molten rage that erupted nearly as fiercely as the vomit had. And then he cringed, bracing for a blow. He had lost control and he was going to pay for it. He tensed, his breath coming in short gasps.

Madam Pomfrey sputtered, “I’m so sorry, Harry. You are absolutely right. I don’t know what I was thinking, sending a blind child through the Floo on his own… and why won’t the Headmaster approve of adding an Egress to St. Mungo’s, I don’t know…”

“I am not blind,” Harry seethed, but his rage had cooled. He had never known her to be so discomposed, and it startled him.

“Here, let’s get you out of the corridor - we’re in the way here, right in front of the Floo exit,” she said, as she put a hand on his arm and attempted to lift him up. He stood unsteadily. He was still really dizzy and was having a hard time standing up completely - he kept listing to one side and then the other. The corridor was lit differently than Hogwarts and there didn’t seem to be the same expanse of windows that made the hospital wing so impossibly bright. Harry felt around in his robes to find his glasses and put them on just in case they were headed some place brighter.

As he was still so out of balance, Madam Pomfrey ended up guiding him down the corridor with an arm around his shoulders and her other hand holding his awkwardly, her medibag thumping against his back with every other step. They entered a room that sounded large and crowded, filled with sobs, quiet sniffles, some cries of children and infants, barks, and other noises that he couldn’t quite identify. Some people were talking in hushed tones to others who were asking quiet questions as if they were conducting interviews.

“Here’s a chair. Sit here a moment,” Madam Pomfrey backed him up to a chair and he slumped in relief into the chair when his knees hit it. “And here’s a draught of ginger tonic to settle your tummy and cleanse your mouth.”

She tapped the back of his hand with a goblet that she must have conjured since he didn’t hear her open her medibag. He wrapped his hands around it.
“Drink it while I go check you in,” she said and he sipped it while listening to her receding footsteps. The ginger tonic was spicy and bubbly, a sister to ginger ale, but more effervescent.

Harry listened to the people around him. Someone close by smelled pretty ripe. There was a man and a woman trying to soothe a hiccuping baby who’d break out into full-on wails, then be bounced back to fussiness. They had another kid with them who was running between the chairs making car noises with their mouth (he couldn’t tell if it was a boy or a girl). Their thudding steps came closer Harry until the child was at the seat next to him, pushing a toy over the surface of the seat. They stopped and were quiet.

“Hello,” Harry said tolerantly, turning his head in their direction.

“My car flies,” the child informed him.

“Oh! Well, watch out for whomping willows, then. They’re bad for flying cars,” he joked.

The child made a quizzical sound and zoomed away, back to the safety of their parents from what Harry could tell.

The ripe-smelling person near Harry belched loudly and Harry turned his face away in an attempt to find fresh air, hoping he wouldn’t start throwing up again. He took another gulp of the ginger tonic.

Harry recognized Madam Pomfrey’s steps as she bustled toward him a few minutes later.

“Alright, we’re to go directly to Creature-Induced Injuries on the first floor,” she said a little breathily while vanishing the empty goblet from his hand with a little pop. “Come along, they’re waiting for us.” She grasped his hand, pulling him from his chair. He felt more steady this time and held onto her upper arm as they maneuvered toward the corridor.

“Healer Andy is going to see you,” she told him as they walked. “Very respected healer, specializes in poisons and venomous bites.”

Their footsteps echoed down the corridor, which thankfully wasn’t as busy as the main part of the hospital, and eventually Madam Pomfrey slowed, opened a door, and ushered Harry through it. Right away, they were greeted by a woman with a harsh efficiency that was punctuated by her scratching quill. She asked them to follow her to another room, where Harry found a perch on an exam table while Madam Pomfrey sat on a much shorter seat close by. The room was cold and smelled vaguely of the hospital wing, with the scent of some of the same antiseptic potions wafting through. The paper on the exam table rustled as he shifted, listening to the sounds of people moving through the corridor outside the room.

Harry wondered briefly about what Ron and Hermione were doing just then, wishing he could be with them… even if Hermione was bemoaning the fact that exams had been canceled.

Footsteps came down the hall, papers rustled outside, and then there was a gentle knock. “Harry Potter?” said a soft, warm female voice approaching him. “I’m Healer Andy Tonks. I’m going to take a look at your eyes. I see from your chart that you’ve been in contact with Basilisk venom. Very rare, very rare.” Harry was surprised that Healer Andy was a witch. He had been expecting a wizard.

“I’m going to touch your head and look into your eyes with a bright light,” she warned as she muttered “Lumos.” Even though he was braced for it, the light was too bright and he reflexively shut his eyes against it, tears squeezing out of the corners of his eyes. She adjusted the brightness, “Minus Lumine,” and he was able to open his eyes a bit.

“Hmmm,” she murmured, her breath grazing his face as she peered (he assumed) into his eyes.
“I’m going to run some diagnostics now. Just lie down and relax.” She muttered “\textit{Nox}” and the light in the room was reduced to the more comfortable haze cast by the strange cluster of lights at the ceiling. Harry laid down on the exam table while Healer Andy scanned him with her wand, the sleeve of her robes occasionally brushing up against him.

“Can you tell me about the encounter with the Basilisk? How big was it? I understand it was very old, possibly one thousand years old?”

“It was enormous, wide enough to fill a corridor at Hogwarts and nearly as long as the Great Hall.”

“And you were pierced by a fang as well? Can you show me where?” Healer Andy asked.

Harry pulled back the sleeve of his right arm and ran his fingers over the spot, trying to discern where it had been. “It was here,” he indicated.

Healer Andy’s cold fingers traced over his arm.

“And a phoenix was there and provided tears, is that right?” She asked.

“Yes. But I didn’t think about asking the phoenix for help with my eyes until later,” Harry said softly.

“How much later?”

“I don’t really know… ten or twenty minutes. Volde- er, You-Know-Who” Harry adjusted at the sharp intake of breath from Healer Andy, “was sucking the life out of Ginny and wanted to duel with me. I just didn’t think about it right away.”

“How did you get the venom in your eyes?” Healer Andy asked gently.

“I had pulled the fang out of my arm… and then I wiped my eyes with that hand to get the Basilisk blood out of my eyes because it stung so badly. But it could have been when I stabbed the Basilisk in the mouth with the sword - there could have been venom in the blood that came from the roof of its mouth. I don’t really know.” Harry blinked tears away as he relived the scene in the Chamber.

“So… you fought off the Dark Lord when you couldn’t see? And revived Ginny Weasley and got her out of the Chamber?” Healer Andy’s wonderment made Harry squirm.

The papers on a chart shifted, “And you’re twelve?”

“Yeah. I mean, I was just trying to… not die…” Harry said softly.

“Yes, of course… Ah, well,” she seemed to remember why they were there, “I need to consult with another Healer. I’ll be back in a moment.” The door closed behind her and then opened again when Healer Andy asked Madam Pomfrey to join her in the hall.

Though their voices were low, Harry could hear the conversation through the door. “I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do to restore his vision, as you probably already guessed. Phoenix tears administered at once are the only possible antivenom, and as Basilisks are dark, dangerous creatures and this one was so ancient, the venom was that much more potent… He’s really lucky to be alive and to have the small amount of residual vision that he has… Do you want me to deliver the news, or do you want to do it?” Healer Andy asked.

“I’ll tell him,” Madam Pomfrey said resolutely. “Thank you. It should come from someone he knows, I suppose. I was hoping… it was a foolish hope, but… he’s just a child, and he’s suffered so
much already. I can’t believe he has to deal with being blind, too, on top of it all. Poor dear.” Madam Pomfrey blew her nose loudly. She didn’t come in right away. For several minutes, Harry lay on the exam table staring at the weird fuzzy lights floating above him that apparently were all that he would ever see again and felt as if the world were closing in on him.

He didn’t hear her come in or hear her gently say his name. Her hand pressing on his shoulder finally brought him back.

“I heard,” he said numbly.

“Oh,” Madam Pomfrey said in a small voice.

“Healer Andy is gathering some literature about adaptive charms and tools for blind wizards. Lucky that the term’s almost over, exams have been canceled, and you’ll be able to use the summer holidays to adjust…”

At this Harry went rigid… the summer he had already been dreading just got abysmally worse. He curled into a tight ball and grabbed fistfuls of his hair. He wanted to pull off his skin… and he definitely didn’t want to be Harry anymore.
Harry's having a very bad day.

I'm referencing this link for the floorplans of Number 4 Privet Drive, https://www.hp-lexicon.org/place/atlas-wizarding-world/map-wizarding-britain/number-four-floorplans/

Harry was having a really hard time focusing on what Healer Smethwyck was telling him about the wooden guide staff he was being given and the resources he could access at some Center to help “ease his transition” as Healer Smethwyck had put it, to this new “challenge” that he was facing. Healer Andy had introduced the senior Healer reverentially and had left to attend to other patients.

Harry fiddled with the stack of leaflets that had been shoved in his hand, resisting the urge to toss them aside, worthless as they were to him. Something in the back of his mind (it sounded like Hermione) was telling him that he should really try to pay attention, that he might need to know this stuff. But he felt as if he were listening to everything through a long tunnel - that someone at the end of it was yelling instructions to him that were important, but that he couldn’t quite comprehend them.

In the fog of his despair, Healer Smethwyck’s voice seemed to drone on endlessly… “This staff is charmed to help you navigate independently… can warn you of danger in your path… the ministry that the restriction of underage magic should be modified… the spell ”-----” can be used… some others that you’ll receive… after some adaptation courses… when you’re out and about among muggles… you live with muggles, right?… to use their tools for the visually impaired…”

At some point, Madam Pomfrey had entered the exam room. She had excused herself for a bit to visit a fireplace for a conversation via floo with the Headmaster. Harry heard Madam Pomfrey responding politely to the Healer and it seemed as though the interview was being wrapped up. Harry felt as though he were listening to all this through layers and layers of cotton balls - it was all muffled and distant. He was catching bits and pieces and guessed that they were talking about the upcoming dates of his adaptation courses and where they were located (some Center in London that Harry didn’t recognize) and the name of shops that carried accessibility tools, such as quick quotes quills and book readers. Harry heard the scratching of a quill and the passing of paper and the sound of Madam Pomfrey stuffing the paper in her medibag.

“Here, Madam Pomfrey,” he said in a detached voice, moving the leaflets toward the sound of her bag. “Could you put these in there, too? I’ll have to read them later,” he added with a tinge of sarcasm that she didn’t seem to catch.

Listlessly, he hung onto Madam Pomfrey’s arm, holding his new staff in the other hand, as they made their way down the echoing corridor. He felt lightheaded and slightly nauseous. He was self-conscious holding the stick with his opaque glasses (were they black?) shielding his eyes and clinging to Madam Pomfrey, imagining how he must look to those they were passing in the corridor. With a start, he wondered if they were heading back to the floo fireplace.

“We’re not going to floo again, are we?” he asked.

“Oh, no, dear. That was disastrous,” she said, and he could feel the slight jerking of her body as she
shook her head. “No, we’ll take the Knight Bus to your Aunt’s house.”

“What? Can’t I go back to school?” Harry blurted out in disbelief stopping suddenly in the corridor. *Could this day get any worse?*

“No, dear, there’s only a few weeks of school left and with the exams canceled there’s not much point in you going back. The school needs some time to figure out how to accommodate your needs and you need some time at home to rest and learn how to get along. Best if you do that at home. Professor Dumbledore and I discussed it while you were meeting with Healer Smethwyck. He’s sending an owl to your Aunt and Uncle telling them everything they need to know. Your school things will be packed up and sent home to you, so you need not worry about that,” she hurried on pulling him along.

“I need to be getting back to the school (who knows what mischief has gone on in my absence!) and you really need to rest. You’ll have time this summer to learn how to get around and you’ll need to learn how to read and write in braille, I suppose. Braille is a muggle form of writing with raised dots that you read with your fingers. Blind witches and wizards find it useful, too. The courses that you’re signed up for will be a big help.” Harry heard a finality in her tone and found that he didn’t have the energy to protest. His voice withered and died. He felt like a dried husk.

They exited the building. Harry closed his eyes against the painful burst of light. At the curb, Madam Pomfrey stuck out her arm and somehow conjured a bus. It popped into the space in front of them with a squeal that set Harry’s teeth on edge.

They were greeted, “Welcome to the Knight Bus!” by an individual with the worst halitosis Harry had ever experienced and climbed awkwardly onboard. Madam Pomfrey paid the fare, Harry told them the destination address at Madam Pomfrey’s prompting (he was so tempted to say “The Burrow,”) and Madam Pomfrey helped Harry settle into a seat.

Glumly, he leaned against his staff, barely able to keep his head up until the bus lurched into motion and then he spent rest of the trip trying not to tumble out of his seat. The trip was over pretty quickly and though Harry harbored a lot of dread about showing up at Privet Drive weeks before the end of term, he was relieved to be released from the insufferably jerky and bumpy ride. He wasn’t sure which was worse, transportation by floo powder or by Knight bus. Had he been in a less despondent state of mind, he might have marveled at how incompetent the Wizarding community seemed to be when it came to creating comfortable transportation.

And then they were standing on the front stoop of number 4 Privet Drive, listening to the chimes of the doorbell echo through the house. Harry had had to feel around for the bell because Madam Pomfrey had no idea what he was talking about when he tried to explain the concept of a doorbell to her.

“What are you doing here?” was the greeting Harry received from his Aunt. He stood there numbly as the familiar odor of Number 4 Privet Drive engulfed him. He felt as though he were drowning.

Startled no doubt by the abruptness, Madam Pomfrey introduced herself, “Hello, Mrs. Dursley. I’m Madam Pomfrey, Matron of Hogwarts. Did you get the owl from Professor Dumbledore about Harry’s, um, condition?”

“No,” Aunt Petunia tried to deny, but then sharply reversed, “Yes. I did.”

“Might we come in? I can share some information with you about how to help Harry…”

Petunia spoke over Madam Pomfrey, “I suppose you better come in.”
Harry felt his Aunt’s bony fingers close around his wrist as she pulled him inside; he tripped over the threshold but managed to just keep from falling. He was sure her impatience had everything to do with getting them out of sight of the neighbors and nothing to do with welcoming him home.

The conversation with Madam Pomfrey was conducted in the hallway and was very brief. Madam Pomfrey handed over the leaflets and parchment from the hospital and explained quickly about Harry’s lack of vision while Aunt Petunia responded with impatient grunts and sharp monosyllabic answers.

Harry couldn’t believe that Madam Pomfrey was going to leave him here. *Can't she see how much I'm not wanted here? Doesn't she understand what she was condemning me to?* He felt like he had been mistaken about her character - the trip through the floo network was the first indication… *no wait, that she couldn’t cure my eyes - that she didn’t even try that hard - she’d given up on me before she even tried.*

Madam Pomfrey gave Harry a quick hug, reminded him of the upcoming training, and left him.

His Aunt left him without a word in the hallway, storming back to the kitchen. He heard the garbage can lid clang and he imagined she had just tossed all the literature he had received in the bin. He shrugged to himself; even if he snuck back into the kitchen in the dead of the night to retrieve the leaflets, he had no way to read them. They might as well be tossed. He also acknowledged to himself that there was no way the Dursleys were going to help him attend the adaptation courses.

Resignedly, he used his staff to find the base of the stairs (he hadn’t actually figured out how to use the magical features on it yet, and just resorted to poking around with it until he found the bottom step) and made his way up to his room. He closed the door behind him, located his bed, set the staff to the side, and laid down upon it fully clothed. After a long while of just lying miserably on the bed, he fell asleep.
Harry awoke with a start to the sound of a scratching noise on his bedroom window. He opened his eyes to nothingness and noticed that his glasses were pressed uncomfortably across his forehead. He pulled them off, checking to see if they were broken, and then felt around for the bedside table for a place to put them.

The scratching noise came again and he remembered why he woke. He climbed out of bed, his hands following the edge of the table to the window frame, where he found the latch, undid it, and pulled up the window frame to let Hedwig inside. She hooted impatiently on the sill until he got it up high enough. Once she hopped inside, he felt around the outside of the window, confirming that the Dursleys had not replaced the bars on the window that had been yanked out by Fred, George, and Ron as they rescued Harry from his prison of a room in their father’s Turquoise flying Ford Anglia the summer before.

“Hiya, Hedwig,” Harry said as he smoothed her soft feathers as she perched on the table by his bed.

His throat tightened; he was thankful for a companion. She thrust her head into his hand, begging for more caresses which he was happy to bestow. After a bit she started hopping around oddly.

“What are you doing, Hedwig?” Harry inquired.

He felt down her body and found that she was sticking out her leg. He must have received a letter. He sighed heavily and untied the rolled scroll from her leg. He unrolled it and ran his fingers over the small bit of parchment. He could feel the swell where ink had absorbed into the paper and knew that someone had written him a note, but he couldn’t decipher it.

“Do you know what it says, Hedwig?” he asked hopefully as he laid it down on the table next to his glasses.

She gave a gentle hoot, her claws scratching on the table. She seemed to be rooting around again.

“Are you looking for food, Hedwig?”

She bobbed in response.

“Sorry, girl. I don’t have anything. You’ll have to hunt.”

She hopped to the sill and, in a burst of flapping wings and claws scratching sill, was gone. His stomach rumbled in response.

He was going to have to sneak down to the kitchen to hunt for food himself. How many times had he done this in his childhood? It dawned on him that he that could easily navigate this house in the dark. The thought made a small flame of hopefulness light in his core.

He knew it was night because the house was quiet (except for Vernon's snores) and he couldn’t see
any lights at all, but he had no idea what time of night it was. He remembered something the Healer had said about his staff, and walked confidently over to where he’d left it by the door. His foot struck something metal that clanged loudly and he stumbled against the door, banging into it.

He froze as he listened, his heart beating wildly. Vernon was sure to wake up and come storming into the room. He heard the snoring stop and held his breath, waiting for the explosion. But then the snoring started up again, uneven at first, then more rhythmic. As he slid down the door, his hand found the cat flap that had been fitted on the door last summer. He reached out to find whatever it was he had crashed into. *Hedwig’s cage.* His things must have arrived while he was sleeping. He imagined that his trunk was locked in the cupboard under the stairs.

He sat for a while with his back against the door, making sure that Vernon was snoring regularly again, relieved that he didn’t have to face him just yet. He enjoyed the cool night air that was wafting in through his open window. He hoped Hedwig was finding a good meal (and that she’d eat it far away).

His stomach gurgled again and he rose carefully. He placed Hedwig’s cage in its normal spot on his dresser, patting around to make sure that there was nothing on top already. Then he walked more cautiously to the door again, hoping that nothing else had been thrust unceremoniously into his room while he slept. He found the staff without making a racket this time and ran his hands over the carved surface. It was smooth and sturdy. Though he was inclined to despise it, he actually liked the feel of it - just the right height and weight and when he held it, it gave him the same spark of connection that he felt with his wand. *Maybe it was like a wand?* He wished he had been more awake when Healer Smethwyck had been explaining how to use it.

He tried to recall what the Healer had mentioned about the staff telling him the time.

He tried just asking it, “Staff, what time is it?” Nothing. Then he remembered Percy using his wand to find out the time and tried, “*Tempus.*”

A clear female voice sang out in lilting tones, “It is 1:52 am.”

The snoring stopped for a moment, then resumed. He was tempted to try other spells, but decided to wait until he knew he wouldn’t be overheard by the Dursleys or risk waking them up with the noise. Afraid it might talk again, Harry left the staff in the corner of his room by the door.

He eased open his door and tilted his head out the door, listening for any disturbance in the snores. He took a few tentative steps toward the toilet holding his arms out in front of him.

He found the hall wall and felt around a bit until he found the door to the toilet. He quietly washed his hands and listened at the door before making his way down the hallway to the stairs, trailing his knuckles on the wall.

His muscle memory kicked in and he avoided the squeaky floorboards without even thinking about it. Down the stairs, he followed the hallway wall toward the kitchen, his outstretched hand found the table before he bumped into it, and he skirted around it.

He paused before the door and peered into the darkness, listening hard, hopeful that this wasn’t a night when Aunt Petunia was sitting up nursing a cup of tea in the middle of the night. On those occasions in the past, he’d see the sliver of light under the kitchen door and know that he needed to retreat. He blinked hard assuring himself that he couldn’t see any light and then gently pushed the door open.

He made his way to the kitchen counter, for once in his life thankful for a spotless, clutter-free
kitchen with everything in its place. He knew what kind of food he had to take... food that would not be missed... a slice of bread with a smear of jam, a slice of cheese, a couple of biscuits. He devoured them while hovering in the kitchen. He tucked a small apple in his pocket for later. He had done this in the dark before and was quite adept at it.

He drank milk directly from the bottle to avoid having to wash a mug and relished the thought that it would drive Aunt Petunia mad if she knew. He ran his hands over the counter in search of stray crumbs that would give him away, capturing them in his palm, and went to the bin to throw them away. He paused, mindful of how it was prone to clang when opened and then remembering the tossed leaflets.

Hermione’s voice was there in his head again, urging him to find those leaflets and squirrel them to his room to save them for when he could find someone he could trust to read them to him. He cringed at the thought, both of having to ask someone for help and imagining what might be in the bin and smeared all over the literature.

Hermione’s voice won out, though, and he carefully lifted the lid and held it so that it wouldn’t ring out. Awkwardly brushing off the crumbs, he reached in heedful of what he might find and was relieved that there wasn’t much in the bin and what was there wasn’t wet or gooey. He found the leaflets (three as he remembered) and the bit of parchment with the notes about his courses still tucked together. He also found another large piece of parchment that he imagined was the letter from Dumbledore. Wizard paper was so different from muggle paper. He tucked them all into the waistband of his jeans and went back upstairs stealthily.

Once he was back in his room with his door shut, he relaxed and pulled out the leaflets to hide them under the loose floorboard beneath his bed. He added the scroll that Hedwig had delivered to the papers and then leaned out the window to breathe in the cool night air, listening for his owl and enjoying the vision of the moon that must have moved out from behind clouds - indistinct though it was - against the expanse of the starless (to Harry at any rate) sky.
Bright light pushed against Harry’s eyelids and warmed his face, though the breeze from the window was still early-morning cool and damp. He rolled to his side hoping to escape the blaze of sunshine and rummaged around for his glasses on the table by his bed. He could hear Hedwig on her perch atop his dresser - her small noises pecking away at the mass of the dread that had settled around him when he learned he was returning to Privet Drive weeks early. Hedwig seemed chipper; he guessed she had found a good meal.

He reached inside her cage and stroked her downy head. He was wondering how long he could avoid the Dursleys. He didn’t have to wonder too long… Petunia’s sharp steps (he’d been able to recognize all of the Dursleys by their footsteps for a long time, even as Dudley’s grew similar in heft to Vernon’s - his survival depended on it) ascended the staircase. She rapped forcibly on his door making Hedwig squawk in alarm, and shouted, “You’d better come down and make yourself useful in the kitchen if you expect to eat!”

“I’m coming,” he replied resignedly. Harry wondered if the neighbors could hear her through his open window as her steps descended down the steps again.

He thought about changing (he was still in the clothes he’d worn to St. Mungo’s the day before), but couldn’t muster the energy, though he did take off his school robes because he knew that wearing them down to breakfast would earn him a boxed ear at the very least. He’d become very good at dodging blows, but now what? And the thought made him sink a bit deeper into his muck of despair.

He left his staff in his room as he made his way downstairs to the kitchen, but not before checking the time. “It is 6:45 am,” the melodic voice rang out. He wondered if there was a volume knob on the staff.

His usual job at breakfast was managing the stove - eggs, bacon, tomatoes, sausages, mushrooms - whatever else was on the grill. He could smell the skillet heating up, but didn’t think anything was on it yet. He froze at the door remembering all the burns he got as he learned how to cook under Petunia’s callous instruction. His breath quickened. He’d rather face the Basilisk again. He imagined Aunt Petunia facing the serpent and with a slight smile tugging at the corner of his lips, was able to cross the threshold into the kitchen. He could orient himself in the room by the sunlight coming in the windows and was glad of his glasses that made the light bearable.

A few steps into the kitchen, Harry stopped to listen, trying to figure out where Aunt Petunia was. She must have stopped doing what she was doing to look at him because after a moment, the water at the sink came on accompanied by the clinking of dishes.

Her usual mode was to point with whatever utensil she had in her hand and gesticulate harshly - her disgust with him etched on her face. Well, that’s not going to work anymore, Harry thought. His Aunt was going to get very fussed, very quickly.

Maybe she’d already done that when I came in the room, it dawned on him.
“Uh, Aunt Petunia,” he asked tentatively, “what do you want me to do?”

“Humrumpf!,” she protested, “I already told you, put the sausages on.”

He knew better than to respond and bit back the sharp retort, What part of blind don’t you get? He moved carefully toward the stove, listening to the hissing of the gas stove, his hands held out in front of him. He felt the heat of the flame before he found the stove and edged toward the counter next to the stove. He guessed that she’d placed the food next to the stove, and groped gingerly along the surface of the counter until he located the package of sausage, tightly wrapped in plastic.

*Hmmm. I’m going to need to get the tongs and scissors to cut open the package.*

In the meantime, the pan was starting to smoke.

*I need to put on the fan and turn down the heat!*

His hands, ghosting along the exhaust hood, found the switch for the fan and turned it on.

*She’ll hit me with that hot pan if I burn the sausages.*

He was breathing in sharp gasps and took in a deep shuddering breath to try to calm himself.

*The stove is a Basilisk. I have to slay it. Without further dama…* he cut off the thought. *That doesn’t help.*

He found the knob for the burner and turned down the flame.

*Shoot. I turned it off. Maybe that’s better. I can gather the tongs and scissors and open the package and then heat up the skillet again. She’s going to slap me if I’m too slow, he thought - his heart still hammering.*

He listened to her at the sink. He thought she was wiping down the counter; he didn’t have much time to find the tongs and the scissors and get around Petunia. As he started moving in the direction of the drawer, the back of his hand trailing along the edge of the counter, he heard her throw down the wet rag with disgust.

She yanked open a draw, rooted around in it, and then her sharp heeled shoes tramped toward him. He braced himself for a blow, but it didn’t come. Instead he heard her slam something metal on the countertop. Nervously, he searched for it - it was tongs and scissors!

He was in shock. He couldn’t ever remember his Aunt helping him. He tensed again waiting for a blow and was not disappointed. He was cuffed on the back of the head, “Well, what are you waiting for? Get to it!” she huffed and moved away, opening cupboards and taking out plates.

He found the knob and after a few tries, got the burner to light again, and did his best to set the flame by relying on memory. He noticed that the flame was not bright enough for him to see it and wondered if he’d be able to see it in a dark room.

The shrink-wrapped sausages were really hard to get out of the package and the pan was starting to smoke again, and when he put them on the skillet (using the tongs to feel around for the edges of the pan after his first attempt left a stinging burn on the side of his hand), they hissed and spit pricks of grease at his face. He turned them and turned them, listening and smelling to try to figure out if they were done. When Aunt Petunia gave him a plate to put them on, he guessed that they were done and took them out. He had to set the plate on the counter and transfer them inefficiently one by one because they were in danger of rolling off the plate when he held it over the pan. He was exhausted -
the mental effort required to do this simple task was daunting. He hoped that was all that he was expected to do today, but then his aunt shoved a carton of eggs, a whisk, and a bowl at him.

He did his best to crack the eggs smoothly, wondering how he’d tell if there were shells in them.

*Uncle Vernon will let me know, no doubt.*

Cooking the scrambled eggs was just as tough as the sausages, though he decided to keep the temperature low so that the grease in the pan wouldn’t splatter so much when he added the scrambled eggs.

He found the salt and pepper shakers in their usual spot without much fumbling and hoped that a couple shakes of each were enough. He was surprised again when Aunt Petunia slammed the spatula down on the counter. *Why is she being so helpful?* he wondered as he pushed the eggs around in the pan. He was having a hard time telling if they were done or not.

He figured they must be done when Aunt Petunia banged a platter down on the counter next to him. Scooping the eggs out onto a platter was so much harder than actually cooking them. They were slippery like the tomatoes and he wondered if Uncle Vernon was going to complain about them being too wet.

Next up were tomatoes and they were just as slippery to fry up as they’d been to spoon out of the bowl in the Great Hall. Aunt Petunia took them over and thrusting him out of the way with her bony hip. After he regained his balance, he was relieved.

Uncle Vernon thudded into the kitchen for breakfast - Dudley was still at school - and was reading his paper and slurping his tea. Harry hovered by the counter, not wanting to draw attention to himself, but he knew he’d have to sit down at the table soon.

He didn’t fancy stumbling around trying to find his chair under Uncle Vernon’s scrutiny. When it sounded like he was engrossed in a story, Harry made his way toward the table using the sounds of the rustling newspaper to guide him. But he misjudged the distance and slammed into a chair, hitting his knee painfully with a bang.

He crouched next to the table cradling it as Uncle Vernon exploded in fury, “Watch where you’re going, you clutz! I can’t believe we have to put up with this! First, you’re dumped on our doorstep and we have to feed, shelter, and clothe you for eleven bloody years and now you’ve gone and blinded yourself! Insufferable!”

“Hush, Vernon,” Petunia said in a steely voice, and Harry nearly fell to the floor in shock. He bent his head to look at her, then remembered, *Right. Can’t see.* He desperately wanted to know what was going on. He’d never heard her defend him, ever. Maybe this wasn’t Aunt Petunia at all!

*Polyjuice potion, maybe? Is there a witch or wizard in there?*
Harry encounters a door.

Aunt Petunia left Harry to wash up the dishes on his own while she sent off Uncle Vernon to work. Harry rubbed his shoulder where Uncle Vernon had whacked him with the newspaper for getting shell in the eggs and serving them undercooked. He was surprised again that Aunt Petunia had shushed Uncle Vernon mid-tirade.

He was glad of the silence and took a moment to run cool water over the burn on the side of his hand before sinking his hands into the hot, soapy water and starting on the glasses. She’d cleared the table muttering about how he was sure to break the dishes stumbling around the kitchen when he got up to gather them after picking at his food. He didn’t have much of an appetite, which was a shame, really, since Dudley wasn’t here to snatch food off his plate. He had slipped some bits of sausages into his pocket for Hedwig after the Dursleys left the room.

Washing the dishes was something he found he could do easily by touch. He was surprised that Aunt Petunia let him near her dishes. He’d kind of assumed that she’d think him a bull in a china shop and would have banned him. Not that he would have been sorry to lose his job as short order chef and dishwasher.

And sweeping, he reminded himself. That is going to be harder to do without getting wacked about the head for missing things, he brooded.

He thought about the Weasley’s kitchen and how everything magically cleaned itself like something out of Fantasia.

The restriction of underage magic has been adjusted for me, he mused, toying with the idea of setting up the dishes to wash themselves. Aunt Petunia would poop her pants if she walked into the kitchen and that was happening… he smiled to himself and then dropped it at the thought: and I’d be tossed in the cupboard again and left to rot. He entertained the thought of donning the invisibility cloak to joke her, but then quickly dismissed it imagining what Vernon would do with his cloak if he got his hands on it. He ached to get into the cupboard under the stairs and go through his trunk. Maybe Ron helped pack it up and left me a message… Not that I can read it. Damn.

He finished up the dishes, dried them, and put them back in the cupboards with only a couple mishaps (some silverware dropping on the floor and having to grope around on the floor to retrieve it - his listened for his Aunt, determined she wasn’t nearby, wiped off the utensils with the dish towel, and put them in the drawer knowing that she’d pop a gasket if she knew).

He plodded to the broom closet, dreading the sweeping, but knowing it would be worse if he tried to skip it. It took forever. He started in the corner near the closet and worked methodically around the whole kitchen with small even strokes. He bent down occasionally to feel the growing pile of crumbs, just reassuring himself that what he was doing was actually working.

Sweat was dripping in his eyes by the time he was ready to sweep up the little pile. One advantage was that he was able to use the broom like his staff to navigate around the furniture in the room and didn’t bang his knees again.
He did run into the broom closet door when he went back to get the dustpan, though. He’d forgotten he’d left it open, and the broom swung into the closet, while his face collided with the door, smashing his glasses into his eye socket. Bloody hell! He held onto his face for a little bit until the stars (great, I can see stars when I’m hit in the face) stopped flashing behind his eyelids. He felt his glasses to see if they were broken. The glass seemed like it might be cracked, but they didn’t fall apart, so he put them back on.

His head throbbing, he got the dustpan, this time closing the door deliberately, and tried to remember where he’d left the pile. He ended up having to search for it on his hands and knees until he located it, swept it up, and carefully carried it to the bin. The lid banged open, making his head pound more.

Aunt Petunia hadn’t returned to the kitchen yet (maybe a dragon had scooped her out of the driveway?), so Harry went back to his room and gave Hedwig the bits of sausages he’d saved for her. He was so tired. This time, though, he stripped down to his boxers, put his dirty clothes in his hamper, and climbed into bed, placing his glasses on the table, and draped an arm over his eyes to cut out the sunlight. He didn’t care that it was 9:46 am. Maybe Aunt Petunia would leave him alone for a while if he was quiet.

When he woke up, the sun wasn’t on his face anymore. In fact it was dark. Hedwig was making crunching noises - she must have caught a midnight snack - and Uncle Vernon’s snores were rumbling through the floorboards.

“Tempus,” he murmured touching the staff in the corner, “It is 1:17 am,” the lyrical voice rang out. He’d slept through the whole day.

He held the staff, running his fingers up and down the length and wondering how he was going to figure out how to use all its magical properties. He really needed to be able to read the leaflets. He yearned for Hermione. Maybe he could call her? Maybe she knew if there was a spell that could be cast over text to read it aloud? That seemed like a handy feature for a staff for blind wizards.

Blind wizards, he morosely contemplated. This isn’t me! he protested and dropped the staff, curling up on the floor by his bed. I didn’t ask for any of this. The burn on his hand smarted, the door-shaped bruise on his face pulsed. A mass of pain clogged his throat, pushed all the air out of his lungs, as his cheek pressed into the wood planks of his bedroom floor. He drew ragged breaths. There was nothing he could do. If he escaped from Privet Drive (he imagined himself stumbling along the pavement with his staff, his trunk levitating behind him) and managed to make it back to Hogwarts, it was pretty likely that Dumbledore would just send him back. It was likely that he was just as worthless now to the wizarding world as he was to the muggle world. A little voice in his head protested, I can still do stuff. I’m not worthless.

I need to talk to Hermione - she’ll know what to do, Harry thought. She’s still at school. I could send her a message with Hedwig. Images of parchment and quills rose in his memory. He didn’t have any in his room, even if he did, how can he write without being able to see. I just have to try, he told himself firmly as he uncurled himself and sat with his back against his bed.

He came up with a plan to sneak down to the kitchen, by the phone - The phone! Yeah, but who would I call? And swipe a pen and a piece of paper, maybe a whole pad of paper if he could find one that wouldn’t be noticed.

He opened his door to listen. Uncle Vernon’s snores were steady.

He slipped out of his room in stocking feet, hoping to be quiet. Down the stairs, to the kitchen. He
found the table by the phone and opened up the draw, rummaging around quietly until he found a small pad of paper and a short pencil with a sharpened end. Again he had a small moment of thankfulness for Aunt Petunia’s rigid adherence to cleanliness and order. He tucked them in his pocket and went to the fridge and nicked a slice of roast beef and cheese - woofed it down, wiped the grease off his mouth, then wiped his fingers on his pants, and went out into the hallway again.

He could still hear Uncle Vernon’s muffled snores upstairs. He slipped up the stairs, hand lightly touching the railing, and on the landing, holding his breath, knuckles trailing on the wall, moved toward his room.

“What are you doing sneaking about?” Petunia’s sleep filled voice came leering out from her room and he jumped. “Just trying to find the loo,” Harry lied, though now that he thought about it, the need was real.

“It’s the other way,” she barked, and grabbed his arm and pulled him to the washroom door, where he knocked into the door jamb with his forehead. He rubbed his head while muttering, “Thanks,” and let out his breath once the door was closed behind him.
Harry writes a note to Hermione and Ron.

Harry sat awkwardly at the table by his bed with the pencil in his hand and the pad in front of him, trying to write a note to Hermione (and Ron - he had to include him, too). *I have to get this right.* He felt for the top of the paper and wondered if there was a logo on it. He tore off a piece and turned it over. *The back will be blank.* He pressed the pencil to the top of the page and wrote slowly, concentrating on making his letters as neatly as he could.

“Hermione and Ron, I am stuck at the Durs… ”

The pencil slipped off the pad, and he checked the tip to make sure it hadn’t broken. He’d need to find a pencil sharpener at some point if he was going to continue writing notes. He adjusted how he held the pad by placing his index finger on one side and thumb of his left hand spanning the width and wrote in the space between them.

“. . .ley’s” This he wrote up the side along the edge, hoping that it was decipherable.

“I have some stuff I need to read, but I can’t.”

He paused here, feeling a chest-clenching ache - not wanting to have to state why he couldn’t read it. *They know, right? I don’t have to say it.*

He moved down the pad by a finger’s width.

“Do you know a spell or something? Thanks, Harry.”

He thought about explaining how they’d have to communicate in a way that he could get it, but it made him so tired, the thought of explaining it all, and especially that his Aunt and Uncle weren’t going to read messages to him; in fact, they’d likely set them on fire, or at the very least chuck them in the bin again. There wasn’t room on this little scrap of paper to go into detail and he wasn’t even sure if the little bit he’d written was legible.

Maybe if Ron and Hermione couldn’t figure it out and sent him a written message that he couldn’t read, he could sneak out and take it to the library.

The thought of the five-street trip to the library made him break out in a cold sweat. Maybe he’d survive it (couldn’t be much worse than a nest of car-sized spiders, though he’d barely survived that); he thought about the overgrown hedgerows that made the footpaths narrow in places, pushing pedestrians near traffic. And then there was how a librarian was going to react to reading a message containing instructions for casting a magical spell… ministry letters would probably start popping up everywhere declaring that he’d violated some code of secrecy or other such rubbish.

He rolled up the message and tied it with the bit of leather used to secure it to Hedwig’s leg. He wanted to send it right away.

Hedwig seemed to have finished her meal and was making noises like she was preening her feathers.
He put the pad of paper under the floorboard with the other papers and waited patiently on his bed for Hedwig to notice that he had a note for her to deliver. It didn’t take too long for her to hop over to him. Even though he heard her coming, he was still startled by her wings whacking him around his face.

“Hey girl,” he crooned softly as he tied the missive to her leg. “I have a message for you to take to Hermione, okay? She’s still at Hogwarts.”

She growled quietly in response - she was always so good about being quiet while they were at Privet Drive. It was as if she knew. It was another reason why he felt some regret sending her away. *She understands,* he thought as he ran his hands over her stately form.

She hopped to the window and then before he knew it, she was gone. He could hardly hear her wings as they took her into the cool night air.

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Harry just settled the loose board under his bed into place concealing another stolen apple that he’d managed to swipe when she’d been kissing (ugh) Uncle Vernon goodbye that morning when Aunt Petunia came clicking down the hall and pounded on his door. He quickly sat on the bed and tried to pull a blank face, hoping that he didn’t look like he was up to something before she thrust the door open to shout, “Stop lying about and go hoover the living room.”

He followed her, silently padding down the stairs in stocking feet. He had a little thrill. The vac was inside the cupboard under the stairs with his trunk! Maybe he’d have a chance to go through it. But Aunt Petunia must have had that thought, too, because she was unlocking the cupboard door when he came down the stairs. He heard the wheels of the vac dragging across the hardwood floor and the sound stirred memories that fluttered against him. How many bruises had he nursed as he tried to figure out what he’d done wrong?

Aunt Petunia’s face, screwed up with contempt, floated up and banged against his memory, too, and then burst when she shoved the vac against his toes to get his attention. He tried not to show how much it hurt.

He reached for it, waving his hand back and forth in the air a bit before his fingers contacted the handle. He felt exposed under her huffing gaze and as quickly as he could, turned it around to push toward the living room, resignation coupled with humiliation pressing down on his shoulders.

He was startled when the vac jammed against the door jamb of the living room, thrusting the handle into his chest, knocking the wind out of him briefly. Aunt Petunia had shrieked, “Watch where you’re going!” right before impact, but not soon enough. He must have mistaken the light from the window in the front door for the living room. The light he could see no longer had sharp, defined lines - it kind of blended together into a colorless haze.

Recovering and wanting to escape her scrutiny, he turned the vac so he was pulling it and felt around for the door jamb. Aunt Petunia was watching him, he could feel it and it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He flushed as he groped through the doorway into the sitting room. *This is hard enough without an audience.* His knuckles dragged across the door and he set the vac down to unwind the cord a bit to plug it in.

He felt along the wall until he found the outlet, fumbling around as he tried to align the plug prongs with the socket, his frustration mounting until it slid in with a satisfying plunge.

He followed the cord back to the vac, stood for a moment by it as he visualized the room and tried to
remember all the possible hazards. This room was full of traps. Delicate figurines, voluptuous vases, family heirlooms, lace doilies that could be hoovered up if one wasn’t paying close attention. He had learned each lesson painfully, he didn’t want to have to learn them again. He remembered one spectacular dive that had saved a spun-glass bird that had teetered off a table when he had been hoovering absentmindedly… seeker training, he had later identified it. Seeker, I’m no longer a Seeker.

He turned on the vac to drown out the torment of that terrible insight.
Hope is a feathered thing

Chapter Summary

Harry starts to formulate a plan to escape . . .

The days at the Dursleys had plodded along. Another evening was approaching and Harry was getting nervous, anticipating the arrival of Uncle Vernon from work. His first hour or so after work was always Uncle Vernon’s worst. Harry found himself trying to escape the worry by fantasizing about what he’d be doing at that moment if he hadn’t blinded himself with Basilisk venom - which was a bit of torture in and of itself.

Weeks of school with no exams and the end of term not until the end of June seemed like a paradise compared to what Harry was enduring. Everyone would be in high spirits and he could imagine the intense chess games, late night kitchen raids, and all the pick-up quidditch games he'd be playing. Playing these scenes in his head was like poking a stick in an open wound.

Dwelling on what was fair or not fair was not an activity Harry indulged often, mostly because he learned early on that it never swung the balance in his favor. He forgot that momentarily as he thought about all his classmates enjoying the respite from exams and the beautiful weather (even Draco and the Slytherins!) while he was stuck inside cutting onions and trying not to slice his fingers. He was the reason they had a break. He slew the Basilisk, but his reward was eternal darkness… well, except it’s not dark. It is light and dark, but mostly just nothing. Eternal nothingness and a ball of frustration that he just couldn’t do things as easily as he had done them before.

I didn’t know what I had until it was gone.

He wanted to pound and rage and throw things, but he couldn’t because if he did, he’d bring the wrath of Vernon down on his head, shoulders, and back. He closed his eyes against the onion fumes, but not soon enough and tears squeezed underneath his eyelids. The knife slipped on the slick onion skin landing perilously close to his fingers. He took in a deep breath and cast around for something else to think about. He’d end up losing fingers, too, if he kept up the brooding.

Aunt Petunia was also working on dinner in the kitchen, bustling around in her efficient manner. She was humming a little melody that sounded familiar to Harry, but he couldn’t place it. She had lined up the vegetables and utensils needed to process them on the counter for him, which in the context of his history with her, was an unanticipated act of kindness and generosity. It unnerved him. It outright scared him. More than Aragog. It was terrifying because it was so unknown. He didn’t know how to respond to this new Petunia.

All he could do was keep an ear out for clues while he worked his way through the vegetables. The humming was definitely a clue if he could only figure out the melody.

His thoughts drifted to a recurrent narrative in his life: getting away from Privet Drive. How many times had he schemed and planned to run away to have his plans thwarted and his dreams dashed… that was until a hairy kind giant showed up and told him he was a wizard.

Where’s Hagrid now? Harry wondered dolefully.
He couldn’t just wait around to be rescued. He needed to do something and in order to do something, he needed to be able to walk away from Privet Drive… what about fly away? His heart constricted painfully as he remembered the feeling of soaring through the air on his broom - the air whipping through his hair, the swoops and dips and spinning around. It was a freedom he’d never felt before. Maybe there is a spell that would help him avoid obstacles in the air just as he imagined there was one that would help him avoid them on earth. There are fewer things to run into in the air. This thought kept him from sinking into a pit of despair.

His staff was supposedly set up to help him navigate and do other things - maybe he could fly on it, too. He wished he’d been able to focus when he’d been at St. Mungo’s - he was sure that Healer Smethwyck had told him exactly what spells he needed to use to make the staff a useful tool, but he couldn’t remember any of it.

Harry started cataloging spells that might work on his staff just as Tempus had worked. Of all the charms he’d learned in Professor Flitwick’s class the only one that was coming to mind right now was Wingardium Leviosa, which could be useful if he needed to carry something heavy, but it could also be disastrous for him if something floated away from him and he had no idea which way it went.

It was bloody brilliant the way Ron had used the spell to stop the troll from killing Hermione in their first year - it made him smile to remember how Ron had stood in shock, incredulous that the spell had actually worked.

He remembered Ginny used a spell in the Chamber of Secrets that brought his glasses whooshing to her hand… Axxo or something like that. That one could be handy, he thought, recalling how he had spent precious minutes that afternoon trying to find his trainers in his bedroom while Aunt Petunia shrieked about needing to get the rubbish to the curb before the garbage collection arrived. He was glad he found them else he would have had a wet sock in addition to cuffed ears. He dragged the rubbish out to the curb in a drunken, circuitous path until he found the edge with the grass and then kept one foot on the soaking lawn and the other on the driveway. All the while Aunt Petunia was berating him from the porch. What does she do while I’m at Hogwarts? He shook the thought from his head, he really didn’t want to know.

He wondered if Alohomora would work with his staff… maybe he could use it to get into the cupboard under the stairs and get some things from his trunk. Why is it taking Hermione so long to write back?

He remembered Hermione fixing his glasses with Oculus Reparo and wondered if he’d be able to cast a spell to fix something he couldn’t see. He could feel that his glasses were cracked, maybe that was enough? How much of spell casting is visual? Will Hogwarts let me come back in the fall? What if they can’t figure out how to teach me or just don’t want to go to the trouble? He had to reel in his thoughts. I’ll figure it out, he told himself firmly, I can’t stay with the Dursleys…

He was certain that Hermione knew loads of spells that could help him get around more easily. He couldn’t wait until he heard back from her. He just had to make it through… what? … the evening? … the week? … the summer? … without pissing off his Aunt and Uncle… which was a pretty tall order as usually it was just his existence that made them mad. And now it was a lot harder to sneak around pretending he didn’t exist.

Harry managed to make it through dinner without doing much to set off his Uncle. He did knock over a glass of water accidentally when Uncle Vernon had moved it and didn’t think to tell him. Miraculously, Aunt Petunia had stepped in before Uncle Vernon got violent and Harry didn’t get whacked around or sent to his room without dinner. How many times now had she stepped in on his behalf? Uncle Vernon seemed as stunned as he was.
Harry picked at his food in the ensuing silence, sodden as it was and with water dripping in his lap. *I should really eat something,* he told himself in a tone that reminded him very much of Ron’s Mum. He chased a few bites of chicken around his plate with his fork trying to stab them, finally cornering them with his knife, while Aunt Petunia broke the eerie quiet with discussions of when Dudley was coming home from Smeltings.

Harry was feeling deflated until he heard, “Remember, Vernon, we’re driving out to Smeltings on Friday June 25th in the afternoon to pick him up. You got approval to leave work early, right?” He sucked in his breath and tried to calm his breathing. It was weeks away.

They’d never take Harry with them. He’d be left alone in the house. He’d be able to do things… call Hermione? *Not yet, she’ll still be at Hogwarts.* Get into his trunk. Summon a wizard or witch to help him? *How do I summon someone?* Maybe by then, *I’ll have an answer from Ron and Hermione.* Wisps of hope wound around his heart. He worked on making a mask of his face, on not letting his elation show. He thought about Dudder’s stinking socks in the laundry to achieve the expression he needed.

Later that night, after the dishes were washed and dried and put back in the cabinets, the kitchen wiped down and swept, Harry wearily climbed the stairs to bed. While Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were watching the evening news and then their favorite shows, Harry leaned against the window sill feeling the evening air on his face and straining to hear Hedwig’s wings beating as she approached.
Harry figures out some useful spells on his own.

A few days later, Harry woke up early - shivering in the early morning chill that filled the small space of his room; he had been sleeping with the window open all night long hoping that Hedwig would come back. He listened hopefully for her small noises on her perch, but the room was quiet except for a cricket that chirped from beneath his wardrobe. He left it alone.

He could smell the rain in the air. “It’s 5:43 am” sang the lyrical voice from his staff. He was glad to be up early before the sun made his room blindingly bright. Hermione must be writing a novel in response. She probably is spending all her time in the library researching. Hedwig would be weighted down and have a hard time making it back with all her scrolls. That was it. That was why it was taking so long.

He wondered how Hermione was handling the end of term with no exams and the weeks of study that she missed while petrified? Knowing her, she was probably frantically interviewing the professors trying to catch up on everything she missed. He could imagine Ron rolling his eyes in exasperation.

He wished he had written more in his message. He had so much more he wanted to say to both Ron and Hermione.

To distract himself from the yearning and the waiting, he worked on trying to make his staff work (it had to be more than a talking clock).

When he held it, it gave him the same sort of magical charge that his wand gave off. It wasn’t like electricity, which was more of a surface sensation of static, this was something that seemed to connect to his very core. His broom felt this way, too, but more subtly.

He held it and tried “Wingardium Leviosa,” but couldn’t detect anything flying around the room. He locked his wardrobe and tried “Alohomora” and nothing happened. He tried it on Hedwig’s cage and nothing happened. He tried it on his bedroom door, but this time the staff was touching the base of the door when he muttered the spell and he heard the lock pop open. It had to be in contact with the object! He tried the wardrobe and Hedwig’s cage again, but touching the staff to the doors this time and they sprang open! A small thrill raced through him.

He also realized that he was no longer groping around his room for his furniture as he moved through the space, but rather reaching out confidently and finding it where he expected it to be.

He decided to try Wingardium Leviosa again while holding onto the table by his bed and nothing happened, but when he said it while holding on with one hand and touching it with the staff in the other hand, it floated up a couple inches off the floor and he was able to move it around the room easily. When he let go of it, it settled onto the floor with a low thud. He Wingardium Leviosa’d it back to its normal spot.

What would happen if I touched the staff to something I want to read? He wondered. He pulled out
one of the leaflets from under his bed and tried it. Nothing. He thought about it really hard and felt
the paper flutter under his grasp as if a breeze had caught it, but still nothing was revealed. He
suddenly felt sapped. There must be a spell.

All the while he was trying these spells, there was a niggling feeling in the back of his brain. He half
expected Ministry owls to come swooping in as they had last year when Dobby bombèd the kitchen
with Aunt Petunia’s masterpiece pudding.

He hoped that what the Healer had said about the restriction of underage magic being adjusted for
him was really true, but when had any government, magical or otherwise taken care of things
efficiently. He decided to stop. If the Dursleys got a message from the Ministry of Magic, they’d
surely lock him in his room with no wands or staffs or Hedwig and he’d be stuck there for the rest of
the summer with absolutely nothing to do. Not even read. The thought made his heart constrict.

The days passed very much like the days before. Harry did manage to take a shower and though
Vernon pounded on the door, shouting at him to stop wasting water when he’d barely begun, it was
still refreshing.

Harry was figuring out how to cook breakfast and not get burned (he used an oven mitt) while doing
his best not to attract the ire of Uncle Vernon. Once Uncle Vernon was off to work, Aunt Petunia
lined up jobs for Harry to do. In between, Harry took naps. He was still so tired. He noticed that he
had to fasten his belt a notch tighter to keep his trousers up. He just didn’t have much of an appetite.

He spent a good portion of one morning cleaning out the fridge after he misjudged where the shelf
was as he was putting away the orange juice container and the sticky substance splashed all over the
shelves. After his initial dismay, he decided to approach it as a puzzle and tried to figure out what
things were by touch and smell. He had to be careful to put things back in the right spot… no longer
just to satisfy Petunia’s sense of order, but now because he needed to know that he was grabbing the
jam and not the pickled herrings.

Some jobs were easier to do than others. He was banned from loading the wash after (according to
Aunt Petunia) the disastrous effect of including a red T-shirt in a load of whites. *How was I supposed
to know?* Folding was fine, but sorting laundry was a lot tougher. Some of it he could figure out by
touch - Aunt Petunia’s clothes were easy to tell apart from Uncle Vernon’s, but some items were
totally perplexing. It took a lot longer as he had to figure out through touch if a shirt was inside out or
not. Aunt Petunia was so rigid about how items were folded to fit into drawers.

Ironing was okay, just tedious and sometimes painful if he drifted into a daydream and touched the
hot iron. He had a burn on the pad of his index finger that was especially annoying now that he was
completely dependent on his sense of touch.

If Aunt Petunia wasn’t close by, he could listen to a radio station that he actually liked, as long as he
didn’t stay too close to the radio because it would lose the signal and just emit static when he was
next to it which made tuning challenging. At first, he’d tune it to music radio stations, but it didn’t
take long before he was captivated by the BBC news stories. Petunia hustled in and snapped the
radio back to her favorite station that took popular songs and made them perversely instrumental.
Harry gagged at the tunes.

He thought about Madam Pomfrey wanting him to spend the weeks at home so he could rest. He bet
he would have gotten more rest if he had stayed at school than he was ever going to get at the
Dursleys. He was surprised that his Aunt wasn’t more happy to see him given that he lightened her
chore load considerably. *But when did anything she did ever make sense?*
He made it through the days and then the evenings with the Dursleys, and finally was able to escape to his room. At the threshold, he listened to see if Hedwig had arrived while he was doing the dinner dishes. He was disappointed to be greeted by silence and found it hard to fall asleep - every night time sound made him still with anticipation, willing Hedwig to alight on his windowsill with a rustling message tied to her leg.
Harry awoke the next morning to a warmer morning; the birds were lively as if anticipating a beautiful day, filling him with hope that today he’d be released or at least have a reprieve from the monotony.

He lay in bed listening to the early morning sounds in Privet Drive, his ears straining to hear signs of Hedwig’s return. Surely, I’ll get a message today, Harry reassured himself.

It felt like an eternity since he’d been with his friends. How easily he’d left them that Monday morning, thinking that he was headed to St. Mungo's to have his eyesight restored, and taking it for granted that he’d be back again at Hogwarts to savor the time with Ron and Hermione before he had to return to Privet Drive.

*Why am I so stupid?* he wondered.

After Uncle Vernon was on his way and breakfast was cleaned up, Harry was out in the garden potting petunias for Aunt Petunia, who liked to place her namesake in neat rows throughout the garden. He was really glad to be outside, even though he had to keep his eyes closed against the bright sun, even through his opaque glasses.

He loved the dirt in his hands, the warmth of the sun, and the trilling of the birds that darted from tree to tree, bush to bush. He hadn’t ventured too far out beyond the potting table. He had to concentrate to remember the sequence of colors - Petunia’s description and orders had been short and brief. *Who knows what kind of price I’ll have to pay if I put the purple petunias in with the red!* He shuddered at the thought.

As he was sweeping the table off with a small hand broom, he heard a rustling in the grass, and then a little voice, *Yes, a nice juicy grasshopper is just what I was hoping for…* Harry crouched down by the grass and cocked his head.

“Hello, little guy,” he said in Parseltongue. He held his hand out, not really sure what he was expecting. He felt a little tongue whisp against his outstretched fingers and smiled, it tickled.

“Hello, big guy,” said the garden snake.

“How are things out here?” Harry asked, not really sure what to talk about with a snake.

“Lovely since the Owl flew away,” replied the snake.

“Oh, does she bother you?” Harry asked, surprised.

“She eats us,” was the snake’s casual reply.
“I’ll tell her not to, then,” replied Harry.

“That would be lovely. Thank you,” was the snake’s polite response.

“Here comes that horrid big one. I’ll be going,” and the snake slipped away.

Harry stood back slowly and worked on lining up the pots of flowers as Aunt Petunia came near. He was glad for the warning. She was always in a mood when it was a day to work in the garden. She didn’t like how unruly nature was, even her clipped, weeded, and carefully managed corner of it.

Harry supposed that’s why he liked it so much, even Aunt Petunia couldn’t make it bend to her will and sense of order completely.

He wondered how he was going to manage weeding this summer. Get to know all the weeds by what they feel like? That sounds like fun…

“Bring the pots to the front porch, boy!” Aunt Petunia shouted.

Ugh, thought Harry, this isn’t going to be easy. He picked up one pot that was loaded with petunias and started walking to the back door.

“Not through the house, you moron!” she exclaimed, and the back door slammed as she went back inside.

Harry paused. He had to really think about this. How was he going to navigate through the backyard to the front yard while carrying a heavy pot of flowers and not trip? Just the thought of it made him feel defeated. There was no way he could do this without dropping a pot of flowers. Even if he had his staff to check for obstacles in his path, he’d have a hard time carrying the pot and poking around with the staff.

He took in a deep breath, turned and started walking toward the edge of the patio, letting his arm skim against the potting table as a guide. He thought he must be close to the edge, and slid his foot forward to find the drop-off.

“Your eyes don’t see, big one,” his snake friend said quietly, not far from his exploring foot.

“No, I had a run in with a Basilisk,” Harry explained.

“Oh, a most ancient serpent. You are lucky to still be living,” replied the little snake reverentially.

“Step this way, I will guide you.”

Harry heard the snake moving quietly through the grass and followed the sound and the hissed directions. The first trip was a little harrowing as the little snake whispered through the grass and told Harry to move toward the house or toward the fence, at first tentatively guiding Harry around stones, flower beds, and ornamental garden orbs. However, the little snake, with his belly on the ground, didn’t notice the tree branches. Harry found one with his forehead and miraculously managed not to drop the flower pot despite the shock.

The little snake had kept going, Harry could hear his directions moving on ahead of him.

“Hold on, little friend!” And the rustling of the grass told Harry that he had whipped right around and came back.

Now Harry was afraid of stepping on him.
“Can you also warn me when there are things around my face? I just got whacked in the forehead with a tree branch.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t think to look that high up. Yes, I will do a better job. You are bleeding, Big Friend.”

“Great, now I’ll have two scars on my forehead. Just what I need.”

One by one, Harry, with the help of his little guide, moved the pots from the potting table to the front porch. Exhausted and a little triumphant, Harry laid down in the grass when he was done and the little snake moved over his outstretched hands.

“Thank you, little friend,” Harry said wearily. “What do I call you?”

“You can call me Little Friend,” and Harry detected a smile in his hissing noises. “Oh, here comes the Owl!” Little Friend slid under Harry’s belly, making him squirm.

“Hedwig!” Harry called with both joy and reprimand in his voice; he was so glad that she was back and her arrival in broad daylight to the front porch was the nearly the worst possible thing. It would have been worse if Uncle Vernon had been standing in the driveway.

Harry stood up carefully, not wanting to scare Little Friend.

“Hedwig, go up to my window. I’ll meet you up there…I’ll meet you up there… And don’t eat any snakes, please. I’ve made a friend.”

“Little Friend, I’ll talk to you later. Thank you for your help today. I will make sure Hedwig – the owl - doesn’t harm you”

“Yes, Big Friend. Thank you for your help with Owl.”

Harry started edging toward the front porch, then remembered that he was probably dirty and that Aunt Petunia would whack him with a wooden spoon if he tracked dirt through the front of the house.

Little friend was there to guide him back to the back patio where he could knock the dirt off his trainers before going inside.

He was giddy with anticipation. He hoped that Hermione had some good spells for him to use.

Chapter End Notes

Here’s a sketch I drew thinking about Harry and Nio hus cherio kisa’s first meeting. I tried to embed it in the text, but haven’t figured out how to make that work yet. https://www.deviantart.com/hegemonemilo/art/Little-snake-s-tongue-tickled-his-fingertips-771482471
Harry paused with his trainers in his hand at the back door to the kitchen after he’d brushed himself off as much as possible. He was tempted to race upstairs (as fast as he could go at this point as he still had to think carefully as he moved through the house outside of his room), but he knew that to give into that temptation would to alert Aunt Petunia to the fact that something was up.

And something was up! Hedwig had returned and he hoped she’d returned with a note tied to her leg. I should have asked Nio hus cherio kisa, Harry thought, saying Little Friend’s name in Parseltongue. The suspense was killing him!

He drew in a deep breath and tried to compose his face into what it would be normally - some mixture of discomfort, desire to not be noticed, and ignorance. Looking at all happy or content was sure to draw attention and ire. All he had to do to achieve the expression was to think about the task ahead of him - Aunt Petunia told him that after potting the petunias she wanted him to do a thorough dusting of Dudley’s room in anticipation of his arrival on Friday. He had been emotionally scarred the last time when he uncovered a pair of Dudley’s shorts, unceremoniously stuffed behind a short row of books (decorative, no doubt). They were encrusted and stiff and ugh… the thought that he’d had put his hand on them was enough to make him retch a little. He’d put them in the bin because no doubt if anyone else found them, somehow Harry would be blamed.

Slowly, Harry opened the door and walked through the kitchen, finding landmarks with his outstretched hands. I’m going to have to figure out a way to move around the house so that I don’t look so blind. Dudley’s going to terrorize me. I guess I have two days to get more comfortable with the layout…

As he moved through the hallway, he thought about sealing his room so Aunt Petunia couldn’t hear the message from Hermione. He wished he knew a spell. There has to be a spell. I should have paid closer attention in Charms. I hope Hermione’s figured out how to send an audio message that isn’t as loud as a howler! I should have taken the message off of Hedwig in the garden! Why didn’t I just do it there? He knew why, though. Nothing - nothing - was worse in the eyes of the Dursleys than the possibility of the neighbors finding out what a freak Harry was.

He made his way up the stairs, then across the hall to his room, where he closed his door, but didn’t lock it. The sound of the lock would definitely bring Aunt Petunia snooping even though she was on the front porch arranging the petunias. Maybe she’d do that for a while.

Hedwig was in her cage - he could hear her nibbling on the scraps he’d saved for her from breakfast. He went to the window and closed it, then went back to her cage to accept her nuzzles into his hand and stroke her.

“Thank you, Hedwig. Sorry I had to send you up here. Thank you for understanding.” here she nipped at his fingers. “I know, I know,” he consoled indulgently. His hands made their way down her sleek body to her legs and he unfastened the bit of leather strap that held the small scroll to her leg. The scroll was heavier than he expected.
“Thank you for bringing this to me,” Harry said hurriedly to her as he sat down on the bed, holding the small scroll solemnly. His fingers traced the shape of it and he discovered that the ends had been carefully folded as if to prevent something from falling out.

Listening for any sign that Aunt Petunia had come inside, Harry decided that it was safe. He unfurled the scroll slowly and something small and heavy as if it were made of metal fell into his lap. He picked it up and felt along its length. It was roughly the size and shape of a fountain pen. If it wasn’t so heavy, he would have thought it was a fountain pen, but there was no lid to remove, though one end was tapered to a point, it was blunter than a pen. He held it to his ear, expecting it to make a noise, but he couldn’t detect any sound. He did feel a bit of a magic pulse going through it. He was still holding the paper it had been wrapped up in and he tried holding the point to the paper, and that’s when Hermione’s voice erupted into the room, “… hope you’re…” as if she was sitting next to him. He jerked the pen away from the paper and her voice stopped.

He moved to the table by his bed and smoothed the small parchment out on the wood surface, flattening down the edges that had been folded in and held it open with his left hand. With his right hand, he lowered the pen to the paper near the top left-hand corner and dragged it across to the right-hand corner. Hermione spoke to him again and his heart filled his chest. Hearing her voice was a balm and he let her words wash over him. This was way better than a howler.

“Dear Harry,

I hope you’re okay. I was so glad to get your note as I’ve been,” here the pen ran off the side of the page and it took Harry a second to find the line again. He kept his left index finger on the edge of the paper at that line and then was able to scan the next lines more fluidly.

… “so worried about you. Madam Pomfrey wouldn’t tell me anything except that you’d gone home to the Dursleys to rest. She said that she couldn’t tell us what the Healers at St. Mungo’s said or did because that was private. She did look very sad, though, and it makes me fearful that they weren’t able to heal your eyes. Your note pretty much confirmed it, that, and the fact that Dumbledore gave me this anagnóstis to send to you. He said that it is fashioned after the one Homer used. He says that it will help you read any text and so, should help you with the stuff you need to read,” here it sounded like she was a bit exasperated, he guessed with his short note and cryptic message.

“Please write me again and let me know that you’re okay and that the Dursleys aren’t being horrid. I hope you’ve been able to rest and heal. Ginny also went home early to recover. I’ve been doing as much research as I can between classes. I’m really frustrated because there doesn’t seem to be much in the library that would be useful for you. And all the Professors are busy trying to come up with work to keep everyone from being unruly… it is kind of a madhouse here without exams. So, that’s why it took me so long to write back. But Professor Dumbledore gave me this to send to you, so I thought I better send it along, even if I didn’t have the spells you wanted. I’m still working on it. I’ll write again soon with your list of homework for the summer holidays. Ron says, ‘hi.’ Hugs, Hermione.”

Harry let out his breath, which he realized he had been holding while he listened to Hermione’s note. He was disappointed that Hermione hadn’t been able to find any spells to help him, but realized he kind of expected it. After all, he’d never seen a blind wizard… maybe he was the first?

But after getting over his initial disappointment, he realized that to just hear Hermione’s voice gave him so much hope and pushed away some of the fog of despair that had been following him around like his own personal raincloud. He wished that Ron had written, too. He missed them so much. The wisps of hope evaporated quickly when Aunt Petunia slammed through the front door. Before she had made it up the stairs, Harry had stashed the anagnóstis and the letter under the floorboard. He
was opening up his window again when she pounded on his door, demanding that he start working on Dudley’s room. He had to work on not sounding too cheerful when he responded.
Dust bunnies

Aunt Petunia had left the dusting rag, furniture polish, broom, and dustpan in front of Harry’s door. He found this out after he sat up, held onto his bruised knees, rubbed his wrist for a moment until the pain was more manageable and felt around, located, and identified the items he’d tripped over. *What is going on here? Why is she being so nice to me?* It was really starting to freak him out.

After his heart had settled down, he gathered up the dusting materials and awkwardly shuffled them over to Dudley’s room. He carefully lined up the tools along the wall inside the door by size and started to work. He found that dusting was a much slower job without sight. He had to work methodically and think carefully as he approached each surface, find the objects, dust them, then return them to the same spot. Before, he was able to just hone in on the actual dusty surfaces and skip anything that looked clean.

As he worked, he relived the letter from Hermione. Just hearing her voice made him feel closer to Hogwarts than he’d felt in weeks. He thought about the literature from the hospital, the notes Healer Smethwyck had written, the note he’d received the night he’d arrived and the letter from Dumbledore that Aunt Petunia had tossed in the bin. *I'm going to be able to read them!* He was itching to go to his room to read them that instant, but he could hear Aunt Petunia moving around in her room and couldn’t risk that she’d overhear the anagnóstis.

He’d have tomorrow in the house alone for a while to read, and he hoped, to learn how to use his staff, work on memorizing the layout of the house so that he could move around it more easily without having to grope everywhere. *Dudley’s going to beat the crap out of me,* Harry thought dismally. *I’m not going to see it coming. He’s going to think he’s died and gone to heaven.*

*I’ve really got to run away if I’m going to survive the summer once Dudley’s home. Maybe once school is out, I can go live with the Weasleys or with the Grangers until the fall… if they let me return to Hogwarts.* This recurring fear that Hogwarts would not accept him back kept plaguing him. *The anagnóstis means I can read my school work, at least. I wonder if there is a way to make headphones for it?* He had an image of himself in the library trying to listen to his books and Madam Pince shushing him.

Harry had just finished dusting Dudley’s computer which had a set of fancy speakers and headphones attached with tangled cords. He hated dusting it, it always shocked him, even when it was off. He wished he could plug the headphones into his anagnóstis so that he didn’t have to worry about the Dursleys overhearing his notes being read aloud to him.

Harry’s fingers felt grimy and his nose tickled with the disturbed dust by the time he was done. However, there was an upside to it all. He’d found a small pouch of school supplies pushed to the farthest recesses underneath Dudder’s bed that contained pencils, eraser, handheld sharpener, compass, protractor, and straightedge. He’d had to brave an unknown number of dust bunnies and crusted, balled up socks to find it, but it was worth it. *There’s no way that Dudley would miss this… that is, except if he saw me with it.* He tucked it in his waistband, thankful for his oversized T-shirt for once. He’d have to be careful to keep it hidden.

*How much stuff can I store under the floorboards…*

At the doorway, Harry listened to see if he could tell where Aunt Petunia was. He was getting pretty hungry and wondered if he’d be able to sneak some lunch. Aunt Petunia usually snacked throughout the morning when Dudley and Vernon were gone but didn’t let Harry make himself lunch. He had learned at an early age to sneak food into his pockets whenever he had a chance and the baggy hand-
me-downs from Dudley helped him in those schemes. Now he couldn’t check to see if anyone was looking and so had a much smaller stash of emergency food to share with Hedwig.

Harry remembered with an involuntary cringe the first time Ron noticed the pile of hoarded food in his trunk and teased him tirelessly about it, jumping around like a squirrel, until he saw Hermione’s shocked face and shut up.

What he would give for a table that magically produced mountains of delicious, hot food in a single pop. And pumpkin juice.

He couldn’t tell where Aunt Petunia was and that always made his skin crawl. He gathered up the cleaning supplies and started carefully down the stairs. *Maybe I should have made two trips instead of trying to carry this all at once…* he thought as the broom slid down and caught on the stair. As he tried to catch it, he slipped off the stair and landed on his butt, sliding down a few stairs and dropping everything else as his hands went out in an attempt to grab onto something. It made a tremendous racket joined by Aunt Petunia’s shrieking string of curses at him for being so stupidly clumsy. He sat for a second, the wind knocked out of him and tried to assess if he’d broken anything. *Not this time.* His tailbone was sore but not much more sore than the bruises he still was nursing from his encounter with the Basilisk and the inside of the fireplace. His knees hurt, but that was from his first spill over the cleaning supplies.

Aunt Petunia hadn’t let up her shrieking, but she was picking up the cleaning supplies he’d dropped. Harry froze when he realized it. *Is she going to hit me with the broom?* He flinched anticipating a blow, but instead, she put everything back in the broom closet and then pulled Harry up by his elbow. He nearly fell down the rest of the stairs in shock.

Her bony fingers dug into his arm right on an already tender bruise as she pulled him into the kitchen and then thrust him into his seat at the kitchen table. Harry managed to pull up on the concealed pouch of school supplies that was threatening to fall down his trouser leg and secure it again under his waistband. He didn’t think she noticed because was rattling a glass jar with a knife at the kitchen counter. She thrust a plate in front of him (he knew from the resounding clatter). He tentatively felt around the plate and discovered a sticky sandwich. Marmalade! He thought as he licked the stickiness from his fingers. He paused wondering if she was trying to poison him. Maybe she thought she’d finish the job the Basilisk started. Then he inhaled it before she changed her mind and washed it down with a couple gulps of milk, hiccuping in his haste.

He didn’t know what to do. He worked up the nerve and offered a soft, “thanks” to her bustling noises in the kitchen and thought that she paused for a moment and hurumpfed, but it was barely detectable.

“What do you want me to do next, Aunt Petunia?” Harry asked cautiously.

“I need you to go to the market, but I guess that’s impossible. So, I’m going,” she said clearly inconvenienced. *I could probably do it if you let me use my staff and my anagnóstis… wait, what? You’re going to leave me alone?*

“You will polish the silver while I’m gone,” she said firmly.

He slumped. How he hated polishing silver. When he had sight, she was never satisfied with his work, now he would polish ad nauseam and never know if it was gleaming to her specifications, and his only way of investigating was through touch which would leave fingerprints. But there was no way he was going to do anything to anger this new, almost nice Aunt Petunia. She was scarier than any other version of his aunt he’d ever encountered before.
Harry weeds the Albus Agapanthus with the help of his little serpent friend.

Harry’s ears were still ringing from the shrill abuse of Aunt Petunia’s shouts when she’d returned from the market to find that the polished silver was not perfectly shiny and blemish-free. She was also horrified that he’d barely made a dent in the pile. Harry really had tried his best and worked slowly and carefully. He knew what would come crashing down on his head (the frying pan) if he did a shoddy job.

She’d finally sent him up to his room in disgust. He was thankful for a little peace and quiet and a chance to stash the school supplies under the floorboard. He’d write to Hermione after he took a nap.

He felt as though he’d barely closed his eyes when Aunt Petunia was rapping on his door. Apparently recovered from her vexation at the job he’d done with the silver, she had demanded that he weed around the Albus Agapanthus in the front yard. He started at the name Albus, then remembered that it was the name of the tall stalky flowers with round white heads. How funny that Aunt Petunia has a lily named Albus in her yard. He stifled a groan and rolled out of bed, feeling around for his trainers. It’d be nice to be outside again. Maybe Nio hus cherio kisa would be out there.

How on earth am I going to weed? He wondered.

He paused at the front door, remembering the layout of the garden. The Agapanthus lined the walkway up to the house. They were dense, any weeds would be hidden under layers upon layers of their grass-like leaves.

He stepped onto the porch, remembering arriving here with Madam Pomfrey a few weeks before, and it seemed like an eternity. He slid his foot forward to locate the front steps, there was nothing to hold onto, no wall or banister and for a moment he felt like he was venturing out into nothingness. He shook his head and reminded himself that he’d just been placing the pots of petunias on this porch. Of course, that was with the guidance of Nio hus cherio kisa.

Maybe his little friend was near. He called out in parseltongue softly and waited. He heard a rustling nearby and sat down on the step.

“Is that you, Little Friend?” he asked.

“Yes, Big Friend. It is I,” was the little snake’s response.

Harry felt a warmth swell in his chest.

“My Aunt wants me to weed around the Agapanthus, could you help me?”

“What is weed?” asked the snake. This made Harry chuckle. What would a snake know of weeding? He explained and the snake was eager to help because he quickly realized that Harry would be unearth ing insects in the process. Harry felt the round head of the Agapanthus, fingering the delicate, tiny white lilie s - My mom’s name, Lily. He bent to sniff the flower, but was disappointed that it had
Once Nio hus cherio kisa could identify the weeds (which was pretty straightforward in this part of the garden as a weed was anything that wasn’t an Agapanthus), he’d help guide Harry’s hands to them and Harry would pluck them out, then Nio hus cherio kisa would gobble up the earthworms and beetles and other insects exposed by the upturned earth.

Harry and Nio hus cherio kisa worked their way companionably down the path toward the pavement and the street as the sounds of the neighborhood buzzed around them… the occasional passing car, chirping birds (Harry hadn’t really noticed before how many different sounds they made), and the chattering of squirrels. At one point a flock of geese flew directly overhead. Harry really liked listening to their honking as it approached and then flew over and diminished in the distance. It sounded like a huge flock.

Harry sat up and dusted off his hands when he heard someone coming up the pavement. Since schools weren’t out for the holidays yet and many of the people worked during the day, it was usually pretty quiet on Privet Drive around this time of day. He wondered who it could be. He gently hissed at Nio hus cherio kisa to stay hidden in the Agapanthus. The engorged little serpent was more than happy to rest.

The steps grew closer and then stopped.

“Hello?” Harry turned his face toward the steps and let the question linger in his voice. He was pretty certain that the Dursleys hadn’t told any of their neighbors that Harry had returned from school early and blind. He had closed his eyes as soon as he had stepped outside against the bright sunlight, but now he was tempted to open them. It was strange to talk to someone with his eyes closed, but as soon as he opened them, he closed them again. The sun was too bright.

“Hello, Harry,” said someone… it was a familiar voice, he could almost place it - an older woman. “You’re home early from school.”

“Um, yeah,” Harry agreed, angling his head toward the voice. He really didn’t want to explain to some random person why he was home early.

“Is everything okay?” The voice was soft and concerned and reminded him of cats.

“Sure, Mrs. Figg,” finally placing her voice, “How are your cats?” At this Harry heard the grass rustling, Nio hus cherio kisa was retreating further into the Agapanthus.

“Oh, they are fine. Thank you, sweetie, for asking,” she purred. “But you’re looking pretty banged up and you’re so thin,” she clucked.

“Oh, well. I’ve been sick, but I’m getting better,” Harry smiled hoping to reassure her.

“Is that why you’re home from Ho… um, school, early? But then why are you doing yard work? Shouldn’t you be resting? And you’ve got a bruise all down one side of your face,” she said stepping closer and not sounding convinced.

Harry gulped. The Dursleys would go ballistic if someone started nosing around and questioning Harry’s well-being.

“Oh, well, I ran into a door,” he said truthfully. That bruise seemed so long ago that he hardly remembered it. “Didn’t see where I was going.”

“Oh, Hello, Mrs. Figg!” Petunia called from the front door as she hustled toward them. “I’ve been
meaning to call you,” she sounded a little breathy as she neared.

“I was wondering if I could ask you to watch Harry tomorrow while Vernon and I go up to Smeltings to pick up Dudley,” she said smugly.

Harry groaned. Just what he needed, to be stuck in a cat-infested house that he didn’t know well enough to get around and lose his time to read his leaflets and letters. He stood up.

“Aunt Petunia,” he said turning toward her, “I’m fine on my own, really. I’m nearly 13. Mrs. Figg probably has better things to do than…”

“Oh, it’ll be fine, Harry,” assured Mrs. Figg, her hand touching him on his shoulder, surprising him. “I can show you my newest album of cat photos!” She declared proudly.

“Oh, but Mrs. Figg…” Harry started to explain, but Aunt Petunia cut him off sharply,

“Oh, that’s right, Harry. I forgot. You can’t go over to Mrs. Figg’s, I need you to… iron the napkins,” Petunia sounded flustered as she pulled on Harry’s arm, dragging him back toward the house, he stumbled over the pile of weeds he’d gathered. “Thanks anyway, Mrs. Figg,” Petunia called over her shoulder as she shoved him through the front door.

“Why’d you do that?” Righting himself, Harry asked, unable to hide his aggravation. He really hated being pulled around.

“Do what?” Aunt Petunia sounded like she was distracted, no doubt she was peering out the curtains by the front door to see if Mrs. Figg was moving along.

“Ask her to watch me and then change your mind?”

“She was looking at the bruise on your face strangely,” Aunt Petunia confessed in a rare moment of honesty.

“I had already told her I ran into a door,” Harry said matter of factly.

“Why’d you do that?” Aunt Petunia demanded.

“She asked,” Harry said flatly.

“Nosy old bag!” Petunia’s voice rose.

Like you’re one to talk, Harry thought to himself. But he was feeling relieved that it was looking more and more like he’d be able to stay at home alone tomorrow afternoon after all.

“Did you finish weeding the Agapanthus?”

“Nearly, I think,” Harry started to move toward the door. He wanted to go back out and talk to Nio hus cherio kisa a bit more.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Go finish it,” she huffed.

As he went back outside, Harry felt really confused. Aunt Petunia was acting so strangely.

He stepped off the front porch calling softly to Nio hus cherio kisa and was greeted by the little snake who was closer than he thought he’d be.

“I’m really confused, Little Friend,” Harry confided. “My Aunt is acting really strangely,” he sighed.
Harry followed the directions from the snake to the spot where they had been weeding.

Between directions to step around the pile of weeds, *Nio hus cherio kisa* said, “Your Aunt seemed scared.”

“Why would she be scared?” Harry mulled as he tugged a weed out of the wet earth.

*Nio hus cherio kisa* didn’t answer, he was gulping down a fat earthworm.

Harry decided to tentatively chalk it up to Aunt Petunia deep seeded attentiveness to what her neighbors thought, but it didn’t seem quite right. There was something more.

Harry gathered up the weeds and *Nio hus cherio kisa* slipped up his hand, curling around his wrist so that he could guide Harry to the bin to throw out the weeds. His cool body felt silky and comfortable on Harry’s wrist and he was sad to return him to the grass when they were all done.

He was saying goodbye a bit forlornly when Uncle Vernon’s car pulled into the driveway with a sickening squeal.

He stood up quickly, trying to get the dirt off his hands and jeans quickly. He really wanted to get inside and to his room, but he wasn’t quick enough.

“What in the world are you doing, boy?” Uncle Vernon erupted. It sounded to Harry as if Uncle Vernon was wedged behind the wheel of a car and struggling to extract himself. He turned his face away hoping to hide his amusement and replied, “Nothing,” in the flattest voice he could muster.

“Why are you hanging out here like the deadbeat you are?” he demanded as he stomped up the front walk.

“I was just finishing up the weeding, Uncle Vernon,” Harry responded as respectfully as he could manage.

“Hurumph. Likely story!” Uncle Vernon pushed past Harry, knocking him in the back of the knee with his briefcase.

Harry managed not to be toppled, but just barely.

He tried to hang back and let Uncle Vernon go inside without him, but his Uncle came back and grabbed his arm painfully and for a second time he was dragged, tripping into the house. He was pretty sure he was going to have layers of bruises on his arms if he didn’t already.

And things were just going to get worse once Dudley was home.
Erod elb mud subla ross ef orp yler ecnis

Chapter Summary

Harry reads a letter and sends a letter.

Harry sat at the table by his bed. Distantly he could hear the T.V. blaring in the living room. He was really tempted to get the *anagnóstis* out and listen to Hermione’s letter again and read the other letters and leaflets. *The Dursleys are engrossed in the T.V.; they aren’t going to hear me.* Still, he hesitated. He was risking losing his one chance to read the letters… or anything for that matter.

His heart pounding, he went to the door and locked it and placed his pillow across the bottom of the door hoping that it would muffle any sounds that might filter through the cat door and the space at the bottom of the door. He closed the window. Hedwig was out hunting (with strict orders to stay away from snakes). He had cleaned out her water and changed the paper in her cage once she flew outside with the setting sun.

Harry took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, glad for the break from the bright light. It was kind of nice just to sit in the dark.

Listening carefully, he decided that he should be able to read at least one thing. He decided to save the leaflets for tomorrow when he’d have some freedom to try out things with the staff.

*I hope that the leaflets have spells for using the staff… I hope that I can get out of here soon!*

He closed his eyes with these wishes, holding his breath as he made them.

Harry knelt down and retrieved the *anagnóstis* and the letter Hedwig had brought him when she first arrived at the Dursleys from under the floorboards.

He unrolled the scroll and flattened it out. He paused again before setting the *anagnóstis* against the upper left-hand corner.

“Erod elb mud subla ross ef orp yler ecnis.” Harry took the *anagnóstis* off the page, completely perplexed. He tried it again. “Erod elb mud subla ross ef orp yler ecnis.”

Who’d be writing me in another language? Is this from the goblins at Gringotts? Harry wondered.

Oh, wait. I’m an idiot! He turned it around and tried again. The voice that spoke this time was clearly Dumbledore’s gentle and aged tenor.

“Dear Harry, I’m just spoken with Madam Pomfrey and she has shared with me the sad news of the permanent loss of your vision. I am more sorry than I can express. She and I feel that it is in your best interest for you to spend the remaining weeks of the term resting at home. I’ve sent a letter to your Aunt and Uncle to alert them of your arrival and I hope that they are doing all within their power to make you comfortable and give you the space you need to heal and adjust.” Harry lifted the *anagnóstis* from the parchment here. He ached. Something wanted to burst out from him; he wasn’t sure if it was harsh laughter or quiet sobbing. The strangled sound that leaked out was a little of both.

He calmed his breath and then continued to read the letter.
“The classes that you’re enrolled in over the summer will help you adapt to your blindness. I know that you’ll face this new challenge with all the bravery and determination that befits a Gryffindor.

Sincerely, Professor Albus Dumbledore”

There was something about this letter that made Harry really, really worried. It was missing something. He stood up and started pacing. His heart was racing.

Why did he feel suddenly adrift?

Gryffindor? Gryffindor? Harry walked back and forth as the name rang in his ears.

It troubled him. Despite Dumbledore’s assurances, he still wondered if he was truly a Gryffindor. The mention in the letter of his Gryffindor traits felt like a dig. Harry realized that he loved speaking to Nio hus cherio kisa even when he felt a little twinge of shame.

Shame for what? For using this gift from Salazar Slytherin that Voldemort had accidentally passed on to me when Voldemort tried to kill me?

“You have every right to use that gift, Harry!” he told himself firmly, sounding a bit like Ron in his bluster. “It doesn’t make you a Slytherin.” He stopped pacing and sat down with the letter and read it again.

It wasn’t the Gryffindor part that made him feel so alone. It was something else.

He realized that it was what was not in the letter. Missing was assurance that there would be a place for him at Hogwarts at the end of the summer.

His heart plunged into his stomach. His chest tightened. The thought of not returning to Hogwarts was more frightening than facing Tom Riddle’s murderous intent.

He read the letter for a third time while drawing in shaky breaths letting Dumbledore’s gentle voice wash over him.

As he mulled over this insight, his hand loosely held the anagnóstis so that it hovered over the last words in the letter.

“Albus: a boy’s name of Latin origin, meaning ‘white, bright’.” The voice that offered this helpful definition was not Dumbledore’s, but rather the crisp, knowledgeable voice of a young woman. The image of a young professional woman in sharp new robes and smart glasses popped into his head. Harry also remembered the feel of the round heads of the Albus Agapanthus in his hands as he worked in the garden earlier. Somehow the knowledge that Professor Dumbledore’s name was the same bright, white light that was the only thing he could see anymore made him feel comforted and he was able to quell his fears.

They are just my fears. There’s nothing here that confirms them.

He took out the ruler, the pad of paper, and the pencil and using the ruler as a guide for writing straight lines, he wrote a longer letter to Hermione and Ron using a couple of pages from the pad of paper. Harry spent the next half hour trying to put into words his worries without being too worrisome, his fears without being too fearful, and his hopes without being overly hopeful. He knew there wasn’t much they could do for him, but it felt good to write to them knowing that they would understand.

He knew they’d be heading home via the Hogwarts express on Saturday - so he wanted to send the
letter to them while they could get it together, instead of having to write two letters once they were at their respective homes. He used the anagnóstis to read his letter back to him. It was strange to listen to his own disembodied voice, but he was assured that the letter was legible and he was able to make a few spelling corrections with the eraser.

He decided to not push his luck any further and put everything back under the floorboard. He opened his window and called for Hedwig with a low whistle. She hooted softly in response and soon alighted on the window sill. He fastened the scroll (larger than the first one he sent to Hermione and Ron) with the leather strap and asked her to deliver the letter. He sat at the window for a while after her burst of flapping wings faded into the night. He couldn’t see the moon, it must have been hidden behind clouds. He thought about tomorrow and the chance to learn how to use the staff and maybe gain more independence. It was a bubble of hope that kept him buoyed.

As he drifted asleep, he was able to loosen the grip of his fear of not returning to Hogwarts and let it drift out into the cool night air.
By mid-day, Harry was really ready for Aunt Petunia to leave. She had asked him to wash the outdoor windows, which was a challenging job with one’s sight intact as it involved hauling ladders, buckets of soapy water, and making sure every window was spotless. Harry point blank refused to do the second story windows, which meant that he had to endure being whacked around the head more times than he cared to count (or maybe the result of being hit in the head so many times meant that he lost count). He figured that if she wanted to kill him, she’d have to get more creative than insisting that he scale a 25-foot ladder with a bucket of soapy water.

Early in the day, he knew that the only way he’d complete the job well enough to live to the Dursley’s departure time of one o’clock was with help from a sighted friend. In the back by the potting bench, Harry overturned some stones to find some tasty insects to tempt Nio hus cherio kisa. He put the worms and beetles in an old margarine tub that had once held seeds hidden in a far corner under the potting bench. He called softly in Parseltongue for his little friend, but though he waited for several minutes, he didn’t hear the familiar rustling.

Maybe he’s in the front.

Harry filled the bucket with water (managing to splash water all over his knees) and added soap, but decided to wait until he had a guide before he hauled it around to the front yard. So he left the bucket by the potting bench and went through the house to the garage to see about getting the ladder out.

At least the car isn’t in the garage, Harry thought as he stood in the echoey space of the garage and tried to remember where the ladder was located.

How am I going to get it down without knocking into things?

He remembered all the times he teetered on disaster trying to carry the ladder before.

I’m bigger now, stronger. At least I have had a year of eating well under my belt.

He tugged at his belt - it was still a bit lose. He’d lost weight since he’d come back to Privet Drive.

He trailed his hand along the wall, across the guides for the garage door, and then with his foot found the path to the front porch, which he was able to follow by keeping his right foot right at the edge of the path and sliding it in front of him a bit to feel his way as he went. He bent down again and whispered in Parseltongue among the Agapanthus, “Little Friend, are you here? I have some treats for you!”

“Oh! What kind of treats?” Little Friend’s voice emerged from the Agapanthus as he neared Harry’s trainer. Harry had emptied the tub of insects into his hand and held it out and Nio hus cherio kisa slithered up on to his fingers to investigate.

“Little Friend, could you guide me today? I’m to wash the windows and make them spotless, which is hard to do when one can’t see.” For some reason, Harry found it was a lot easier to talk to Nio hus cherio kisa about his vision loss than it was to write about it in the letter to Hermione and Ron.
Maybe because the snake easily accepted it and didn’t seem phased by it at all. He was a very down
to earth snake. He had a feeling that Ron and Hermione wouldn’t be so nonchalant about it all.

“What is wash… and what are… windows… and what is… spotless?” Nio hus cherio kisa asked
between crunching and gulping down the insect offerings.

Harry explained as best he could, motioning to the front of the house.

“Yes, Big Friend, I will help you. I would like to curl around your neck where it is warm and I can
see well.”

“Thank you! And yes, that’d be a good spot for you, just keep an eye out for my Aunt because if she
sees you… well, it won’t be pretty.” Harry tucked his baggy T-shirt into his trousers so that if Nio
hus cherio kisa had to make a speedy retreat inside his shirt, he’d not fall all the way to the ground.

“First, can you help me find the ladder?

“Sure, what is a ladder?”

The corners of his lips turned up slightly at Nio hus cherio kisa ’s questions, Harry brushed the bits
of mud off his hands and offered his arm to Nio hus cherio kisa who climbed up. Harry helped him
get settled around his neck and found it was easier to walk back to the garage with Nio hus cherio
kisa ’s whispered cues. Getting the ladder down off the wall and out of the garage was not so easy,
but Nio hus cherio kisa was able to tell him where to go to retrieve the garden rake and shovel that
he’d knocked off the wall as he staggered under the unwieldy weight of the ladder. Rake and shovel
restored, Harry and Nio hus cherio kisa set the ladder next to the front door and then went to the
backyard to get the bucket.

With Nio hus cherio kisa ’s vantage point up higher than when he was guiding Harry from the grass,
he was also able to warn Harry more reliably about branches and other high up obstacles. Harry was
also released from the worry of stepping on his little friend.

Walking back with the bucket was slow going, but they managed to do it with most of the water still
in the bucket and not on Harry’s legs.

*I probably couldn’t have managed any better with sight,* Harry conceded.

Harry had long ago stopped questioning Aunt Petunia’s need to wash the windows in such a rainy
climate.

*At least now I won’t see them get mucked up immediately after finishing the task.*

It wasn’t much consolation.

The first window was easy to reach and didn’t require the ladder. Harry was thankful. He and Nio
hus cherio kisa were able to figure out how to communicate about what cleaning a window actually
entailed. Harry was tempted to set down Nio hus cherio kisa and ask Aunt Petunia to inspect the
window to make sure it was up to her standard, but he dismissed the idea when he considered how
grumpy she’d be at being interrupted during her show. He’d just have to hope that the little snake
understood the concept of spotless or rather, Aunt Petunia’s concept of spotless.

They moved on to the next window which required a ladder to reach over the bushes. Nio hus cherio
kisa understood how important it was to place the ladder carefully in the earth by the bushes, and
took a little more explaining for how to place the ladder against the building so that Harry could
reach the window, but not break the glass. They figured it out, taking breaks to gather fat worms for
During one of the breaks, Harry asked his little friend something that he’d been wondering, “How did you know that Mrs. Figg was talking about cats yesterday? Do you speak English, too?”

“Oh, no, I don’t speak human speak, but I do recognize some words. My survival depends on it.” Hearing about the world of the garden from the snake’s perspective helped Harry understand it differently - it was like a new world had been opened up to him - not unlike the night he learned that there was an underground community of witches and wizards.

Harry felt very exposed and vulnerable standing on the ladder and leaning over to reach the window with only one hand to steady himself even though he knew he wasn’t very high off the ground. He was really glad for Nio hus cherio kisa’s sibilant whispers and cool coils around his neck. The little snake didn’t like the heights either but liked the warmth of Harry’s neck and the steady supply of treats.

At last, they finished the ground floor windows. It was nearly one and though Nio hus cherio kisa was stuffed, Harry was starving - enough to consider nibbling on a worm.

He was cleaning up the bucket and rags, his legs trembling from a combination of excursion, fear, and hunger when Aunt Petunia came bursting out of the back door to shout at Harry about putting the ladder away before Uncle Vernon arrived.

Nio hus cherio kisa slipped into Harry’s T-shirt as they planned, squirming a bit against Harry’s belly, tickling him, to hide from Aunt Petunia. Harry crossed his arms in front to hide the slithering snake. He knew she didn’t see Nio hus cherio kisa because she continued in her tirade without pause. After the ladder was put away, he was to clean up and get started ironing the napkins.

Harry listened morosely while trying to keep a neutral expression on his face. He couldn’t wait for the Dursleys to get in the car and go.
Navigant cupboard under the stairs

Chapter Summary

Harry finally has a chance to learn how to use his guidance staff.

After Harry and Nio hus cherio kisa put away the bucket, rags, and ladder, Harry returned his little friend to the Agapanthus in the front yard and tried to express how thankful he was for his help. Nio hus cherio kisa had saved him from heaps of abuse from his Aunt. He also didn’t feel quite so alone with the snake draped around his neck and while Hedwig also gave him a feeling of companionship and a connection to the magical world, with Nio hus cherio kisa he had someone to talk to.

Granted their conversations so far had been focused on the layout of the garden and figuring out what they were talking about. Even with a shared language, there was a lot that didn’t translate between the serpent and human perspectives. Still, the conversations were a relief from the toxic spew or stony silence Harry was subjected to from the Dursleys.

A bit forlorn at leaving his friend, and with his legs shaking from hunger and weariness, Harry made his way to the ironing board to start in on the napkins before Vernon got home. It was always better to be employed in some task when his uncle arrived.

He knew that he’d be able to get something to eat once the Dursleys left to fetch Dudley from Smeltings. He assumed that Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon would go out for dinner with Dudley, and so arrive home late.

Maybe I won’t even have to see Dudley until tomorrow. Saturday.

A month ago I was still at Hogwarts, I didn’t know about the Basilisk, Ginny was okay, and I was able to see. A lot can change in a month.

Finally, after enduring a lengthy invective from Uncle Vernon about what he could and couldn’t do while they were gone, Harry could hear the car squealing out of the driveway and he was able to finally breathe easily.

Maybe the directions for the staff will include some household cleaning spells and I’ll be able to speed through the ironing!… Man, Ron would take the mickey out of me if he knew I was fantasizing about learning spells for doing chores, he thought laughing at himself and craving time with his friend.

For a second, he was in Gryffindor tower, goofing around with Ron, Dean, Seamus, and Neville - pushing and shoving each other, telling bad jokes, and laughing until his sides hurt. He thrust the bruising thought away, the tower seemed so distant, so unattainable. He forced himself to focus on finding something to eat so that he wouldn’t be trembling when he read through the literature from the hospital, eager though he was to get started.

oO0OooO0ooO0oO0O0o

Up in his room - he still felt safest in his room, even knowing he had the run of the whole house for a couple of hours - Harry pulled the literature and the anagnóstis out from under the floorboards.
He sat down on his bed and spread the leaflets out on the table by his bed. He didn’t know where to start, so ran the anagnóstis over the three pieces of literature to see what they said. He figured out that one of them was upside down, righted it and tried again.

A stuffy sounding wizard (not unlike Percy Weasley) said the titles as he slid the anagnóstis over the fronts of the leaflets. They were titled: Getting Around: Using Your Guidance Staff, Why Learn Muggle Braille? For the Low Vision or Vision Impaired Witch or Wizard, and Adjusting to Your Magical Malady. Harry decided to get started with learning how to use his staff and pushed the other two aside. After determining there was no other useful information on the front page, he opened the leaflet and a voice erupted into his room, much louder than his anagnóstis. “THIS IS A LISTENING LEAFLET FOR THE WITCH OR WIZARD LIVING WITH VISION LOSS. TO ADJUST THE VOLUME, STROKE THE PAGE EITHER UP (LOUDER) OR DOWN (QUIETER) TO ADJUST THE VOLUME. TAP IT TWICE TO TURN THE AUDIO ON OR OFF.”

Harry immediately stroked the page down and was relieved when the volume of the voice was more tolerable. He was also thankful that he never opened the leaflets while the Dursleys were in the house. The leaflet kept going. Harry decided that he preferred the anagnóstis as he could more easily control the pace and tapped the leaflet twice. He wondered if the volume on his anagnóstis could be adjusted in the same way and was pleased to learn that it could, then he walked swiftly to the corner of his room where he kept his staff and tried to adjust the volume on it as well on it. He cast “Tempus” and was pleased with the softer “1:43 pm” response.

Eager to learn more, he returned to the table and the leaflet and continued to read with the anagnóstis.

“Your guidance staff is equipped with the latest in assistive charmwork to allow you to navigate easily around any obstacles in your path. Unlike your wand, the staff needs to be in contact with objects for many spells to work in order to prevent accidental magic.” Harry had already figured this out.

“A newly developed feature that we are excited to introduce with this model is that your staff is equipped with an extendable storage place that makes transporting items easier. Open the storage by pressing your thumb on the triangle formed by three dots, 3 inches down from the top of the staff. To retrieve items you’ve placed in the extendable storage, use the summoning charm, Accio, to summon the item. To close the storage, press your ring finger on the triad dots.

To walk around a room using your staff to guide you, simply grasp it by the handle as you would a wand (think of it as an extension of your pointer finger). If you are outside or in a spacious environment, hold the staff in front of you at about belly-button height and swing it in a gentle arc hovering a little above the floor, and move it a little wider than your shoulders. As you advance your left foot, swing the staff to the right and tap, then swing back to left as your right foot advances and tap. If you are inside or in close quarters, hold the staff more parallel to your body and swing in a smaller arc, advancing the foot opposite to the arc. This motion activates the charms in the staff that will provide information about your surroundings. You can ask it to give you more or less information by tapping the staff twice with two fingers in rapid succession for more information or twice with one finger for less information. However, if your staff senses danger, it will alert you immediately.

Your guidance staff is paired with an aftí listening instrument for your ear that you will find in the extendable storage area of your staff so that only you can hear the guiding voice. It is charmed with a cloaking charm, so once it is in place, no one will be able to see it. The aftí is designed to be comfortable, waterproof, and require very little care and maintenance.”
Harry set down the *anagnóstis* and tried opening the storage area and summoning the out the *aftí*. It didn’t come out. He went back to leaflet to read the directions again and listen carefully to the pronunciation of the spell and the inflection for the listening instrument *aftí* and tried again and after several attempts was finally able to extract it.

A very small, metal c-shaped ring winged into his hand. He felt it carefully and found that it was completely smooth with no marks that he could discern. Harry went back to the leaflet to figure out how to wear it and figured out that it should be pinched over the helix of his ear. He was surprised, though, when he got it in place and he picked up the *anagnóstis* to read the leaflet again, now the voice was not speaking aloud in the room, but in his ear!

He decided to try out the staff with the *aftí* in place.

First, he tried holding the staff as he held his wand and swinging it in an arc, stepping forward with the opposite foot. It didn’t speak until he remembered to extend his index finger down the length of the staff. Then, the voice from the *aftí* started describing the furniture in his room and he adjusted the volume to a comfortable level. It was a little weird to have this voice speaking right in his ear, but he could appreciate how useful it could be. He imagined he’d be able to hear it even in a really loud environment and it was nice not to have to worry about the Dursleys hearing it. *That wouldn’t work.*

Harry listened to the descriptions and started moving around the room, “single bed on your left, wardrobe 7 feet, straight head.” Harry continued walking and swinging the staff in an arc, the staff lightly striking the furniture legs in his room. He tried increasing and decreasing the amount of information and found that he could set it up so that it just made the staff vibrate a bit in his hand right before he hit something so that he could avoid hitting things before the staff even struck it. He imagined that this would be handy if he was walking around people (again, the Dursleys… he could imagine what Uncle Vernon’s response would be if he tapped him with his staff… ). Even without the voice describing the furniture and the room, the feedback from the staff tapping on the walls and furniture was helpful. With the navigator on, the staff told him where the door was and how to find the doorknob.

He decided to go back to reading the leaflet:

If you need more information or don’t understand something, simply squeeze the staff twice in rapid succession and your staff will give you more information about what it is touching, or if you hold the staff in the air, it will give you a visual description of the room or space where you standing. Two more rapid squeezes will return it to the previous setting.

To ask your staff to guide you to a location, cast the “*navigant*” spell and state the address or the item you want to walk toward.

When you walk among Muggles, your staff will appear to be a Muggle white cane for the blind.

Your staff can be shrunk to fit easily in a pocket by tapping it three times on the ground while it is held at a perpendicular angle. To restore it to its normal size, shake three times quickly in front of you. To Muggles, it will appear as if you’re folding or unfolding a collapsible cane. If you’d like it to still give you directions while it is shrunk, simply touch it with your thumb and middle finger.

When first adapting to your vision loss, keep in mind that while this staff is designed to give you as much independence as possible, it is not a replacement for sight and you will need to proceed with caution, rely on your remaining senses, and don’t be afraid to ask for assistance when you need it.
Harry felt a bit deflated upon hearing this last bit as he was starting to imagine all the things he’d be able to do with his staff now that he was learning how to use it. He was even imagining flying on his broom.

He shrugged off the stifling feeling that was threatening to envelop him. He stood up and said, “navigant cupboard under the stairs,” and waited for the instructions. But it didn’t seem to work. So, he tried again taking care to pronounce “navigant” as the leaflet had said it and thought about the cupboard under the stairs.

This time, it worked and he followed the staff’s directions out of his room to the stairs. He was so used to finding the top stair with his toes, the railing with his hand, and then counting the stairs down that he didn’t need the staff to tell him that he’d reached the bottom step, but he could understand how it would be helpful if he was in an environment he didn’t know so well. It then directed him to the door of the cupboard under the stairs and told him where to find the keyhole.

He touched the staff to the door and said, “alohomora” and he could feel the lock slide open under his hand when the door popped open.

His fingers swiftly found the three triangular spaced dots on the staff. He placed all the items in his trunk inside his staff - he was amazed by how much it could hold and it didn’t get any heavier.

He had a fleeting moment where he wondered if he could go inside the staff, but then worried about how he’d get out, so didn’t try it. Maybe sometime he’d explore that possibility with Ron and Hermione. He closed his trunk and then realized he didn’t know the spell to lock the cupboard again.

He was a bit frantic for a little bit until it dawned on him he could summon the key that Aunt Petunia kept hanging on a nail in the broom closet, high up. He tried saying it, “Accio key to the cupboard under the stairs” and the first few times it didn’t work, but he worked on pronouncing Accio exactly as it was pronounced in the leaflet and finally, it came.

He locked the cupboard and it took him awhile to put the key back on the hook (but he was able to wingardium leviosa a chair over to help him reach it). He wondered if there was a counterspell to accio - something to replace things.

Maybe now that I have my textbooks and can read them, I’ll be able to find the counterspell.

It was so liberating to be able to use his magic without fear of reprimand, either from the Dursleys or the Ministry of Magic. Harry was torn between finishing reading the leaflets and getting out of the house. He thought of the park and what it would be like to just go play… to swing, to see-saw, to climb the jungle gym.

Go to the park, for sure! When am I ever going to get the chance again?
Harry hurried up the stairs - he was still getting used to the staff and he had to think carefully as he said the navigation spell so that he pronounced it precisely and thought carefully about where he was going. It definitely made him feel more confident moving around the space outside his room. Before he put everything he’d had stored under the floorboards in his room into the storage compartment of the staff, he tried using the summoning charm to remove some items. What if I can’t get them out? He was still struggling with the summoning charm, but eventually, he was able to summon his charms book, his wand, the invisibility cloak, and his broom. He returned all of them to the compartment, though he spent a bit of time just feeling his broom as he leaned against his bed. He loved the heft of it, the feel of the grain against his fingertips and longed to try flying, but resisted the urge - sure that the Ministry of Magic would show up if he started flying around Little Whinging. Maybe he and Ron could try out flying this summer at the Burrow. Maybe he could escape there for a bit.

Finally, he returned the broom to the compartment and then felt around in the floorboards for the other items he had stored there. He found the bit of parchment that Healer Smethwyck had given to Madam Pomfrey and grabbed the anagnóstis to read it.

“Adaptation Course at 56 Charing Cross Road, London.


Registration on the 29th of June at 9 am. Questions, contact Healer Jordan at the Residency by Owl.”

Harry sat back and sucked in a deep breath. This meant that he only had to make it through Saturday and Sunday and then he could leave the Dursleys for a month! Maybe after the training, he could go to the Burrow instead of returning to Privet Drive (on my birthday!). He held onto the note hardly daring to breathe. It is a ticket out of here! He didn’t care what kind of training it was, it was away from Dudders, Vile Vernon, and endless chores. He felt like he was floating! He listened to the message a few times to commit the address to memory. If he had to walk there on his own, he’d do it.

Next, he listened to Professor Dumbledore’s message to Aunt Petunia - it was very much like the letter Dumbledore had sent to Harry - and a little subdued, he put it and the rest of the items from under his bed in his staff, pushing away his fears that he’d not be allowed back at Hogwarts.

He tried out minimizing the staff and using it in his pocket - it was a nice feature - rather like having Nio hus cherio kisa wrapped around his neck, but not nearly as comforting or companionable. He restored it to its normal size to go to the park because he felt more confident feeling the ground with it. It was only 2:30 pm - surely he had time to get out for a little bit. He could listen to the other leaflets later. Also, he had planned to use the time to learn how to navigate around the house without reaching with his hands, and now he could simply put the staff in his pocket and listen to the directions.
Maybe Dudley won’t notice that I’m blind, Harry hoped. He is pretty dense.

As he was heading down the stairs, the doorbell rang.

Harry froze on the steps. Who could it be? He was tempted to pretend that he wasn’t home, but it was likely that whoever it was had already seen him descending the stairs through the window by the door. A very clean window!

He walked slowly down the rest of the stairs and opened the door, “Hello?” he asked to the space outside the door. He was still holding his staff and remembered the directions for a description of the space around him. He held it off the floor and squeezed it firmly twice and the voice in his head started describing the doorway and front porch... “and a short older woman with wispy gray hair wearing a worn purple housecoat and carrying a grocery bag on her right arm.” He squeezed it again so that the voice was silenced.

“Mrs. Figg?”

“Harry, how are you?” She asked, worry lacing her voice.

“I’m okay, Mrs. Figg. Thank you. My Aunt and Uncle are gone, they’ve gone to get Dudley from Smeltings.”

“I know. That’s why I came over. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“The Dursleys said I couldn’t let anyone in the house while I was gone.”

“It’s okay, Harry. I understand. Maybe you can come outside?”

“Sure, I think that would be okay,” said Harry. He started opening the door wider so that he could go out, closing his eyes against the bright sunlight.

“Why do you have a white cane, Harry? And sunglasses?”

I guess the Muggle disguise for the staff works, he thought wryly.

“I got some... stuff... in my eyes at school. I can’t see now,” he explained as he stepped onto the front porch.

“Oh. Dear. That’s awful. When will it clear up?” Mrs. Figg sounded jittery.

“Um. It’s permanent. No cure,” Harry said shortly.

“What? Oh my. Well... is that why you have bruises on your face?”

“Yeah. I’ve been running into things,” he sighed. “But I’m figuring it out and on Monday I’m going to an Adaptation Training to learn how to get around better. It’ll be okay,” he said reassuringly as it sounded as though she was dissolving into tears.

Better than digesting in the innards of a Basilisk... he thought.

He reached out a hand and found her housecoat sleeve and then placed his hand on her arm to soothe her.

“I was worried that your Uncle... well, when I saw those bruises on your face... well. He’s just such a sour mu- man,” She sniffed.
“I’m okay,” Harry said stoutly. “Thank you for checking on me, Mrs. Figg. It is really very nice of you.”

“Well, I better be going. Mr. Tibbs will be expecting his supper.”

She shuffled off the porch steps and Harry listened to her steps as she walked away down the path and then out on the street toward her house. He waited there for a while and then squeezed the staff to listen to the surroundings. The staff didn’t mention anyone else on the street.

He wondered if he could get to the park without asking for directions from the staff. He knew the way, of course. He’d gone there on his own as often as he dared - it offered a bit of peace from Number 4 Privet Drive. But can I get there without seeing my way? Without seeing the Ash tree on the corner where I turn or the house with the funny lawn ornaments near the entrance to the park? He’d never really paid attention to how many streets he crossed on his way there, he just knew the way.

He used his staff to walk down the walkway, holding it at belly-button level and letting the arc swing out wider than he’d used it in the house. Tap, tap. Left foot, right foot. He reached the end of the walkway and could feel the difference in the paving stones. The staff described the Agapanthus and the curb. He turned left and walked toward the park, keeping to the side of the road. There were square stones along the gardens in the street, and he kept close to them, tapping them reassuringly as he made his way to the park. It seemed a lot farther than he remembered but guessed that was because this was the first time he’d done it with his eyes closed.

After walking for a bit he realized that he wasn’t entirely sure where he was - have I gone past the house with the pink stone birdbath where there was an entrance to the park between houses? He decided to whisper, “Navigant park on Magnolia Road” to his staff and was relieved to listen to the confident voice guide him and especially when he reached a part of the road that had paving stones, uneven though they were. The staff warned him when he needed to step up. He wasn’t as far along as he thought he was.

A little dog surprised him, yapping out of nowhere, but the staff described a fence that kept him from charging, so he kept going.

He passed a hedgerow that smelled strongly of lilacs and gladly breathed in the fragrance, remembering the purple blossoms and knowing he was nearly there. Then he could hear the shrieking chains of the swings and the rhythmic pounding of the see-saw and children squealing in delight as they ran around the play structures.

He’d made it. He felt a sense of accomplishment. And he felt a bit exposed in the park. He hadn’t really thought through the fact that there would be moms and children too young to be at school at the park and that soon primary would be out and more kids would be at the park. He did want to swing and swallowed his apprehension. He wondered if there was a free swing or if they were all occupied.

He moved closer to the play structures, his staff’s tapping muffled by the grass. The uneven ground was harder to move across - he had to go more slowly and the staff wasn’t really good at describing the bumpy terrain adequately. He reached the sand that surrounded the play equipment.

He held up the staff and squeezed it and learned that there was a free swing directly in front of him, just a few feet away, so he walked toward it.

“Duck!” The staff yelled, and he dropped to the sand - the staff flung to the ground, out of reach. He felt something graze over his head - some child in a swing, no doubt - just missing his head by a
“Oh my goodness, are you okay? How did you miss getting hit?” A motherly voice asked him, pulling him up by his elbow.

“I dunno.” Harry mumbled. “I just wanted to swing a bit.”

“Oh, are you blind, dear?” She asked as she brushed sand off his jeans.

“Yes,” Harry admitted a bit reluctantly as she pressed his cane into his hand. “Thank you,” he said as an afterthought.

“The swing is over here. Where are your parents? You’re not here alone, are you?”

“They are around,” Harry lied. Too many times he’d been questioned about his alone-status at the park - he knew he had to fib if he was going to be left alone. The Dursleys always took it out on him if someone started poking around too closely in their business.

She had pulled him over to the swings and put the chain in his hand. Harry minimized his cane and put it in his pocket hoping that what the leaflet had said about how it would appear to muggles was true.

He sat on the swing and leaned back, rocking gently back and forth until he was soaring a bit and it seemed like he’d left the earth for a while to roam among the clouds.
Harry gets to be a kid for a bit.

As he moved back and forth, Harry listened to the children who were running around giggling and shrieking in delight. The scent of lilacs drifted by occasionally on the breeze and the warmth of the sun gave him a lazy, contented feeling. He was mindful to swing slowly and stay low to the ground in case a small child walked into his swinging path.

The mom who had helped him was still pushing her child in the swing next to him, speaking in a sing-song voice. The child’s responses were gleeful unintelligible chortles. It made him wonder if he and his mom had ever gone to the park to play.

He had slowed by dragging his feet in the sand, swaying in the swing when a small child had run into his knees, pressing up against him giggling and grabbing his middle in a hug.

“Umph, uh - Hello?” Harry had been holding on loosely to the chains but reached forward to steady himself and drawing the child into an awkward hug as he tried not to fall.

“Play wit’ me!” The child demanded and laughing grabbed Harry’s hand with a sticky, sandy small pudgy hand. He wasn’t sure if it was a girl or a boy.

“Oh, okay,” Harry answered a bit reluctantly as the child pulled him out of the swing and across the sand. Harry pulled out his staff and shook it to restore it to normal size and swung in an arc trying to get a sense of where he was on the playground. The child was pulling him along and talking animatedly about digging in the sand.

“What’s dat?” the child asked. Harry guessed he was pointing at his staff.

“It’s my cane, it helps me find my way,” Harry explained. “What’s your name?”

“Owiver Fwankwin Evans!” the child stated proudly, stopping and pulling Harry down toward the sand.

“I’m Harry. How old are you, Oliver?” Harry asked as he collapsed his staff and put it in his pocket. Oliver didn’t answer. Harry sank onto the warm sand and waited expectantly, then tried again.

“Oliver, how old are you?” It seemed that Oliver was suddenly bashful after all his bravado hauling Harry over to play with him.

Oliver made a little grunting noise like he was frustrated, and then his hand was pressed against Harry’s cheek, and Harry felt three fingers digging into his face.

“Oh, are you three?” Harry asked, sitting back. “Are you nodding, Oliver?” Harry still didn’t hear anything. “I can’t see you when you nod. Can you tell me with your words?” he tried gently.

“Why you can’t see?” The boy was nearly nose to nose with Harry now - as if he was peering into his face. His breath was a mixture of sweet and sour, like milk. “Take off yous glasses… then you
see.” His sandy fingers fumbled at Harry’s glasses and pulled them off. Oliver hooted in laughter as Harry pulled the glasses from the little boy’s fingers and put them back on.

“Yous eyes is closed! Dat’s why yous can’t see!”

“The sun is too bright, so I have to close my eyes, but when I open them, all I see is bright light, nothing else. See?” Harry tried to open his eyes to demonstrate but blinked them closed again.

“Huh?” the boy grunted uncomprehendingly.

“Are we going to dig?” Harry felt around the sand in front of him.

“Here,” Oliver pushed something against his hand. Harry ran his fingers over it and discovered a sand-encrusted flimsy plastic shovel. He stuck into the ground and started making a hole. Oliver knelt next to Harry, his warm little body pressed along his side and started moving and digging, too. They scooped out a hole. Every once in a while other kids would come and plop down next to them and join in the digging, then get up and run away to play on the other structures. Harry could hear their voices and footsteps as they climbed the ladder and then came whooshing down the slide nearby. Harry built up a mound next to the hole with the sand from the hole and started to shape it. Oliver would sometimes smash it down and laugh, delighted in the destruction. They shared the shovel and moved as their hole got larger.

A bigger boy came over, Harry guessed by the height and timber of his voice as he talked to Oliver about how it was time to go. “No, Mawk, I don’t wanna go! I’s playing wit’ ‘Arry.”

“Mum said it’s time to go, Ollie,” Mark said impatiently and Harry felt the little guy being lifted up by his older brother.

“Bye, Oliver,” Harry said standing up and knocking the sand off his hands and trousers.

“Come play wit’ me, again, ‘Arry.”

“I’m going to school for a while, but I’ll be back. Maybe I’ll see you then?” Harry said.

“But yous can’t see,” said the little boy, confused.

“Well, yeah, but I’ll play with you again. You just have to tell me its you, okay?”

Mark was impatiently urging his younger brother to come and Harry heard Oliver run back toward him - with just enough warning to brace himself for a fierce hug from Oliver, who just as quickly released him and ran off again. “Mmm’kay. Bye, ‘arry!” Harry smiled wistfully and brushed off more sand.

Harry decided that he’d better head home, too. He had a bunch of sand in his shoes, but wanted to wait to empty them until he was out of the play area. He pulled out his staff and shook it to restore it to its normal size and started walking toward the sound of the swings. He was glad of the staff which warned him about holes that other kids had dug in the sand and guided him around the play structures. When he felt like he was far away from people who might overhear him, he muttered “Navigant bench” and was glad to find that there was one nearby. He realized, though, that there were people sitting on it as he approached. “Here, dear. Do you want to sit down? There’s a spot right here.” Harry heard a woman pat the bench and as he approached she gently grabbed his hand and guided him to the spot.

“Thank you,” Harry said. He emptied his shoes of sand and then got up and started walking away, muttering, “Navigant Number 4 Privet Drive” to his staff. His arm and wrist were tired from
holding the staff and moving it back and forth for so long. *I'm going to have to build up my stamina,*
Harry thought as he passed the lilacs on the way home, *if I’m going to make it to 56 Charing Cross Road on Monday!*
Galleons to pounds

Chapter Summary

Harry works out a plan to get to London on his own.

As he walked back to Number 4, and in between really concentrating on walking and listening to the directions from his staff, Harry thought about what he’d do when he got there. He could pack up the rest of his things and put them in his staff. *I wonder if Hedwig’s cage will fit?* His books had fit and they were larger than the staff, so maybe the cage would, too? He wondered if everything was rattling around the staff as he walked. *It didn’t feel like things were moving inside of it.*

_Hedwig! She’s not back yet!_ Harry stopped in the middle of the walkway. He sucked in a deep breath while reminding himself that it was only Friday, his training didn’t start until Monday morning, and continued his steady tap, tapping way. *She’ll be back by then… and maybe with a letter from Hermione.*

He stopped at an intersection and listened carefully for cars, not hearing any and with the reassurance from his staff that there weren’t any coming, he started across. Once he was safely crossed, he went back to planning. *How am I going to get to 56 Charing Cross Road by 9 am on Monday?* He thought about sending a letter to Madam Pomfrey asking for suggestions… she knew that he had the training. He dreaded the thought of contacting her, though, after the floo fiasco. Also, he didn’t really want to bring it to her attention that he couldn’t expect help from the Dursleys. He was kind of put out with her for not noticing or not caring how horrid Aunt Petunia was to him.

He could take the train and underground to Charing Cross Road if he could convert his galleons into pounds. *Where do I find a place to convert coins?* The thought made him prickle with sweat. He’d only traveled by the Hogwarts express by himself before and that was when he could see. He really didn’t count the trip he and Ron had made in the Flying Ford Anglia - he had been with Ron after all. He had the staff and was learning how to use it and that made things easier, for sure, but he still couldn’t read signs without using the _anagnóstis_ and that would be a little awkward… what if he couldn’t reach them to read them? *And it’s not like I can do that around muggles.*

_Maybe_ Nio hus cherio kisa _would want to go with me!_ Harry thought with a spark of hope. *He can’t read signs, either,* he sighed. _And how would I care for him in the city? Where would I find soft earth to dig up worms and other bugs? He’s probably never gone beyond the garden wall. He won’t want to travel to London with me,* Harry’s hope deflated a bit.

The walkway had disappeared and now he was walking on the side of the road. He heard a car approaching and froze for a second as his staff warned him of the approaching car and the closing distance. He moved over closer to the hedgerow that was encroaching on the street. The branches poked into his back as he held his staff parallel to his body and waited for the car to pass. When his staff started describing the area in detail, he realized that he must have squeezed it twice in rapid succession and he was surprised to hear it read the street sign, “Privet Drive.” *My staff will read signs to me!*

He drew in a breath that held the scent of both exhaust and leaves and continued toward Number 4. It would be busier on the street soon as people returned from work. The local primary was out and there were more kids playing outside, too. Some of them got quiet as he neared and he thought they
had probably stopped to stare at him as he passed. Nice. He wondered if there were kids that he knew from the neighborhood or primary - not that they’d talk to him. Dudley always made sure of that.

Ugh. Dudley’s coming home.

Harry heard a ball bounce near him and stopped when a voice called out, “Oi. Pass it here, would ya?”

Harry used his staff to locate the ball which had stopped by his feet and bent down to pick it up awkwardly with one hand. It was the size of a quaffle but squishy. He turned toward where he’d heard the voice, and said “Here you go,” holding it out.

“Go ahead and toss it,” the voice said, nearing him.

Harry switched his staff to his left hand, hesitated for a second while he doubted his ability to throw blindly, and then said, softly under his breath, “sod it,” and sent the ball into the air an underhanded arc, hoping the kid hadn’t moved much. He heard feet slapping and then hands on the ball, and a muffled “Thanks!”, so Harry responded with “No problem,” smiled to himself and continued on his way. He wondered who it was - the voice did seem kind of familiar…

Soon, his staff told him to turn right and he was on the path fringed with Agapanthus walking to the door of Number 4. He let himself in, the familiar odors of the house washing over him, and went into the kitchen to fix himself some dinner.

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After he’d cleaned up after himself, hoping that Aunt Petunia wouldn’t be able to tell that he’d even been in the kitchen, let alone made himself a corned beef sandwich, Harry tried navigating around the lower level of the house with the staff in his pocket, the fingertips of his thumb and middle finger lightly resting on it. He practiced getting around without reaching out for tactile cues until he felt pretty confident. Maybe this will save me from getting tripped by Dudley, he thought ruefully.

He heard a squawk and ran up the stairs without thinking about it, surprising himself. Whoa! I can run up the stairs. He almost tripped on the landing at the thought, caught himself and skidded into his room just as he’d done a million times before. It felt good.

“Hedwig!” Harry exclaimed gleefully.

She growled in response and he heard her stretching her wings on the windowsill. He knew it was still daylight by the sunlight that was a little easier to bear inside the house.

He was too glad to see her to reprimand her for coming in during the day. Someone is bound to notice a snowy owl flying in and out of my window, he thought, but right now I don’t care.

He had tucked some scraps from his dinner into his pocket for her and offered them to her bobbing head. He ran his fingers through her soft feathers as she pecked them from his hand.

After she was done, she hopped around and he knew she had a scroll on her leg, which he found and unfastened. She went to her cage to drink water and he listened to the familiar sound as he unrolled the scroll. There were actually two pieces of parchment. He took his staff out of his pocket to retrieve the anagnóstis, pleased that he could open the storage compartment while it was collapsed.

Holding the larger scroll flat, he figured out which end was up and started reading it.
“Dear Harry,

Thanks so much for your long letter with more details about what they said at St. Mungo's. That’s the pits and I’m sorry. I won’t say anything else because, well, I know you don’t want me to.

I’ve spent as much time as I can in the library researching spells that could be useful. The best one I’ve found so far is the navigation spell. You think about where you want to go, hold your wand in front of you and say, navigant, and it will tell you how to get where you want to go. However, I don’t think you can use it while you’re around muggles.

There’s a summoning charm that will summon things to you ( accio ) and a charm that will return the accio ’d item back to where it came from ( reditus ), but I think we’ll have to practice them because I tried them and it took me a while to get the hang of them, especially the returning spell. You really have to visualize the location exactly to replace items. Those, too, are spells that you can’t do around Muggles, but could be handy once you’re back at school.

I talked to Professor Flitwick to see if he knew any other spells, but he couldn’t think of anything. He said he’d do some research, too, and let me know over the summer.

I’ve included a separate list of your homework for the summer.” Harry groaned when he read this.

“I know you won’t be happy to get it, but maybe it’ll help to have something to do. I hope that with the anagnóstis you’re able to read the list, my letter, and your homework. I thought it was really brilliant of you to use a ruler to write the letter to me. It was a lot easier to read than your first letter.

I’ve also read that some blind wixen (this is a word for both witches or wizards that I learned while researching! I don’t know why more wixen don’t use it, it’s so much easier than saying witches or wizards all the time!) learn braille which is a muggle invention for reading by touch. You’ve probably seen it on the elevator and other public muggle places. I think there are spells for converting text to braille or to speaking books (though, I think your anagnóstis is probably easier to use for that), but I haven’t found them yet. I’ll keep looking.

It sounds like the Dursleys are being horrid and for that, I’m really sorry. I’ll ask my parents about having you come to visit. Ron says that he thinks his parents will also invite you to visit, so maybe between the two of us, you’ll get a break. I’ll give you a call once I’m home. Tomorrow we take the Hogwarts express home. It won’t be the same without you. I miss you. So does Ron and well, loads of other people. Everyone is asking if you’re okay.

Your friend, Hermione.”

Harry was so glad to have the letter from Hermione that he didn’t mind too much that it included the long list of summer homework.

Harry checked the time. It was nearly 5:30 in the evening. He was pretty sure that the Dursleys would be gone for a few more hours at least. I’ve got to call the train station and find out about tickets to London while I can. How much is it going to cost?

He went down to the phone in the kitchen and found the phone book. With the anagnóstis, he was able to find the number for the local train station and called it (though it took him a while to remember the order of the numbers on the phone and he dialed a few wrong numbers until he tried using his anagnóstis to read the numbers on the phone - duh! ).

Trying to sound as adult as he could muster, he learned that the ticket from Little Whinging Station to London would be nearly 25 pounds ( that’s like 5 galleons! ).
With an urgency, he decided to write Hermione back right away and tell her about the staff and the training in London and to see if she could help him convert galleons to pounds. *If anyone can do it, Hermione can. Maybe while she’s at King’s Cross Station. Her parents have had to convert pounds to galleons, I bet they can help her.* He summoned the paper, ruler, pencil, eraser and pencil sharpener from his staff and set to work.

It was slow going, but soon he had an adequate letter describing the staff and how he was able to walk to the park with it and that he was heading to London on Monday morning to start training. He asked her not to call him at the Dursleys (he didn’t want anything to get in the way of his escape to London) and told her that he’d figure out a way to talk with her once he was safely at his training residency.

After he summoned his money bag from his staff, he counted out (he was so glad that galleons were so obviously different in shape and size than the other wixen coins) and wrapped 10 galleons up in an old sock (begging her forgiveness) as it was the only thing he could find that he could secure inside the scroll. Maybe she’d be able to get him the pounds by Sunday night. He crossed his fingers and hoped this plan would work.

Hedwig wasn’t so thrilled about being sent out again so soon after arriving, especially weighted down with the bag of galleons. She made a show of dragging her leg noisily so that Harry had to ply her with more scraps from the kitchen. Harry was anxious to send her off before the Dursleys arrived home. She hooted doefully as she flew away and Harry was sad to lose her company so quickly.

It was now after 7 pm and Harry suddenly realized that he hadn’t finished the ironing yet.
Clown barf

Chapter Summary

Aunt Petunia is livid over the state of her napkin.

Knowing that he only had to make it through Saturday and Sunday with Dudley made Harry almost giddy until he remembered that he had to make it through Saturday and Sunday with Dudley. He tuned the radio to the BBC news station and listened to the stories while he worked his way through ironing the stacks of napkins. While he was listening, he felt like he was escaping being Harry for a while and it was nice.

Also, listening to stories about children in Rwanda who were forced to become soldiers and kill people when they were younger than he was kind of helped put everything in perspective. Some of them had lost their legs or arms in the war (and… he imagined… their eyesight, though the story didn’t say that specifically). It occurred to him that many of them must be orphans like him, too. All because some people thought that they were more human than others… it made him think of wixen and their pureblood nonsense. He was lost in thought when a wisp of smoke grazed his nose. He jerked the iron up and felt the napkin that he’d been ironing with his fingertips.

“Ow!” he shouted and stuck his burned fingertips in his mouth. He was pretty sure there were scorch marks and holes in the napkin, but he didn’t want to investigate further.

“Oh, no!” he started panicking. He was tempted to throw the burnt napkin in the bin, but knew that Aunt Petunia would count the napkins and he’d be hit with whatever was nearest. He turned off the radio because he couldn’t think while they kept talking.

He twirled around for a little bit - dashing from side to side as he tried to figure out what he could do to fix the burnt napkin until he got dizzy and disoriented and almost fell down, then he focused on breathing until he was calm.

“Okay. It’s a burnt napkin, not the end of the world,” he told himself sternly. He really didn’t want to show up at training with more bruises.

He put his hands on his hips as he calmed down and touched his pocket.

My staff!

He took out the collapsed staff and touched it to the napkin and said “Reparo napkin” hoping that it would work even though he didn’t know the magic word for napkin. He felt it. It was cool again, not burning hot and he couldn’t feel any holes or difference in the cloth from the other napkins. Maybe it worked! He put the napkin in the middle of the stack and kept ironing, but didn’t turn the radio back on, afraid that he’d drift away again.

Finally, at half past 9, he’d put away all the napkins, the ironing board, and iron away and climbed upstairs to his bed. The Dursleys weren’t home yet and he was glad.

He put on his pajamas and climbed into bed, leaving the window open just in case Hedwig came back in the middle of the night. It’s not outside the realm of possibility.
He knew something was up by the way Aunt Petunia was pounding up the staircase early the next morning. She flung open his bedroom door and stomped over to his bed where she was flapping something in his face and demanding to know, “What is this, boy? Just what do you think this is?”

Harry cowered down into his sheets, trying to get his face out of the range of the cloth that she was slapping him with.

“I don’t know,” Harry ventured. “Could you tell me… please?”

“Just what do you think you’re up to? You think this is a funny prank? Do you?” She shrieked continuing to flail him with the cloth. “All I want is for everything to be perfect when Dudders comes home from school… but you just have to go and ruin everything…”

“I’m sorry, Aunt Petunia,” Harry tried, hoping it would appease her.

“Oh, you’re sorry, are you? Well, so am I. I’m sorry we ever agreed to allow you and your strangeness to enter our home. We thought we could stomp it out of you, but no. Even now, damaged as you are, you’re still doing it!”

“What did I do, Aunt Petunia?” Harry asked again.

“My napkin! My beautiful napkin! Yesterday they were all perfect and white and today this one…” she seemed at a loss for words. “These were my grandmother’s napkins, pure Irish linen! Now this one… looks like clown barf!” Her anger was palpable.

“What?” said Harry disbelieving. When she hit him in the face with the napkin again, he grabbed at it, managing to yank it from his Aunt’s hand and ran his fingers over it from seam to seam. It felt like the ones he ironed last night - nothing different about it.

“I ironed them, Aunt Petunia, just like you said.” Okay, I burned one and tried to fix it. I guess that didn’t work. It’s not burned though, no holes!

“I know you did ma… something vile,” she finished, unable to utter the word.

He didn’t deny it and felt heat rising in his neck and cheeks.

She snatched the napkin from his hand and stood very still over his bed. Harry had the sense that she had her hand raised as if to slap him and he cringed, bracing himself for the blow. But she suddenly turned and stormed out of the room, slamming his door as she left.

Harry sat in his bed for a little bit, trying to calm his racing heart. He didn’t know if he should get up and go down right away and get breakfast started or wait a little until she cooled down.

He decided to go somewhere in between right away and in a little bit.

As he nervously pulled on his clothes, feeling the seams to make sure they weren’t inside out and tried to make his hair lie flat, he chanted to himself… Saturday, Sunday, Saturday, Sunday, Saturday, Sunday. . .

As he was picking up his glasses to put them on, he traced the cracked lens with his fingertips.

I guess it is good I didn’t try to repair this crack.

He put his collapsed staff in his pocket and started out of his room to head to the bathroom, but in the
hallway, he heard Dudley emerging from his room and decided to duck back into his room and wait. Last summer he would have made a mad dash to the bathroom to get in first and lock the door before Dudders who couldn’t move nearly as quickly as Harry… but then he always had to move quickly when he was exiting, too, to dodge the waiting blows from his cousin and he didn’t want to risk that today.

Once Dudley was safely in the bathroom, Harry went quietly down the stairs and used the bathroom downstairs. Since he had unloaded all his items from his school trunk into his staff, he also had his toothbrush and toothpaste.

This staff is so handy, especially with the extendable storage charm. Everyone should have one of these.

He laughed at himself for sounding like one of the infomercials Aunt Petunia watched.

He walked cautiously to the kitchen, listening for cues that Aunt Petunia had cooled down. It was awfully quiet.

That can’t be good.

He was tempted to go back upstairs and wait a little longer but then heard Dudley emerging from the bathroom and decided to try his luck in the kitchen. At the door, he held his staff in his pocket with his thumb and middle finger to get a description of the kitchen. He didn’t think his aunt or uncle would very much like the staff’s description of them: “a thin, dour woman to your right washing dishes at the sink and a ruddy, obese man to your left reading a paper at a table.” He stifled the laugh that threatened to escape his throat.

He went to the stove to start tackling the stack of eggs, sausages, and tomatoes that were undoubtedly on the docket - it would be a full English breakfast for sure with Dudders home from school now.

Aunt Petunia had laid everything out as she’d been doing since he’d awoken on Privet Drive earlier that month. He ran his fingers lightly over the waiting food and utensils, surprised that she’d taken care to do it this morning when she was so angry with him for ruining her napkin. Maybe she did it before she discovered the napkin.

He was getting better at knowing when the sausages would be done - he couldn’t time them using the clock (he’d never get away with casting the time charm in the company of Vernon and Petunia), but he’d sing a song in his head (R.E.M.’s Everybody Hurts mostly) as a way to gauge the time and then poke at them with the tongs and smell them until he was certain they were done. He hadn’t had a negative review yet, which was as much praise as he was ever going to get.

He’d loaded up the plate with sausages and had started with the eggs when Dudley finally made it downstairs. He tried to keep his posture as neutral as possible and didn’t turn when Dudley came into the kitchen. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon fawned over Dudley as Harry expected and Harry managed to escape their notice for a while longer.

Harry was surprised when Dudley turned on a telly in the kitchen. He didn’t know it was there. Must be a welcome-home Dudley present so he can watch his favorite shows while eating.

Its sickening noise littered the kitchen.

He’d finished up the scrambled eggs and was starting with the tomatoes and mushrooms when Aunt Petunia came near him to retrieve the eggs and he flinched, expecting her to hit him. She just huffed
loudly, obviously annoyed at his presence, but didn’t touch him.

Weird.

The baked beans were bubbling softly on the back burner and Harry turned off the heat, then carefully scooped them into the bowl that Aunt Petunia had set by the can for them. He touched the tongs to the frying tomatoes and mushrooms and tried to flip them, but it was really hard to know if he’d done it or just turned them to mush. He’d made some progress with the slippery vegetables during the week, but apparently not enough because Aunt Petunia took over, sending him on his way with a bony thrust of her hip.

He had no choice now, but to sit down at the table and try to eat. He gulped and then slipped his hand in his pocket to touch the staff for more seamless guidance to the table where his hand found the back of the chair and he pulled it out and sat down. He used the staff to get a sense of where the dishes were on the table and only reached for toast, eggs, and sausages as the rest would have required asking Uncle Vernon or Dudley to pass them to him.

“Watch what you’re doing, boy!” Uncle Vernon yelled at him.

Harry started, then recovering quickly, put the serving spoon back in the bowl of eggs and lightly touched the space between the bowl and his plate and discovered that some of the eggs had dropped off the spoon onto the tablecloth. He picked them up carefully and put them on his plate.

“Why’s Harry wearing sunglasses inside?” Dudley asked through a mouth of food.

“Hrumruph,” was all the response Dudley got from his father. Harry was surprised. It was a perfect segue into how Harry was now even more of a burden on the family, one of Uncle Vernon’s favorite topics.

Dudley’s attention was drawn back to his show and Harry was able to eat in relative peace.
Dudder's beefy foot

Chapter Summary

Harry works on evading his cousin.

After breakfast, Aunt Petunia cleared the dishes while Harry washed them. Uncle Vernon continued to read the paper while Dudley watched obnoxious Saturday morning shows on the telly in the kitchen.

Harry was a little grateful for it, even though he hated the noise because he was pretty sure it was the reason Dudley hadn’t started in on him yet. He was braced for the usual harassments he received from his cousin and more, now that he had a new vulnerability that his cousin was sure to exploit. But Dudley hadn’t seemed to notice yet.

Strange.

And Harry was still waiting for the other shoe to drop about the clown-barf napkin. Surely Aunt Petunia hadn’t let it go so easily. He was certain she was thinking of all sorts of jobs for him such as washing all the bins, cleaning the toilets, and clearing out the bathtub drain. Consequently, he wasn’t too shocked when that pretty much summed up the rest of his morning.

Man, I should have been more creative if I was somehow planting the list of work in her head, Harry scolded himself as he carried all the bins from each room out to the backyard to be emptied, hosed out, scrubbed, dried, and replaced. He was able to use the staff (in its collapsed form) to locate the bins and then navigate through the house while carrying them.

Dudley tried to trip Harry as he walked through the kitchen to the back door carrying the largest bin, but Harry heard his chair creak ominously and his staff described the obstacle in time for Harry to skirt around Dudley’s outstretched foot.

That’s more like it!

Harry was tempted to keep some of the soggy remnants of the bin washing to deposit somewhere for Dudley to sit on, but resisted the urge knowing from past experience how badly retaliation could backfire on him (even if he felt completely justified).

Harry’s reverie was interrupted by a lisping little voice near his feet. “Hello, Big Friend!”

Harry hadn’t heard him rustling in the grass and guessed it was because it was wet from the hose. A warm feeling spread across his chest as he crouched down to greet Nio hus cherio kisa.

“Little Friend! I’m so glad you found me! I’ve been thinking about you.”

“I’ve been missing you,” Nio hus cherio kisa said with a heaviness in his hisses that Harry hadn’t heard before.

“Would you like to perch on my neck while I work?” Harry offered. He knew he couldn’t spend too much time crouching beside the bins talking to the little snake before Aunt Petunia with her penchant for peering out windows would wonder what he was up to.
"Nio hus cherio kisa" crawled onto Harry’s offered hand and he gently guided the snake to his neck, loving the feel of his sleek scales against his skin. He tucked in his shirt again as a safety net.

“What are you doing with these big tubs?” Nio hus cherio kisa asked curiously.

“Cleaning them,” Harry explained.

“You have a lot of things to clean,” observed the snake.

Harry grumbled at this, though he actually preferred having something to do and an excuse to go outside that didn’t get him in trouble with the Dursleys. The sun, though it was too bright to tolerate with his eyes open, felt really good on his skin. He liked the breeze whispering through his hair and how it rustled the leaves. Against the backdrop of the hum of Little Whinging’s traffic and the train in the distance, bird songs trilled and squirrels chittered, all punctuated by barking dogs and shouting children. It was as much peace as Harry ever experienced at Number 4 Privet Drive.

Nio hus cherio kisa’s guidance was easier to follow than the staff’s which described everything in the vicinity even if it wasn’t relative to the task at hand. He liked his little snake friend, too, even when he wasn’t particularly interested in helping Harry do his work. Like today, Nio hus cherio kisa really just wanted to hang out on Harry’s neck and nap and that was fine. He didn’t really need the snake to be his eyes for this job, he could just enjoy the softly snoring form draped around his neck. Harry took as long as he possibly could cleaning the bins in the yard until Aunt Petunia yelled at him from the kitchen window to stop lollygagging around and get to work on unclogging the bathtub drain. Nio hus cherio kisa was startled awake by her shouting.

“I have to go inside, Nio hus cherio kisa,” Harry explained regretfully.

“Take me with you?” the little snake asked hopefully.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea… The Dursleys aren’t kind people. If they saw you they might try to hurt you,” Harry’s voice was tinged with fear.

“What are ‘the Dursleys’?” Nio hus cherio kisa asked.

“The other people in the house… my aunt, uncle, and cousin,” Harry explained.

“Okay. I’ll stay outside. But you come to visit me again soon, please. I wish you could come to my burrow and meet my family. They are kind and might even welcome a parselmouth like you.”

“I’d like to meet them,” Harry imagined a nest full of snakes all talking at him at once and the thought made him laugh. He was turning the bins upside down to empty out any droplets of water and set them on the back patio to dry in the sun. Nio hus cherio kisa gave suggestions for where to set them when needed.

“Nio hus cherio kisa, I have to tell you that I’m going away the day after tomorrow for a whole month to go to school,” Harry said gently.

“I thought you said you just returned here from school,” said the little snake confused, “after the Basilisk attacked you.”

“I did. This is another school where I can learn how to get around without sight,” explained Harry.


“Yeah, especially with your help. Thank you for helping me. I like being with you,” Harry said as he
put down *Nio hus cherio kisa* in the grass by the back patio. “You make being at the Dursleys almost bearable.”

“Thank you for keeping me warm and finding big worms for me,” *Nio hus cherio kisa* said gratefully.

Harry took off his trainers and padded to the back door. He decided he’d better take off his socks, too, as his feet were soaked and he didn’t want Aunt Petunia to add mopping the kitchen to his list of Saturday chores.

When he went inside he was startled by Aunt Petunia who was standing right in front of him as he passed through the doorway. He stopped just before he ran into her because his staff shouted in his ear, “Stop! Angry woman straight ahead!”

“What were you doing out there with all that hissing?” Aunt Petunia demanded.

“Um,” was all Harry could come up with on the spot. He didn’t think she’d like the truth: Talking to my snake friend in a rare snake language spoken by the last known heir of Salazar Slytherin, Lord Voldemort, and transferred to me accidentally when he tried to kill me after he murdered your sister and her husband?

“I was singing a song I learned at school,” Harry lied.

“Duck!” screamed his staff, and Harry dropped to the ground in a crouch as he felt something pass through the air over his head. He scrambled on the ground at Aunt Petunia’s feet, feeling in front of him to make his way around her with the hand that wasn’t full of shoes and wet socks. He struggled to his feet and then ran forward, lurched around the kitchen table, knocking into one of the chairs despite the staff yelling more warnings about obstacles in his path, and hopping on one foot when he stubbed his toe. Aunt Petunia was yelling at the top of her lungs, no real words, just frustrated, gurgling noises. He figured he was going too fast for the staff to guide him accurately, but it still helped him mostly make his way through the kitchen, to the hallway, and then up the stairs without getting banged up too badly. He hadn’t been holding it, it was just shouting at him as he hurled toward the obstacles.

Panting he went right into the bathroom to start working on the drain. He locked the door behind him, though.

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After finding the bent wire coat hanger that he kept under the bathroom sink for this job, Harry got to work pulling the slimy muck from the bathroom tub and depositing it into an old rag. He gagged at the smell. He’d have to brave Aunt Petunia again as he took it out to the garbage bin in the garage since all the bins were sitting on the back porch drying. He was tempted to save the muck and slip it into one of Aunt Petunia’s slippers. That thought kept him going for a while.

After the drain was done, he worked on scrubbing the toilet. He still had to clean the downstairs bathroom and his stomach was starting to rumble.

He was also keeping one ear out for Hedwig’s return, though it would be disastrous for her to return again in broad daylight with all the Dursleys at home. He knew that there was no way that Hermione would be able to get the galleons converted until she got to London and then she’d have to write a letter and send it to him. He couldn’t reasonably expect anything before night time. And he could see her getting all fussy about him traveling by himself to London, especially now.
... When I can’t see.

Hermione would be all worried about it. I shouldn’t have asked her. I should have sent it to Ron. He wouldn’t question it. He was regretting asking Hermione for help… but it’s not like he could take the letter back. It was probably already in her hands. He just had to wait and hope that she’d help him. She knows how much I’ll want to escape Privet Drive, even if it is for some stupid adaptation training. She’ll think that’s good for me, at least!

Harry was wishing he had thought to wash some of his laundry yesterday while the Dursleys were gone as he felt his wet socks that he had hung up to dry while he worked. He wondered if his Aunt Petunia remembered that he had the training on Monday. Should I ask them if they are going to take me to London? He went back and forth about it. She did throw the note in the bin. Though, you’d think she’d be happy to get rid of me for a month out of the summer! Who’d she get to mop the floors? Dudley! Ha! Harry nearly laughed out loud at the thought of Dudders trying to mop the kitchen.

Finished with the toilet, he listened by the bathroom door wondering if anyone was upstairs before he opened it slowly. He had the rag with the drain dregs to take out to the garage in one hand (with his shoes and wet socks) and with the other, he held his staff in his pocket to get a description of the hallway. It seemed clear.

He could hear a cricket match on the telly in the living room - that would be Uncle Vernon. He wondered what Aunt Petunia was doing. And Dudley.

He stepped out of the bathroom in the hallway and heard floorboards creaking at the threshold of Dudley’s room and realized that Dudley must be watching him.

Harry decided to pretend he hadn’t seen Dudley (Well, I haven’t!) and walked by his room to the stairs. It was a little awkward to walk while concealing his staff in his pocket, but holding it so that he could get the description of the area. Again his staff warned him of Dudley’s beefy foot trying to trip him. Harry skirted around it, ducked (he knew Dudley would try to grab him - how many times had his cousin tried this move?) and then made it down the stairs pretty quickly. Dudley came lumbering after him. In the dash down the stairs, Harry pulled the staff out of his pocket so that he could use both hands for balance as he made it down the stairs in his bare feet.

Wow, he sounds a lot bigger than he used to sound. More like Vernon than he did last summer. Slower like Vernon, too, and breathing hard.

Harry ducked into the bathroom on the first floor and locked the door. Dudley pounded in frustration on the thin wood of the door which rattled Harry’s head a bit as he was leaning against it. Resigned to being stuck in the bathroom for a while, Harry cleaned the toilet and unclogged the drain with the supplies that were kept under the sink.

Then he accio’d the anagnóstis and the letter from Hermione from his staff and settled down to read the list of homework Hermione had sent. He listened to the first chapter in his required summer reading from Professor Binns. He ate the apple he’d been saving (also accio’d from the staff - not bruised or anything ) and checked to see if his shoes and socks were dry yet.

Not yet.

He had made it through the morning at least.
Chapter Summary

Harry has to make it through Saturday and Sunday before he can leave the Dursleys.

Harry left the first floor bathroom when he decided that the telly in the kitchen had been on long enough to have sucked in Dudley and before (he hoped) the Dursleys had a need to use the bathroom that he was currently locked in. His shoes and socks were still not dry and he needed to throw away the gunk from the drains in the bin in the garage.

Walking around in bare feet felt good - he liked the feel of the carpet between his toes, the smooth (very clean) wood floors and now the cool concrete of the garage.

He had completed the Saturday chores that his Aunt had ordered him to do, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t come up with more if she saw that he was unoccupied.

He wanted to return to the garden to spend more time with Nio hus cherio kisa before he had to leave.

Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and, well, everyone would be on the Hogwarts Express right now, heading back to London. He could almost hear the train whistle in his head and feel the swaying of the cars as it zipped along the tracks. And the smell of the candy trolley as it made its way along the corridor. The apple he’d eaten in the bathroom seemed like a long time ago. He wished he had more food stockpiled in his staff.

Damn! I should have thought of that yesterday! He berated himself as his stomach rumbled in protest.

He used the staff to locate the bin and tossed out the gunk. Though he was tempted, he didn’t restore the staff to its normal size because he didn’t want Dudley to see him using it.

Though he’s probably not sticking his head out the curtains like Aunt Petunia. He’s probably still glued to the telly.

It would have been a lot easier to use the staff as a cane to find the doorstep where he sat down and put on his damp socks and shoes. His toes squished in his shoes uncomfortably and their damp odor kept wafting up to his nose.

He went out into the garden and tried to come up with some chore that he could do to stay outside… something that wouldn’t send Aunt Petunia through the roof.

Though that wouldn’t be so bad either…

He walked along the fence that was bordered with roses and lavender. He steered clear of the roses, though he liked their scent, he had had too many close encounters with their thorns to want to cozy up to them. He picked a lavender leaf (a tiny one) and crushed it between his fingers to breath in its pungent fragrance. It helped get the lingering wet shoe smell out of his nose.

He kneeled on the earth when he heard a rustling in the grass and walked on his hands and knees for
a bit. He found a spot to lay down, nose to nose with *Nio hus cherio kisa* who was as happy to see him as he was to see the little snake. As the snake twinned through his fingers and wipped his tongue against Harry’s nose, greeting him amicably, Harry felt as though he were seeing the snake, though with his other senses rather than just strictly his vision. He imagined that he was a greenish-brown color, but it occurred to him he didn’t actually know.

“What color are your scales, *Nio hus cherio kisa*?” Harry asked his friend.

“Oh, they are like the leaves when they are growing in the spring, and decaying in the fall so that I can hide among them easily.” *Nio hus cherio kisa* explained poetically, “they aren’t as brilliant as your eyes, which are like the ash leaves in the middle of summer when the sun shines through them.”

The snake had poked his head between Harry’s glasses and his face to look closely at his eyes which tickled and made Harry blink. He had opened them in the shade. He wished he could just stay outside with *Nio hus cherio kisa*.

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Dudley was so engrossed with his telly and eating mounds of potato chips (the constant crunching that accompanied the jingles from the adverts was wearing on Harry’s nerves as he and Aunt Petunia prepared dinner) that Dudley hadn’t seemed to notice that there was something different about Harry. And Harry wasn’t about to enlighten his cousin.

His staff was brilliant at alerting him to his cousin’s constant attempts to trip him or hit him and as long as he was able to keep his fingers on the staff in his pocket when he was nearing Dudley, he was able to avoid the assaults. It was exhausting and he kept chanting to himself: Saturday-Sunday, Saturday-Sunday. He had put off asking his Aunt about the trip to London until Sunday. No need to send her into spiral of hysteria a day early if it could be avoided. Harry was good at avoiding conflict. Well, as good as someone could be who was constantly being thrown under the train of conflict.

Harry had peeled and boiled potatoes, chopped more onions, and sauteed green beans in butter while Aunt Petunia managed the roast in the oven. He was pretty sure that Uncle Vernon had only left the living room twice to empty his bladder. Aunt Petunia had sent Harry in a few times with fresh pints of lager. Harry had walked very carefully and slowly trying not to spill or attract Uncle Vernon’s attention… he was pretty sure his Uncle didn’t even know he was in the room, even though he had grabbed the fresh pints from Harry’s hand. Harry had felt around on the end table by the sofa to find the empty glasses as quietly as he could manage. Each time, Harry started breathing again once he’d left the room.

Harry was so hungry by the time they sat down at the dinner table. Before the Basilisk, he’d been able to nibble on bits and pieces of dinner while he cooked it - a green bean here, a piece of potato there. But he didn’t want to risk it now - his staff didn’t tell him when people were looking at him or not, just where they were in the room.

He was still finding it challenging to scoop food from bowls onto his plate without spilling and only managed meager helpings that he then chased around his plate with his knife and fork.

Dudley asked again about Harry’s sunglasses, but no one answered him. And Harry sure wasn’t going to fill him in if he was too dense to figure it out on his own.

Uncle Vernon spent a good portion of the meal ranting about disabled people taking more than their fair share of the country’s resources while not contributing to society and not having to pay fare for public transportation and getting parking places right up front. Harry thought that was pretty rich
coming from a man who had spent the entire day in front of the telly while other people waited on him. The whole tirade seemed directed right at Harry, but still Dudley didn’t catch on. Harry made a mental note to ask at the train station if that was true.

*Maybe I don’t need to buy a ticket!*

Harry was relieved when finally the Dursleys had retired to the living room to watch their Saturday night telly leaving Harry to finish the dishes and sweeping. He was glad for the relative peace and quiet of the kitchen and even more glad when he was able to creep upstairs to his room. He listened at the door, hoping to hear Hedwig, but she hadn’t returned yet.

He was sitting looking out at the light of the moon when Dudley came up the stairs to use the bathroom (it sounded like he had lost a bid to use the downstairs bathroom with his dad).

“How are you sitting in the dark?” his cousin asked belligerently at the door.

Harry shrugged and his cousin went on to the bathroom. Harry got up and closed his door, then got in his pajamas. He hadn’t thought about turning on lights in rooms for nearly a month now.

*It’s been four weeks since the Chamber of Secrets and Tom Riddle and the Basilisk and Ginny almost dying and my eyes…*

He actually preferred it when the lights were off since his eyes were so sensitive to light.

He drifted off to sleep listening to the crickets and the frogs wondering where Hedwig was and if *Nio hus cherio kisa* was intertwined with his family in a burrow under the ground.

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Sunday morning dawned and Harry woke with the sun as the light filled his room. He laid in bed listening… had Hedwig arrived? He didn’t hear her tattletale scratching or little grunts and growls.

*Sunday, Sunday, Sunday! I just need to make it through the day! Tomorrow I can leave!*

He had someplace he could go that was away from the Dursleys. He just had to figure out how to get there. He really, really hoped that Hermione would come through for him.

*Please, please, please, Hermione. I really need this.*

He got up and dressed and put the rest of his belongings (a couple of T-shirts, jeans, socks, and pants) in his staff. In the bathroom, he worked on his hair (hopeless, really) and brushed his teeth. He thought about a shower, but decided he wasn’t that ripe - maybe he’d be able to take one in the evening while the Dursleys were watching telly after dinner.

*Sunday, Sunday, Sunday,* he chanted in his head.

Breakfast went pretty smoothly, all things considered. He and Aunt Petunia fixed another full English Breakfast for the Dursley boys who didn’t seem to even notice the amount of work entailed in the feast. Harry managed to eat a bit more than he’d been able to before because he made a sandwich with his egg and toast and no one said anything. He tucked a few scraps in his pocket for Hedwig when he was cleaning the plates.

Aunt Petunia had him whacking the area rugs from the kitchen, front door, back door, and bathrooms outside on the clothesline. It was a dusty job, but he liked being able to take his frustration out on the rugs… there was something satisfying about just hitting something until his arms ached.
Harry was really looking forward to a shower after he hauled all the bags of cut grass to the bin, sweat dripping from his forehead.

Harry and Nio hus cherio kisa sat on the garden wall in the back by the lilies (they hadn’t started blooming yet - but Harry felt the long stems that were forming buds) and enjoyed the humming of the garden.

“Tomorrow I’m leaving, Little Friend. I wish you could go with me, but I don’t know if I could find bugs for you to eat and I think you’d miss this garden.”

“I would miss my family and the garden, Big Friend,” agreed the little snake, “but I’m also going to really miss you.”

“I’ll be back at the end of July,” reassured Harry.

“What’s July?” asked the snake.

“I’ll be back after the sun rises…” Harry paused to count the days, “33 times.”

“That’s many suns,” said the snake sadly.

“Yes,” agreed Harry. He had never before been sad to leave Privet Drive.
At dinner that night, Harry worked up the nerve to ask Aunt Petunia about how he was going to get
to his training the next day. He had tried to ask quietly while it seemed that both Uncle Vernon and
Dudley were engrossed in an episode of the East Enders, though he realized as he tried to get her
attention, that she was also ensnared.

“Aunt Petunia?” he asked softly, his face turned in her direction, his expression as neutral as he was
able to manage.

She didn’t answer, but groaned in response to something happening on the telly.

“Aunt Petunia?” he asked again, reaching out with his hand - wanting to verify she was where he
thought she was.

“What?” her tone was suddenly sharp. He had her attention and withdrew his hand quickly.

“Tomorrow my Adaptation course starts in London, registration is at 9 am. It’s at 56 Charing Cross
Road. Are you and Uncle Vernon going to take me there?” he said it quickly before he lost the
nerve.

“What-? No. Of course not,” she was shocked, then adamant.

“Will you take me to the train station so that I can get there on my own, then?” he asked bravely,
though a tremble in his voice revealed his apprehension.

“How are you going to do that? You can’t even see. And we’re not paying for it,” she spat out.

“I’ll manage,” Harry brushed it aside, though a prickly sweat broke out under his arms. “The course
goes until my bir - er -July 31st,” he reminded her.

“What do you mean ‘he can’t see’?” Dudley cut in loudly.

“The useless boy went and got himself blinded at school!” Uncle Vernon interjected.

“What? But how?” Dudley stammered, and Harry felt Dudley leaning toward him and then felt the
air moving in front of his face. His cousin was waving his hand in front of his face.

*Nice,* thought Harry, *really nice.*

And then Dudley started laughing like it was the funniest thing on earth.

Angry and wanting to flee, Harry got up abruptly, caught his foot on the table leg and stumbled
away from the table which made Dudley laugh even harder and he heard Uncle Vernon joining in.
He was surprised that Aunt Petunia wasn’t laughing, too, but then again, she wasn’t shushing them
either. And she didn’t call him back, insisting that he do the dishes. She let him go.
He went up to his room and closed the door on their guffawing and sat heavily on his bed. 

*I hope Hedwig comes soon,* Harry pleaded with the cool night air that was making his curtains flutter. His eyes pricked with tears. *This sucks. I have to get out of here.*

He was tempted to just leave. Walk out of Number 4 Privet Drive and just walk to London. He had everything packed in his staff already except for Hedwig’s cage and some food. *I really need some food and water to take with me.* But a voice in his head (which sounded a lot like Hermione) counseled him to stay until at least early morning… to give Hermione a chance to respond. He really needed the muggle money and he had no idea where he could convert the few galleons he had left besides Gringotts and he guessed that they weren’t open now at any rate.

How did Madam Pomfrey summon that Knight Bus anyway?

After a bit, Harry heard the telly go on again in the living room and decided that he could probably take a shower without being harassed. He *accio’d* his pajamas and bag of toiletries from the staff storage compartment once he was in the bathroom and took as long of a shower as he dared.

Back in his room and feeling a little better, Harry pulled his *A History of Magic* book out of his staff and the *anagnóstis* and settled into read more of his summer homework. He figured it was the only way he was going to get his brain to stop running laps around all these obstacles… and maybe he’d be able to fall asleep eventually. Every little sound outside made him pause and listen while holding his breath, hopeful for Hedwig.

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Harry woke up to a strange stuttering sound with a crick in his neck and realized that his face was pressed into his *A History of Magic* book, the *anagnóstis* still clutched in his hand and pressed against one word which it was repeating in a continuous loop, “goblin, goblin, goblin.”

*I guess that explains my dreams,* he thought.

He found his staff on the table by his bed and *tempus’d* it to find out that it was 5:24 am. The sun hadn’t come up yet, it was still dark. He listened, hoping to hear signs of Hedwig, but her cage was still empty. He double-checked by going over to it and reaching his hand inside. It was clean and waiting for her, with fresh water and the food scraps he’d managed to save for her getting stale and hard.

He sat on his bed for a while, trying to decide what to do. After a while, he quietly got dressed. He put his history book in his staff. Next he put in Hedwig’s cage in the staff after he dumped the water out his window. It was a funny feeling to hold the big, metal cage up to the tiny window that opened in the staff and feel it be sucked into the compartment like it was made out of licorice whips. He decided to put his *anagnóstis* in his pocket in case he needed to read something while he was traveling and *accio’d* out his money bag to put a couple galleons, sickles and knuts in his pocket for easy access. He returned the rest of his money bag to the staff.

Harry closed his window - he didn’t want Hedwig to think he was there after he left and quietly made his way to his door in his stocking feet, carrying his shoes. He was using his staff at its full length, but not letting it tap the floor.

At his door, Harry listened to make sure that the Dursleys were still asleep. He seemed to be in luck and made his way down the stairs careful not to make any noise.

He thought about putting his trunk in his staff, but decided to leave it not wanting to have to mess
with getting the key back in the closet.

In the kitchen, he made himself a couple of sandwiches and put a few apples in the staff along with a bottle filled with water. He was tempted to leave a mess, but then remembered he’d probably have to come back at the end of July and cleaned up after himself. No reason to add fuel to the fire.

He left out the back door, figuring the Dursleys would be less likely to hear him leave. In the backyard, he whispered quietly for Nio hus cherio kisa, hopeful, but not expecting the snake to be up before the sun warmed the rocks in the garden. He waited for a bit while he accio’d his hoodie from his staff - he was shivering in the damp early morning air - and put on his trainers. When he didn’t get a response, he cast the navigant spell, asking his staff to guide him to the train station.

In the front, he paused again by the Agapanthus and whispered for Nio hus cherio kisa just in case he had a chance to say one last good-bye to his little friend before setting off on his journey.
Harry walks to the train station.

Harry had waited for a bit, crouched down with his face in the Agapanthus, hoping to hear the rustling sounds of *Nio hus cherio kisa* making his way toward him. With a sigh, he stood up and squared his shoulders.

*I can do this,* he told himself bracingly. *Sure, I don’t have any muggle money and…* he stopped himself from naming his other fears. *I can do this,* he repeated firmly.

He started down the path to the street and at the staff’s direction, turned left to walk in the street (there was no pedestrian walkway), and kept as close to the side of the road as he could by tapping the bordering stones on the curb. His footsteps on the gravel broke the quiet of the neighborhood and he imagined that people were starting to stir in their houses, making morning tea and getting the paper from their stoops. He was glad it was still pretty early and there wouldn’t be many people on the road at this hour. The sun was just starting to get bright and Harry closed his eyes behind his glasses.

Harry listened to the birds filling the morning with their song and wished he heard Hedwig’s low hoots among them.

*Hedwig will be able to find me, she always knows where I am… I wonder how she does that?*

He could hear the traffic on the busier road ahead of him and took in a shaky breath. He knew his staff would help him avoid the cars, but they moved a lot faster than Dudley or Aunt Petunia and he’d have to respond quickly to the warnings. *What if I jump in the wrong direction,* he cringed at the thought.

*The roundabout is coming up,* Harry thought as he turned left again, this time onto a walkway. His staff warned him of a low-hanging tree branch and he ducked his head to avoid it. The staff told him to turn right and that he was at a pedestrian crossing. He listened to the traffic in the roundabout trying to figure out if he could cross and heard a car stop near him. His staff told him to cross… so he thrust his staff out in front of him, swinging it from side to side and started across. He heard another car approaching on the other side and then stop suddenly. It made his heart race and he felt like he was on display, his face flushing with heat. He drew in a deep breath and kept walking until the staff let him know that there was a curb in front of him. He could feel the different textures of the street and the walkway under his feet and was glad when he was safely on the other side. The cars moved on and he followed the curved pathway that went along the side of the roundabout to another street with a pedestrian crossing. He knew that he’d be walking along one of the busiest streets in Little Whinging soon, and then he’d have to cross it to get to the train station.

The distance to the next intersection was short because of the roundabout, and again Harry listened to hear if the cars had stopped before stepping out. It was nerve-wracking and it reminded him of being trapped by Devil’s Snare in first year and having to trust Hermione that relaxing was the way to get through it. *Blind faith. This is what people mean by blind faith. Gah.*
He made it around the roundabout to the next pedestrian crossing - this one would take him to the street that led to the train station.

Harry was starting to regret not eating breakfast while he was stealing food in the kitchen - he had been too nervous at the time. *I’ll have time to eat one of my sandwiches once I get to the train station.*

Another pedestrian joined Harry at this crossing and as Harry was listening to the traffic trying to gauge if it was safe to cross, the person grabbed his arm and started pulling him across the street.

“Here, let me help you get across,” said a man’s voice as his fingers dug into his arm, right on one of his bruises. The staff told him that the man was reaching for him, but not urgently like it did when the swing was about to hit his head or when he was going to run into Aunt Petunia or Dudley was about to trip him.

“Hey! Ow! Stop! Don’t do that!” Harry yelled and planted his feet so that his torso was twisted and he was pulled forward, staggering to regain his balance.

“Geez! I was just trying to help!” the man grumbled and hurried off as if Harry was the one being rude.

“Next time ask!” Harry yelled after him, feeling righteous in his anger. His heart was hammering. He wasn’t entirely sure where he was now. Was he out in the intersection still? He started swinging his staff from side to side and it helped reorient him - he had been turned so that if he had started walking straight ahead he would have been walking right into the middle of the traffic circle. A car tooted its horn impatiently, startling in its proximity.

Great. I’m about to be killed by traffic and you’re worried about being late to work…. It’s probably Uncle Vernon! Who else would honk at a blind kid stranded in the middle of a roundabout?

Gulping in the air and swallowing his fear, he made it to the pedestrian crossing; the cars whizzed by impatiently.

Reorienting himself, he knew that he had to walk along this busy street for a while. There were more pedestrians headed toward the train station for their morning commute - the staff was feeding him a lot of information and it was hard to filter it all. He realized that he must have accidentally changed the settings on his staff when the man was trying to haul him across the street, so he tapped it twice with one finger.

*That’s better,* breathing a sigh of relief and continuing on, using the side of the walkway that bordered on a bit of grass as his guide for staying out of the way of the people rushing past him.

His staff clanged into a metal pole startling him and he knew he must be getting close to the train station, remembering a line of thick poles that lined the street at regular intervals. Also, he could hear the trains in the station more clearly - their whistles and the clanging, rattling tracks, the squealing of metal on metal.

His staff told him that the walkway was narrowing and that parked cars were along one side - their bumpers intruding on the walkway. A couple of people pushed by him - clearly in a hurry - as his staff struck a car on one side and an encroaching hedgerow on the other. It told him of low hanging branches, too, and he had to duck to miss them. *This isn’t much of a walkway.* He heard other pedestrians walking out in the parking lot, but didn’t want to venture out there. He made his way along the narrow pathway a little more slowly and he could hear some impatient people behind him muttering, their footsteps crunching on the gravel. There wasn’t much he could do to hurry up. Finally, he’d made it past the parked cars and his staff told him that he was at another intersection.

The people who were stuck behind him hurried past him as he stopped and listened before he
crossed. He was getting more nervous as he approached the train station and he tried to calm his nerves.

His staff told him he had arrived at the train station after crossing the street and walking a few paces straight ahead and he stood there for a moment before it dawned on him that he’d need to find the ticket window. He had a vague idea where it was, but the Dursleys didn’t take the train much and definitely didn’t take him with them hardly at all, so he hadn’t been here a lot even though it was pretty close to their house.

It felt like it was getting more and more busy at the train station as he stood there and he had to wait a bit before he felt like he could mutter, “Navigant ticket window.”

The staff had him turn left and walk a few yards and he noticed that there seemed to be a line of people by the small noises they were making. The staff was taking him to the front of the line, to the window. He stopped and muttered, “Navigant back of line of the ticket window,” and it had him turn around and guided him to the last person, where he stood hesitantly trying to gauge when the line was moving up without tapping the foot of the person in front of him with his staff (though he did a few times accidentally - muttering “sorry!” each time). Someone joined the line behind him and Harry soon figured out that they moved closer to him when the line was advancing and, awkward though it was, it did help him keep up with the moving line.

Finally, his cane came in contact with the brick wall of the station, where the ticket window was.

“Next,” said a voice that seemed to be muffled behind a window and directed downward.

Harry moved closer and reached out to find a ledge. He slid his fingers forward until they found the glass, and leaned in. He had been rehearsing in his head what he’d ask at the window.

“Excuse me, what time does the train to the Waterloo station arrive?” Harry asked, his voice cracking a bit, trying to be heard over the noise of the train station.

“The next one is in 7 minutes, they arrive every 13 minutes,” the person behind the glass answered mechanically and it sounded like they hadn’t looked up yet.

“Um, I’ve heard that people with… disabilities… can travel on the train for free?” His statement turned into a question and he felt his embarrassment rise in his neck.

“No, it’s one-third off the fare and you need to show your disabled persons railcard. . . .” It sounded like the person had looked up, “Eh - are your parents with you?”

“Oh, um. They are parking the car,” Harry lied, feeling his face get hotter.

“How old are you?”

“Um, I’m twelve. I’ll just wait for them. Thanks.” Harry moved away from the line, tapping along the side of the wall until he felt like he was relatively alone. Crap.

Harry wondered if there was a bench nearby where he could sit and think about what to do.

*Maybe I should have waited at the house for Hedwig?* he asked himself.

But he didn’t know if Hermione had sent Hedwig back with his money.

*Hedwig would have arrived by now.*
“Navigant bench,” he said quietly to his staff, and then amended, “Navigant empty seat on bench,” as it started directing him about ten yards to his right.

The staff told him where to reach to find the back of the bench with his hand and he sat down on the end seat. There was someone else sitting on the bench, but farther down - he could feel them rocking the bench with their movement (maybe they’re listening to a walkman?).

He heard a train enter the station and the garbled announcement over the loudspeaker. He leaned his staff close to his ear and muttered, “Tempus” to find out that it was 6:37 am. He knew it would take about an hour and a half to get to 56 Charing Cross Road from the conversation on the phone on Friday. I have some time to figure this out, but not much.
A friend in need

Chapter Summary

Things start to work out for Harry.

As he sat on the bench trying to figure out what to do …

Wait for Hedwig? Sneak onto the train with my invisibility cloak? Walk 50 kilometers to London? Fly on my broom? Try to find Hermione’s phone number? …

Harry realized how hungry he was.

Shoot! I can’t get things out of my staff out here in public.

He wondered if there was a public restroom at the train station. He stood up and quietly said, “Navigant men’s toilet” to his staff and it started directing him to one just to the left of the ticket window. He touched the staff to the door and it helped him find the handle and he went inside, muttering “Navigant empty stall.” A bit nauseated by the smell, he held his staff up and squeezed it twice rapidly for a description of the stall. He didn’t want to step in anything nasty. He learned that there was a hook on the back of the door and accio’d his school book bag out of his staff and hung it on the hook and emptied it into the staff, then accio’d the sandwiches, apples, and water, and his invisibility cloak (as quietly as he could, waiting until the other men using the restroom left) and put them in his book bag with his bag of galleons. He transferred his anagnóstis into a pocket in the bag, too, along with the note from Healer Smethwyck.

He used the restroom and washed his hands, then made his way back out to the platform. He couldn’t decide between using his invisibility cloak to sneak on the train or waiting for Hedwig. He ruled out flying on his broom as much as he ached to do it.

People would see me. I’d get in big trouble with the Ministry, maybe even expelled from Hogwarts.

He didn’t want to stand around in his invisibility cloak on the platform since it would be hard for him to stay out of people’s way and he wondered how he’d avoid getting sat upon if he snuck onto the train and found a place to sit. Also, it would be hard for him to know if he had a toe sticking out from under the cloak that was visible to everyone around him.

That could cause a scene!

Sighing, he found an empty spot on the bench again, collapsed his staff, put it in his pocket, and took out a sandwich to eat while he struggled internally with what to do. He was lost in thought when he heard running feet.

“Harry! We found you!”

“Hermione?” Harry started, his sandwich suspended in mid-air before him. “What are you doing here?”

She skidded to a stop in front of him and he braced himself, expecting her to hug him. But she didn’t. She sat down next to him and put her hand tentatively on his arm. It felt warm and comforting. He
lowered his sandwich to his lap and turned to face her.

“Harry, my dad and I came to take you to your training. Did Hedwig give you my note? No, she must not of, else you wouldn’t be here.” Hermione ran on, panting and out of breath. Harry heard other footsteps approach them that stopped in front of them and he turned his head toward them, “Your dad?”

“Hi, Harry.” Dr. Granger said in a voice that conveyed concern even in its friendliness.

Harry stood up, stuffing his sandwich back into the plastic bag and his book bag. He stuck out his hand, “Hi, Dr. Granger.” There was a moment when Harry stood there with his hand sticking out, and then Dr. Granger grasped it in a handshake and released it. Harry flushed, overcome with emotion.

Hermione stood up, too, still touching Harry’s arm. She was trembling, he noticed.

“You came to get me? To help me get to London?” he asked incredulously. “How did you find me?”

“Oh, Harry… your face is bruised. What happened? Are you okay?” Hermione talked over him.

“I just ran into a few doors, that’s all,” he said reassuringly, but winced as she squeezed his arm where he had another bruise.

“You look thin, too,” she said quietly.

“It’s been a rough month,” he admitted.

“Harry, where are your Aunt and Uncle?” Dr. Granger asked, “Hermione said that they wouldn’t help you get to London. Is that true?”

“They are at home. And yeah, they said no when I asked them,” Harry mumbled hating to have to confess this to an adult.

“Hmm. Well, that’s… ” He seemed to bite off his retort, “Did you already buy a ticket for the train?” asked Dr. Granger, while Hermione told him at the same time, “We just arrived on the train from Heathgate, we were headed to your house to pick you up.”

“I haven’t bought a ticket yet, I didn’t have any mug - pounds… Dr. Granger, don’t you have to go to work?” Harry asked wonderingly.

“He doesn’t go in until after lunch on Mondays, Harry - so he said he’d come with me this morning,” Hermione explained.

“That’s very kind of you, Dr. Granger. Thank you.” Harry was humbled and embarrassed that Hermione’s father - someone he’d only met once before very briefly - was more concerned about him than his own family. Tears pricked at his eyes, but he blinked them away.

“It’s no problem, Harry. I’m happy to do it. Hermione’s been very worried about you. Hermione, I’ll go get our tickets,” Dr. Granger said.

As he walked away, Harry leaned toward Hermione and asked, “How early did you have to get up to get here? It’s only 6:30 in the morning, Hermione! Did you convert my galleons - did you give the pounds to your dad so he could buy the tickets? Isn’t this a lot of money for you to come all the way here to get me and take me to London?”
“Hush, Harry. It’s okay. I’ve got your money here,” she said as she pressed the bills into his hand. Harry tried to push it back into her hand, but she wouldn’t let him. “Dad says he wants to pay for it. Don’t worry, please. It’s really okay.”

“That’s really too much, Hermione.”

“It’s okay, Harry. You don’t have to do everything on your own.” Hermione said, a seriousness in her voice usually reserved for lectures.

“What do you think happened to Hedwig?” Harry asked Hermione, suddenly worried about his owl.

“I don’t know, Harry. It is a long flight to Hogwarts, maybe she’s still making her way back?”

“I guess. Do you think she’ll be able to find me in London?” He was worried.

_How do you track a lost owl?_

“She’s really smart, Harry. I think she’ll be able to find you.”

Hermione pulled on Harry’s arm, guiding him back to the bench to sit down. “Let’s sit down. You look tired, Harry.” Concern laced her voice.

“I’m okay, Hermione,” he said, more confidently than he felt.

“So, how were you going to get to London if you didn’t have money to get a train ticket?” she asked.

“I was trying to figure that out. I just had to get out of the house. I couldn’t stand to be there any longer,” Harry confessed. “I was thinking about walking or trying to sneak on the train with my invisibility cloak. I’m really glad you came, Hermione. Thank you.”

“How did you get here?” Hermione asked.

“Didn’t I tell you about the staff St. Mungo’s gave me? It’s pretty brilliant,” Harry lit up, taking it out of his pocket to show her, “it has that _Navigant_ spell you wrote to me about and an extendable charm for storage! I guess it looks like a white cane to muggles. When I use it to find my way, it speaks through this little apparatus on my ear” he touched it, “guiding me around obstacles. It even warns me if someone - er- something is about to hit me,” he corrected quickly.

“And the Ministry doesn’t send you letters for using it outside of school?” Hermione asked skeptically.

“No, the healer at St. Mungo's said that the Ministry’s been alerted to my… um… need to use it. I think that if I used my wand it would be different, but this has a lot of built-in charms. Like, it just starts telling me what is around me when I’m using it to find my way.”

Dr. Granger came back over, “Here you go, Hermione, Harry.” Harry held out his hand and Dr. Granger placed the ticket in it after a second.

“Thank you, Dr. Granger,” and he held out the folded bills that Hermione gave him to Dr. Granger.

“No, Harry. This is my treat. I think you’ll need those pounds while you’re in London this summer.”

“Thank you, sir. It really means a lot to me… thank you,” he said as his voice caught.

Dr. Granger grasped his shoulder in a comforting way and released him. Harry put the money in his
pocket.

“Okay, kids, we better go to the platform, the next train is due soon,” Dr. Granger advised.

Harry felt a wave of relief. He was getting away from the Dursleys and he didn’t have to figure it out all on his own. He squeezed Hermione’s hand as she led him to the platform behind her dad.
Harry and Hermione stood at the platform waiting for the train to London with Dr. Granger. Harry had shaken out his staff to restore it to its normal size so he could show Hermione how he used it get around.

“That’s really impressive, Harry,” Hermione commented when he walked around a rubbish bin to demonstrate how useful it was.

“Here, you want to try?” he held it out to her.

“Oh, I don’t know, Harry,” she said hesitantly, but she took it from his hand and held still while he tried to put the *aftί* on her ear. After a bit of awkward fumbling that involved getting his hands tangled in her hair, she smoothed it back and guided his hand to her ear so that he could put it on. He heard her walking around, tapping the ground. “It’s not saying anything, Harry,” she said.

“You’ve extended your index finger down the length, right? Are you swinging it from left to right in an arc in front of your body like I showed you?” he asked, “and stepping with your opposite foot?”

“Oh, okay, now it’s doing it. That’s cool!”

She walked around with it a bit more. Hermione came up next to Harry and handed it back to him. She touched the back of his hand with it, so that he knew and then grasped his other hand and turned it palm up to place the *aftί* in it. Harry put it back on his ear.

“You really can’t see the *aftί* once it is in place, Harry,” Hermione remarked.

“Harry, I’ve been thinking,” said Dr. Granger thoughtfully, “maybe before we catch the train, we should go talk to your Aunt and Uncle.”

“Oh, I don’t think that would be a good idea, Dr. Granger.”

“Why not?” asked Dr. Granger.

“Well, they are really busy right now. That’s why they couldn’t take me,” Harry lied again. He’d had parents of friends from primary who’d done similar things… and it had not gone well for Harry. Never had it improved his lot… it had only made things worse.

The train came into the station and Harry could tell that Dr. Granger was torn.

“Really, it’s okay. They want me to be independent,” said Harry, taking the story further.

“I think this is a bit much, sending a newly blinded child on the train to London to find his adaptation training on his own,” Dr. Granger was hedging.

“Well, they know I have this staff,” he held up his staff, “it makes it easier for me, right?” Harry said
convincingly.

“Well, okay, but I’m going to give them a call when I get home,” Dr. Granger conceded as they boarded the train. Harry held onto Hermione’s shoulder and held his staff in his left hand, parallel to his body as they went up the stairs into the car.

Harry was tempted to tell him not to, but decided to let it go. Maybe he’ll forget.

“Harry, don’t you have more luggage?” Dr. Granger inquired when the got on and found their seats, “I understand from Hermione that this course you’re taking will last a month?”

“I’ve got it all with me, Dr. Granger. My staff holds a lot,” he said leaning in close so that he didn’t have to say it too loudly. He collapsed it and put it in his pocket.

“That is truly amazing,” confessed Dr. Granger.

The train started to pull out of the station and Harry sat back in his seat feeling a bit tired and a little content. It felt really good to be sitting next to Hermione and her dad.

He had a niggling worry for Hedwig. I hope she's okay!

“Harry, how’d you crack your glasses?” Hermione asked.

“When I ran into a door,” Harry said sheepishly.

“Maybe when we’re at the training center, I can fix them for you,” Hermione offered.

“That’d be nice,” said Harry. “I tried to repair a napkin of my Aunt’s that I burned - I guess it was my great-grandmothers - when I was ironing, but she said that it turned all sorts of different colors. It fixed the holes and it felt whole to me. I used the reparo charm with my staff. So I’ve been nervous about trying the charm with other things, like my glasses,” explained Harry.

“That’s weird that it turned it different colors. Why do you think it did that?” Hermione asked.

“Well, I didn’t know the word for napkin, so I just said ‘reparo napkin,’ I think that’s why it happened,” Harry clarified. “When you fixed my glasses, you said, ‘occulus reparo,’ remember?”

“I guess that could be it.” agreed Hermione.

“Harry, Hermione, I’m going to use the facilities, I’ll be back in a little bit.” Dr. Granger said as he got up.

“Harry - you can’t tell my dad about the Basilisk, okay? I didn’t tell him about any of that stuff or even that I was petrified,” Hermione explained in a rush.

“Oh, okay. What did you tell him happened to me, then?” Harry asked.

“Well, I told my parents that you were injured by an exploding cauldron when you were trying to protect Ginny from a bully,” Hermione explained nervously. “I wrote about this in my letter, but I guess you didn’t get it,” she went on.

“Bully is a bit of an understatement,” Harry chuckled.

“They’ll never let me return to Hogwarts if they knew anything about a centuries-old monster lurking in the bowels of the castle or if they knew how close I got to being killed by it,” Hermione went on.
Harry let out a sigh. With everything that had happened since he had forgotten about that. Hermione was almost killed by the Basilisk, too. He felt a little twinge of guilt for befriending Nio hus cherio kisa, and then he mentally kicked himself. Nio hus cherio kisa is nothing like the Basilisk. And maybe the Basilisk wouldn’t have been so bad if it hadn’t been controlled by Tom Riddle.

Harry was feeling like he was being lulled to sleep by the motion of the train. It was weird to travel on a train and not see the landscape rushing by.

Dr. Granger returned and it sounded like he’d brought a newspaper with him.

Harry asked Hermione about the last month of school that he missed and she started recounting all the lessons that he missed and pretty soon he was having a harder and harder time paying attention. He felt like he was weaving in and out of consciousness until he gave in completely and laid his head on her shoulder.

Harry sat up slowly and wiped a string of drool suspended from his lip with the back of his hand.

“Oh, sorry, Hermione. I guess I fell asleep,” he apologized.

“It’s okay, Harry. You looked tired. I bet you needed to sleep,” she was very understanding. He touched her shoulder where his head had been resting, and found a corresponding spot of wetness.

“Oh, sorry. I drooled on you,” he was embarrassed.

“Harry, it’s okay,” Hermione insisted, though he imagined that she was a bit grossed out by it. He could only go by her voice.

“We’re getting close to the Waterloo station. I think we get off there and then walk to the Waterloo East station to catch the underground to Charing Cross road,” she explained.

Harry held onto his staff and whispered, “Tempus,” to find out the time. The lyrical voice of the staff said, “8:13 am.”

“What time is it?” Hermione asked. Harry told her.

“That’s really handy - your aftí means you can use magic while you’re around muggles,” Hermione said quietly.

“Yeah, it’s nice. What are you going to do after you drop me off at the Adaptation training,” Harry asked.

“Dad said he’d take me to the British Museum afterward,” Hermione said excitedly.

“Oh, I bet you’ll love that,” said Harry appreciatively, glad that he didn’t have to go to some boring museum, but knowing it was exactly what Hermione would love.

“Harry, before I forget, I want to give you my phone number. Is there something I can write it on for you, that you could read it with your anagnóstis? ” she asked, sounding like a secretary.

“Oh, I have the note from the doctor you could write it on there,” Harry said, pulling it out of his book bag. “Do you have a pencil or pen?” He asked her.
“Yes,” and she took the parchment from his hand and he could hear her writing on it. She handed it back to him.

“I wrote my number on the back and also Ron’s number,” she explained.

“Thanks. That’s great,” Harry felt better knowing that he could call his friends, given access to a muggle phone. “I don’t know if they will have muggle phones at the training,” admitted Harry, “but I should be able to send letters with Hedwig, too, once she comes back.”

He couldn’t hide the worry in his voice.

“She’ll find you, Harry,” Hermione consoled.

“I hope so,” he said.

“I don’t know what this training will be like, but maybe I can come visit you on the weekend or something,” Harry offered.

“Oh, that would be great, Harry!” Hermione replied enthusiastically.

“Yes, Harry, you’d be welcome any time,” Dr. Granger agreed, “We are going to France for holiday mid-July and into August, though.”

“Oh, wow. What part of France?” Harry asked.

“Paris. Emma (Hermione’s mother) has planned it all,” Dr. Granger sighed.

“I’ll write you lots, Harry,” Hermione said hurriedly, “and tell you all about it. They have some really amazing museums and I’m hoping to do some research into some of the magical sites in Paris. I’ve only read about them, it’ll be really interesting to visit them. And of course the food is divine,” she sounded like she was imagining tasting some delicacy.

Harry felt a little glum. He was glad to escape the Dursleys for a bit - anything had to be better than dodging Dudley, but when he compared it to Hermione’s adventures, it felt bleak. He shook his head trying to dislodge the self-pity.

Even with the sting of envy, there was something comforting about Dr. Granger’s presence that made Harry a bit wistful that their journey was coming to an end. He wasn’t sure what it was. They hadn’t really talked much, beyond his desire to look into the Dursley’s neglect. Maybe that was it. Or maybe it was something about the way he sounded and smelled - his voice was comforting and strong and he had a clean, but woody smell about him... like a strong tree that you could lean against and feel safe. Harry realized that he’d never felt that way about Uncle Vernon. He had only known fear and revulsion around him. Hermione’s really lucky, he thought.

They were approaching the station (according to the announcements over the train and Hermione who was giving him a blow-by-blow description of pulling into the station). Harry shook out his staff again and took Hermione’s arm after looping his bookbag diagonally across his body.
Harry, Hermione, and Dr. Granger take the tube.

Harry was really glad to have Hermione’s arm to hold onto as they made their way through a crush of people exiting the train at Waterloo station. He realized that Hermione must be holding on to her dad, too, by the way she was walking. He held his staff in front of him and followed a step behind Hermione, but still, he felt buffeted by the waves of people that were moving by them. I would have been so lost in this sea of people if I had come by myself, he realized as he held on tight to Hermione’s arm, afraid to lose her.

Dr. Granger was telling them which way they were headed, but Harry couldn’t really make sense of it. His staff wasn’t describing the scene, either, and that was okay because it would have been too much. He was feeling like it was too much just listening to it, feeling it, and smelling it. He was amazed at all the aromas and odors that were assaulting his nostrils… from sweaty people to perfumes to colognes to a fragrant pastry to exhaust to sewer to wet dog… there was a lot to smell in the underground. There was also haunting music. A busker was playing a violin and it sounded otherworldly echoing through the underground chambers mixed in with all the voices and the mechanical sounds of the trains as their metal wheels ground against metal rails. It was a lot to take in.

The pastry smell reminded Harry of how hungry and thirsty he was. I should have had some of my water while I was on the train. I’ll have to wait until we’re at 56 Charing Cross Road, though maybe once we’re on the underground I can have some, he consoled himself.

“Harry, we’re about to get on an escalator,” Hermione warned as she stepped up and he felt the ground moving under his feet.

“Thanks, Hermione! You know, you’re pretty good at this…” he said appreciatively as he found his footing on the moving steps. He imagined that Ron would not be nearly as good at warning him. Of course, Ron would never know what to do on an escalator anyway, Harry smiled to himself imagining Ron navigating the tube. Hermione squeezed his hand in response.

She warned him as they neared the top, too, though the way the escalator started to level out was also helpful. He bumped into Hermione stepping off - her momentum stopped while his was still moving forward.

Now they were moving through an echoey space that reminded Harry of a mall. There were other smells and sounds here… more food smells… breakfast foods and coffee and something spicy like curry… and music was issuing from different areas like it was being piped into a bunch of small shops. People were moving differently, too. They were moving against each other more than as a tide in concert with each other. Harry was catching snatches of conversations, too, and picked up on languages other than English being spoken.

Dr. Granger slowed and said something that Harry couldn’t make out and suddenly, they turned sharply and were headed down a corridor, leaving the echoey space behind them.
Hermione warned Harry that they were getting on another escalator, this time down and he stumbled behind her, lurching as the ground moved under his feet again. It was very discombobulating and he was looking forward to returning to the surface of the earth and not having to deal with the press of humanity all around him. Again, he was very thankful that he hadn’t had to try to navigate this on his own. He’d probably still be stuck in the Waterloo station with no clue for how to get out - if I had ever figured out how to get on the train in the first place.

There were even more people waiting for the underground. Harry pressed himself against Hermione. He had never been in a crowd like this before.


“It’s okay, Harry. I’ve got you,” Hermione said in his ear. He realized that he was holding her with both hands, his staff pressed against her arm, trapped by his hand.

“Sorry. There’s a lot of people here. It’s hard…” he said trying to steady his breath and letting go with one hand.

Dr. Granger had a hold of his shoulder, too, he realized.

“We’ve got you, Harry. Don’t worry,” Dr. Granger reassured him, “Okay - here’s our line. We won’t lose you, Harry. Keep holding on to Hermione. We’ve just got three stops and then we’re there, the Leicester Square Station, okay? It’s packed, so we’ll just stand together.”

“Okay, thank you,” Harry didn’t know when he’d been more thankful.

They shuffled forward with the surging crowd onto the tube. Harry clung to Hermione, who was holding on to her father, who seemed to be holding onto something more stationary. They swayed with the train as it sped through the tunnels and three stops later they were disembarking. Harry felt like he was coming up for air. They moved with the crowd up to the surface of the street and then he felt like he could actually breathe.

Dr. Granger kept walking. He seemed to know where he was going and Harry was happy to just follow. Hermione seemed to feel the same way.

“Oh!…” And for a second Harry thought Hermione was going to run off to the library, but then she said, “Harry, why don’t you try to find the entrance with your staff?”

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” Harry said as he stepped forward and started walking toward the door. His staff was guiding him as it normally did, with descriptions and distances using steps and the face of the clock for angles and then it stopped. Harry stopped, too. “You have reached the entrance of
“I think I found it Hermione, Dr. Granger!” Harry called to them. They stepped up beside him and Hermione put her hand on Harry’s arm. He hoped Dr. Granger was holding onto Hermione. He said, “Yes, we wish to enter,” and stepped forward.
Harry, Hermione, and Dr. Granger stepped forward and Hermione gasped and Dr. Granger muttered a quiet, “oh.” Harry could tell from the immediate quiet and gentle echoes that they were in a large open space. There was a scent of potions in the air and the temperature was cooler than it had been on the noisy, exhaust-filled street; it was less muggy, too.

Harry turned to Hermione, “What does it look like, Hermione?” he whispered, but his voice seemed to carry in this echoey chamber.

“It’s very beautiful, Harry,” she paused catching her breath, “it is open and filled with a soft light that reminds me of being underwater and looking up at the sun through the water, it is shimmery and green and blue and yellow all at once. It’s really calming.”

“Oh, it feels calming to me, too,” he replied, and some of his trepidation about this training dissipated.

“Where do you think we need to go?” Harry asked, breaking a bit of the spell they seemed to be under.

“Oh, yes. It looks like there is a desk over there and someone is sitting behind it.”

Harry felt Hermione’s arm move as if she were pointing. He stepped around her to switch places with her, grasping her arm when she had been holding onto his, and moved his staff to his left hand.

“Will you take me there, please?” Harry asked.


Their footsteps echoed around them as they walked over to the desk; Dr. Granger’s followed a little behind them. Harry was appreciative that Dr. Granger, who had guided them so thoughtfully through the train and underground journey, was now hanging back a bit. He probably feels more comfortable in the muggle world.

When Harry’s staff, which he had been holding a little in front of him as he walked with Hermione, touched the base of the desk, it informed him, “You have reached the reception desk for the Perenelle Flamel Adaptation Center.”

Harry let go of Hermione’s arm and stepped forward to find the ledge of the reception desk with his hand. He was intrigued to find that there was a texture of raised dots on the surface of the desk and momentarily distracted, he ran his fingers over it. Braille. This is braille.
“Welcome to the Perenelle Flamel Adaptation Center. I’m Godric Burbage. How may I help you?”
The voice greeting them was low and clear - and sincerely welcoming.

“Hi, I’m Harry Potter. I was told to come here for the Adaptation Training that starts today at 9 am.”

As Harry was speaking, he heard the footsteps of people entering through the same entry point they had just come through - for a brief moment the sounds of Charing Cross Road echoed through the space.

“Oh, yes. We’re expecting you. I will let Healer Jordan know that you’ve arrived. If you could please take a seat - there are benches directly behind you and about 7 yards from here. You have companions with you?”

“Um, yes. My friend Hermione Granger and her father, Dr. Granger, helped me get here today.”

“They are welcome to join you on the tour of the center that will start at 9:30 am.”

“Oh!” said both Hermione and her father, sounding surprised.

“Thank you,” said Harry and he turned around to find the waiting area.

“Would you like to go on the tour, Hermione and Dr. Granger?” asked Harry as they walked to the benches, “I know you want to get to the British Museum, so no worries if you want to head out. I’ll be fine,” Harry assured them.

“What do you think, Hermione?” Dr. Granger deferred to his daughter as they sat on the benches. Hermione guided Harry to the bench and he tapped his staff on the ground three times to collapse it and put it in his pocket.

“Dad, is it okay if we go on the tour. We can do the Museum on another day, and maybe we could come visit Harry, too.” Hermione’s voice was directed away from Harry, toward her father. Then she turned to him, “Harry, we can come visit you and maybe you can come to the museum with us!” She was getting excited.

Harry hated to dampen her enthusiasm, but went ahead and voiced his concerns, “Hermione, I’m really glad you want to go on the tour! And I definitely want to see you this summer, but I don’t know about a museum… I think that it might be really dull for me to go to a museum…”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that, Harry. Yeah, I imagine it would be really visual.”

“There are tons of things to do in London, right? I’m sure we can think of something like go see a band or something,” Harry said.

“I’ve always wanted to go to the British Library!” Hermione exclaimed.

“I’m surprised you haven’t been already, actually,” Harry replied.

“Me, too,” agreed Dr. Granger, chuckling.

“Well, it’s definitely on my list,” Hermione said.

A door opened not far from them and someone walked toward them with sharp short steps that put Harry in mind of an athlete.

“Harry Potter?” A warm woman’s voice called out gently.
“That’s me,” Harry said standing up and shaking his staff to extend it.

“Hi, I’m Healer Jordan. I’m here to welcome you to the center and get you registered.”

As she walked forward, Harry extended his hand and she grasped it, shaking it. It felt small, warm, and strong.  

_I was right, she is an athlete_, Harry noted.

“Hi and thank you,” Harry said as he released her hand. He felt Hermione and her father stand up behind him.

“And are you Harry’s uncle, Vernon Dursley?” asked Healer Jordan, her voice directed away from Harry and toward Dr. Granger.

“No, Healer. I’m Dr. Granger, Hermione is my daughter and she is a friend of Harry’s and we brought Harry today as his Aunt and Uncle weren’t able to,” explained Dr. Granger. Harry could hear the consternation in his voice.

“Oh, I see,” said Healer Jordan, “Well, it looks like they did sign the consent forms we sent earlier, so all is in order.”

It sounded like she was flipping through pages on a clipboard.

Harry swallowed his surprise. _When did they get consent forms and why didn’t they say anything about them? I wonder if they were in the letter from Dumbledore?_

“Harry, will you take my arm? I’ll lead you to the registration area,” Healer Jordan said as she came alongside him and touched the back of his right hand with hers. He grasped her upper arm and followed her as she led him away.

“Dr. Granger and Hermione, you may wait here until it is time for the tour,” Healer Jordan said over her shoulder.

“Harry, we’re going through a door and then we’ll turn left to walk down a corridor where we’ll turn left again into the center,” she explained as she opened the door.

The aroma of potions was definitely stronger on the other side of the door, Harry noticed. It put him more in mind of the Hospital wing at Hogwarts than of St. Mungo's, of which he was glad.

The light in this area was also gentle like the light in the reception area - it didn’t hurt his eyes. Harry wished he could see the colors that Hermione described… they sounded otherworldly. He wondered if that’s what it would look like from beneath the lake at Hogwarts.

From the sound of it, he was pretty sure they were in a corridor, though a large one.

“This space sounds big,” Harry observed.

“It is rather large,” answered Healer Jordan, “we share the space with other organizations with similar missions.” Their footsteps were echoing through the hallway. Harry could hear other people walking farther along the corridor as well.

“Okay, we are going to turn left here and go through a door that opens to the right and into the center, and then we’ll be in our Center,” explained Healer Jordan.

“Okay, Harry, I’m going to ask you to sit here,” Healer Jordan took Harry’s hand and placed it on
the arm of a chair, “while we get you registered.”

He collapsed his staff and put it in his pocket before sitting down in the stuffed chair. It was a very soft chair and he leaned forward to avoid being sucked into the cushions. It sounded like Healer Jordan had walked around a desk and settled into a chair facing him. Harry looked up expectantly.

“Okay, we’re just going to get you checked-in. We have most of the information we need from Madam Pomfrey at Hogwarts and Healer Smethwyck at St. Mungo’s, but we’re missing some information from your guardians. It’s too bad they weren’t able to make it today, but I’m hoping, um, I think…” she paused, rustling through some papers, “that you can provide some of the missing information,” she finished, her voice no longer directed down, but now toward him.

“Yes, if I know it,” agreed Harry.

“We need your medical records from your childhood from your muggle doctors and any hospitals you might have visited,” Healer Jordan continued, “just the names are enough and then we can contact them,” Harry imagined a muggle doctor’s office with a bunch of owls perched on desks and parchments scattering the surfaces and smiled.

“Oh, well that’s easy. I’ve never been to a muggle doctor or hospital,” Harry said, “I mean, for me. I’ve been inside the buildings, of course, but that was for when my cousin was sick and I went along. . .” and it dawned on Harry that this was probably odd. Why did the Dursleys never take me to a doctor? Dudley went every year for a checkup just to see if he was growing and everything. At the time, Harry had been glad. Dudley always got shots at those visits and Harry was glad to escape that particular bit of torture.

“I mean, I had check-ups at school and that’s how I got my glasses,” Harry said, pushing his glasses higher on his nose.

His shoulders slumped as he let out a breath. He straightened up and tried to say brightly, “But I never had to go, I didn’t get sick much and when I got sick, I always got better a lot faster than Dudley, so that’s probably why they didn’t take me…”

His heart was racing. If Dr. Granger and Healer Jordan started pestering the Dursleys about him, he was going to have a very rough time when he went back to them.

“Oh, well, yes, I suppose you’re right, Harry. Thank you, that’s fine,” she said, but from her tone, he didn’t think it was.

“So, all that’s left now is for me to tell you what to expect from your training… your Aunt and Uncle shared the literature we sent to them with you?”

This last bit caught Harry off guard.

“Uh, um. Well, no,” Harry confessed. “My aunt and uncle are muggles… so they don’t really understand this stuff…”

“I see,” said Healer Jordan, a quill scratched on parchment.

Harry sat quietly wondering when the Dursleys received the forms and literature from the center and how he’d missed it completely. If it had arrived by owl, there would have been an uproar! Hedwig!

“Say, has my owl arrived here? She’s a big snowy white owl. She should have arrived at my home before I left, but she didn’t. Is she here?” Harry interrupted the quiet with his worry.
“Oh, I don’t know, Harry. We can ask Godric if any new owls have arrived at the owlery when we see him on the tour,” Healer Jordan seemed distracted.

“I’ll also see that we get you a copy of the literature about the center and the training. In the meantime, I’ll give you a brief overview,” she went on hurriedly.

“The Perenelle Flamel Adaptation Center is a charitable foundation that was started to serve those injured in the war and to assist gravely injured wixen as they learned to adapt and acquire new skills so that they could return to the lives they wanted to lead,” Healer Jordan took a breath.

“We’ve found that the four-week residency program works really well for those who have recently sustained a life-changing injury such as yours. One of the benefits that people who have gone through the course cite most often is the confidence gained by learning how to live independently at the same time that they are bolstered up by a strong community of people who are going through similar challenges.”

She drew another deep breath and went on, “I can tell you more about that, but it is nearly time for the tour and I want to tell you a bit about the weeks ahead. After the tour, we’ll get you settled in your room and you’ll meet your roommates. We’ll eat lunch in the dining hall, and then in the afternoon, we’ll get to know each other and you’ll meet some of the mentors who will be working with you during training. A typical day will include one-on-one work with mentors to address the specific needs of individuals as well as group lessons that address more general concerns. You’ll spend a good portion of your afternoons learning to read and write braille.”

With a bit of discomfort, Harry remembered the leaflet about braille that he’d fished out of the bin that he hadn’t read yet.

“Okay, that was pretty brief and I’m sure that you have lots of questions, but we’ve run out of time and we need to return to reception to go on the tour. I think the tour will answer a lot of your questions and there will be time afterward to ask more.” Healer Jordan said this while coming around the desk. Harry stood up and she touched the back of his right hand with her left hand and he followed the curve of her arm up to just above her elbow where he grasped it gently.

He was looking forward to being with Hermione and Dr. Granger again, even if briefly. He was really glad to be away from the Dursleys, but he couldn’t deny that he was nervous about a month with people he didn’t know in an unfamiliar environment. And he wasn’t sure he was up to learning how to read those raised dots. He took a deep breath and walked a step behind Healer Jordan as she led him from the room.

Chapter End Notes

A thoughtful comment from a reader (thanks, Ronald8472) made me realize that the voice-in-the-head magic might be a bit too much, so I went back to chapter 20 and modified it so that there is a charmed bit of metal (afti) that Harry wears on his ear that speaks quietly to him, giving him directions.
Harry tours the adaptation center with Hermione and Dr. Granger.

“Healer Jordan, could you please take me to the reception desk so that I can ask Mr. Burbage about my owl?” Harry asked as they walked back down the corridor.

“Sure, Harry,” Healer Jordan said. “Oh, and I meant to tell you that there will be a weekend event in a few weeks when we invite your families and friends to come and learn how to do all these things including how to be a sighted guide. That information was sent out with the forms.”

“Oh,” said Harry quietly.

“Here we are at the reception desk,” Healer Jordan announced as she took Harry’s hand from her arm and placed it on the ledge of the desk.

“Godric, Harry has a question for you,” she turned to Harry, “Harry, I need to leave you here to go get our tour started. Your friends are coming over.”

“Thank you,” Harry said and turned to the desk.

“Mr. Burbage?” Harry asked the air in front of him, not really sure where Godric was as he hadn’t heard him move since they arrived.

“Yes, Harry?” His voice was nearer than Harry was anticipating. He heard Hermione and her father talking quietly not far from him, no doubt waiting for him.

“Oh, well, I was wondering if my owl Hedwig had arrived here? I was expecting her at my house last night, but she didn’t arrive and this morning I had to leave. So I’m hoping that she found me here - do you know?” Harry rushed on.

“Oh, well, we’ll have to check the owlery after the tour. I haven’t heard that a new owl arrived, but often there are several who do show up when we start the residency program,” Mr. Burbage explained.

“Okay, thank you,” Harry turned away from the desk, shook out his staff, and walked toward Hermione’s voice.

“Hi, Harry,” Hermione greeted him, “How was the registration?”

“Okay, I guess. They wanted to know stuff about my medical history,” Harry shrugged.

“Oh,” said Hermione.

“Yeah,” said Harry, “Healer Jordan said that there is going to be a weekend when we can invite friends and family to come and learn about how to be a… a sighted guide,” Harry searched for the phrase. “Would you want to come to that?” Harry asked hopefully.
“Oh, yes. I’ll see if I can come. Did they say which weekend?” Hermione asked.

“No, I guess they sent the information to the Dursleys,” Harry grimaced, and then remembered that Hermione’s father was standing right there, “I’m sure we can ask,” he hurried on.

“Did you find out if Hedwig has arrived here,” Hermione asked.

“They don’t know yet, but said we can check the owlery after the tour,” explained Harry, trying to get his anxiety about Hedwig under control.

There was a tinkling sound of a clear, bright bell and the voices in the reception area died down. Harry turned toward the bell and Hermione came and stood by his side.

“If you could all gather around, we are ready to begin our tour of the Perenelle Flamel Adaptation Center,” Healer Jordan’s voice rang through the reception area as if she were speaking in a microphone - though he couldn’t imagine a microphone here. Harry heard the crowd gathering. It was larger than he thought it would be. *I don’t know how big I was expecting it to be*, he considered, *how many newly blinded wizards can there be?* He had never noticed any before this happened to him.

Hermione moved closer to Harry and started to take his hand. He squeezed it, then ran his hand up her arm to find the spot just above her elbow, and grasped her arm gently. She moved closer to Healer Jordan’s voice and Harry could feel more people around them, hear their breath (someone’s breath was rather labored) and other sounds that gave him the impression that it was a good-sized group, but not too large. Harry was pretty certain that it was Dr. Granger who stood behind them.

“Welcome to the Perenelle Flamel Adaptation Center and the beginning of our four-week residency program for those of you adapting to a life-altering event. We are going to lead you on a tour of facilities with your families so that they can experience where you’ll be for the next month and, we hope, feel comfortable leaving you in our care. Before we start, I would like to remind you to respect each other’s privacy and not discuss the private concerns of individuals with others,” Harry felt heat rising in his neck as it felt as if Healer Jordan’s voice was directed at him. *Is she worried that I’m going to talk about other people?* Harry wondered and then thought about it some more… *Or that other people are going to talk about me?* This thought made his shoulders sag a bit. *Maybe this just what they remind people everytime they start - not to talk about each other - part of their policy.* Hermione reached for his hand on her arm with her other hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

He wished that Hermione could stay with him during the whole program. He heard someone to their left who sounded like a child and he wondered if there were kids younger than him in the program. *Would their parents stay with them?*

He couldn’t imagine the Dursleys in this very magical place and that made him glad.

“We’re going to enter the Center through the main entrance directly behind me and travel up the corridor to the dining hall. Please follow me.” Healer Jordan turned and started walking toward the door that she and Harry had gone through earlier and the crowd slowly followed after her. Hermione said, “thank you,” to someone as they passed through the door and Harry guessed someone was holding it open for them. At one point his staff, which he was holding a little bit in front of him as an extra buffer in the group, hit something that sounded like metal and Harry guessed someone in front of him was in a wheelchair. It sounded like people were wearing robes from the amount of swishing fabric and he heard a few staffs like his tapping among the hushed conversations. Some people near Harry and Hermione were commenting on the corridor and how beautiful the lighting was.
“Hermione, is the light in here like the light in the entrance,” he asked, “it seems different to me. I can hardly tell that there is light in here.”

“You can tell the difference… ?” she asked curiously, and then recovered, “yes, but darker as if you’ve gone deeper in the water and are farther from the light,” she replied. They had traveled passed the door that Harry and Healer Jordan had gone into for his registration, from what Harry could tell judging by distance.

The group paused and up ahead, Harry could hear a creaking and groaning and realized that heavy doors were being opened - by magic? he wondered. Now the group was going through a doorway that seemed to accommodate a lot of people at once. The space was large and echoey, the light brighter (Harry closed his eyes) and larger than the reception area. It had a pleasant fragrance - like a garden near a bakery.

“Oh, Harry,” said Hermione in a hushed voice, “I wish you could see this, it is so beautiful!” Harry sucked in his breath sharply. He knew she didn’t mean it, but the comment kind of stung. Hermione realized immediately what she’d said.

“Oh, Harry, I’m sorry. That was stupid of me.”

“It’s okay, Hermione. I wish I could see it, too.”

“Oh, Harry. It’s just hard to get used to,” she said quietly.

“Believe me, I know,” said Harry taking a deep breath, “Why don’t you describe it to me?”

He could feel her turning to look around as they were walking slowly down the center of the large room, “Well, it is like the Great Hall at Hogwarts in some ways in that it is a large open space, but instead of heavy wood panels and portraits, there are floor to ceiling windows that look out on a peaceful lake fringed with trees - as if we’re in the middle of the country, not in the heart of London. The walls are fluted white marble that arch up near the ceiling like the necks of swans or the ribs of a whale. The light is reflecting off the lake so that there is the same shimmering water feel in here, too, as there was in the reception area. There are about twenty round tables organized on a grid, each with six chairs - with white linens and vases of lilies in the center. There are ten on either side of this large aisle that we’re walking through. It goes straight through and at the end of the hall is another grand entrance like the one we just passed through. It’s very elegant, open, and peaceful.”

“Thanks, Hermione. It’s almost like I can see it when you describe it like that,” Harry said softly, “I can smell the lilies,” he added.

Healer Jordan had stopped and the group settled around her.

“We’ll take our meals in here - breakfast at 7 am, lunch at noon, and dinner at 6 pm - every day. Our meals are specially prepared to provide a healthy diet and also fixed to accommodate the needs of each individual. If you have any dietary restrictions or special requests our kitchen staff is happy to work with you. Daily menus are posted at the entrance the night before and available in audio and braille. Please follow me as we move through the dining hall and take the rear exit to proceed to our classroom spaces,” Healer Jordan continued.

The groups footsteps echoed through the space along with the pleasant murmurings. It sounded as though many of the families agreed with Hermione, though Harry had picked up on one voice that stood out from the others and did not seem impressed.

Harry was pretty sure it was the person using a wheelchair. They sounded young, though maybe
older than Harry. He was pretty sure it was a girl, though her voice was low and a bit gravely.

“A healthy diet!” she was exclaiming petulantly. “What does that mean? Carrot sticks and cucumbers? Mum, you can’t leave me here.”

Harry lost track of her as the group moved through the doors at the back of the hall and into a darker space. *I imagine all this light is magical - I wonder if it changes throughout the day?*

Healer Jordan was leading them through another corridor that she described as the classroom wing. Hermione filled Harry in on some of the details… there were doors on either side of the corridor that lead to classrooms - a total of four. Healer Jordan led them into the last one on the right and the light in here was so bright that Harry had to close his eyes against it.

“Oh, ow. It’s bright in here,” Harry said to Hermione.

“Harry, it’s like being outside. The room doesn’t seem to have walls. It is like we’re on the edge of the lake and behind us is a grove of aspen trees. I feel like we’ve left England and we’re in the Alps. There are benches here arranged in a circle, rough hewn out of logs, instead of desks and chairs. I’ve never seen a classroom like this!” Hermione exclaimed and he could hear some envy in her voice.

“It’s cool in here as if there’s a breeze, too,” noticed Harry as he slid his foot forward on the sloping floor. “what is the floor made of? It doesn’t feel even.”

In front of him, the girl he had noticed before was hrumphing, clearly not happy with the classroom space even as others around her were also exclaiming as Hermione was.

“It’s cold in here and I don’t like being on a mountain top,” she complained loudly.

“In this classroom,” Healer Jordan was speaking to the whole group in her amplified voice, “we often gather as a community to support our emotional health” (the girl snorted audibly) “and begin the journey toward holistic healing and adapting.”

“The rooms can be changed magically to accommodate the needs of the students on any given day,” Healer Jordan explained. “And we’ll give students as much advance notice as possible so that they know what to expect.”

“The people who come to our center are often used being defined by their limitations and told what they cannot do by others who may or may not completely understand the challenges they are facing. At the Perenelle Flamel Adaptation Center, we like to focus on what we can do, and finding ways to get around obstacles that are keeping us from doing what we want to do.”

Healer Jordan went on, but at this point Harry was thinking about flying on his broom and imagining skimming the lake (he could hear the gentle lapping of the waves nearby) with his hand as he zoomed over the surface.
Puddle wishes

“Harry?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah?” he answered without really realizing that he was answering, he was still hovering over the lake mirrored by the reflection.

She shook her arm to get his attention and that landed him back in his body.

“Where were you?” she asked teasingly.

“Oh, sorry. I just was thinking about flying on my broom over that lake,” he said wistfully.

“Oh,” and he was surprised by the amount of emotion she packed into that one syllable.

“I’m going to fly on my broom again, you’ll see, Hermione,” he said fiercely. He was surprised at the flash of anger that flared up in him - that her sadness made him feel - and then he felt bad for feeling angry.

“Oh, Harry,” she said and he could hear her tears and he hated that she was crying at the same time that he hated that he’d made her cry.

“I - I’m sor- sorry,” she hiccuped, he was still holding on to her arm and she was wiping away her tears.

He stood there stupidly for a little bit and then she turned toward him and leaned her head toward his shoulder and he found himself awkwardly patting her shoulder and comforting her.

“It’s okay, ‘Mione,” he said, though he didn’t really feel like it was okay.

“I’m sorry, Hermione,” he said quietly, “but I am. I am going to fly” he said.

She nodded into his shoulder and sniffed loudly. He felt the wetness of her tears soaking through his hoodie and T-shirt. He felt Dr. Granger’s hand on his other shoulder.

“Are you two okay?” Dr. Granger asked. Hermione lifted her head and Harry felt her nodding.

“Yes, sir,” Harry answered gravely.

Hermione blew her nose and Harry surmised that Dr. Granger had handed her a handkerchief. She pulled away and Harry realized that the group had started moving out of the room. Up ahead he could hear the snorting girl (as he now thought of her) whingeing about having to stay at the center for a month and begging her mom to take her home. Her mom’s responses were weary. It sounded like she was in the corridor.

“Let’s catch up with the group, shall we?” Dr. Granger suggested in a hearty tone - no doubt meant to bolster them up.

“Sure. You ready, Hermione?” Harry asked squeezing her across her shoulders.

“Yeah, sorry, Harry,” she whispered.

“Maybe they have a library here,” he said hoping to distract her and she hiccuped a half-hearted laugh.
He held onto her arm again and she led him out of the room. He wished they could have stayed longer in the room and explored down to the lake’s edge. He wondered if there would be snakes in the grasses.

Someone followed them tapping a cane that sounded very much like his and Harry wondered who it was. He started to turn to Hermione to ask “Who…?” and then remembered Healer Jordan’s request that they not pry into the privacy of the others in the group - though he felt this left him at a disadvantage and maybe others, too, he conceded to himself.


“Never mind,” he said turning back to face the direction they were headed. They had caught up with the group and Harry noticed that Hermione had guided them away from the snorting girl and a little smile tucked up the corners of his mouth.

Hermione was still occasionally lifting her arm to dab at her eyes and trying to sniff inconspicuously - but he could feel the movement through her body with his hand on her other arm. He tried giving a consoling squeeze of her arm, but that seemed to make it worse, so he stopped and just listened to Healer Jordan.

Now they were near another small group of people - maybe a family - and there seemed to be some little kids who were getting pretty squirrely. He had noticed them before, but now they were whining about being hungry.

Harry’s stomach rumbled loudly and he remembered that all he’d eaten that day was a bite of his sandwich at the station.

Healer Jordan was talking about the schedule and the Healers who would be coming in to give lessons and he felt like he should be paying attention, but he was listening to the family with little kids and thinking about the food and water in his book bag. Finally, he just gave in and let go of Hermione, shifted his staff to his other hand, and pulled his book bag around to his front so that he could open it up and find his water bottle. Rooting around in his bag, his hand plunged into the folds of the invisibility cloak and he realized that it very faintly tingled and made the fine hairs on the back of his hand stand up a bit. He hadn’t noticed that before. He paused. He wanted to take it out and really examine it, this isn’t the place or the time to do that, Harry, so he stuffed it back down and his fingers finally grazed over the water bottle and he pulled it out. He tried to be discreet about opening the bottle, but it popped loudly had we really changed elevation that much on the trains? Or maybe it was caused by moving through muggle and magic environments? Or had we really traveled to the Alps when we went through to that classroom?

He took a couple gulps of water and paused to wipe his mouth with his sleeve and took some more.

“Harry, the group is moving,” Hermione whispered sharply to him.

He put the lid back on and stuffed the water back in his bag and reached out for her arm.

A couple of people near them were talking in whispers that were getting more heated as they spoke, “I know that I’ll miss out on some of the opportunities, but I want to come home at night and on the weekends,” a man (Harry judged by his tenor) was arguing. “Of course, we want you to come home, we want to see you, but all that traveling is risky…” another man was responding, worry etched in his deep husky voice that was surprisingly gentle. “I’ll be fine and besides I already told Healer Jordan my decision… I don’t want to hash it out here, okay?” There was a tense silence as they moved with the group.
“I want to draw your attention to this map of the center,” Healer Jordan addressed the group, “there is a similar one in the reception area, just right of the reception desk on the wall and five feet from the door.” Harry was perplexed as to why she’d be giving precise directions for a moment, until she continued, “I’m bringing this one to your attention because there is more room around it for us to gather. This texturized map is accessible to our vision-impaired residents. In addition to labels in text and in braille, the audible portion will connect with your ahti as long as you’re touching the map alone and do not have your hand on another charmed guidance tool. Please take a moment to check it out.”

Harry realized that he had assumed that all the residents were there for vision loss reasons like him; it hadn’t occurred to him that there were other magical maladies (as the leaflet called them - the one that he hadn’t read yet) that they might be attending to at the center. He had thought that the snorting girl was also blind, but maybe she wasn’t. He listened carefully as the others moved up to touch the map trying to figure out how many people were also dealing with vision loss and if he could hear her among them. He thought he heard two or three people being addressed by Healer Jordan at the map, including the man who’d been arguing a moment ago and someone from the family with kids, but he couldn’t tell who - just that the kids wanted to try, too.

He could hear snorting girl muttering impatiently under her breath and her mother trying to shush her, clearly embarrassed. He noticed that the person behind them following with the staff wasn’t moving up to the front to touch the map.

Hermione started moving forward with Harry and he planted his feet so that she stopped.

“What’s wrong, Harry?” she asked, surprised.

“I don’t want to look at it with everyone watching me, Hermione,” he leaned close to her ear to whisper and ended up sputtering as he got a mouth full of her hair.

“Oh, it’s okay, Harry, it’s just a small group of people and they aren’t even really paying attention,” she tried to reassure him.

He thought that that couldn’t be true as there was a hushed silence in the group that made him think they were all paying close attention.

Dr. Granger joined in, “It looks like it would be useful, Harry, you should… feel it.”

“It’s okay, I’ll just wait,” Harry said.

“Harry, do you want to take a look at the map?” asked Healer Jordan from the front of the group.

Harry flushed.

Great. Just great.

“No, thank you, Healer Jordan. I’ll check it out later, thanks,” Harry mumbled stubbornly. He heard someone nearby exclaim, “I told you it was Harry Potter!” And he blushed even harder. Healer Jordan must have heard because she reminded the group again about privacy issues.

I’m definitely not going up there now! Harry thought he might melt from embarrassment.

In fact, he wouldn’t have minded turning into a puddle at that moment, just so he could avoid the scrutiny he felt he was now under. His hand was itching to grab the invisibility cloak and disappear under it for a while.
Harry and Hermione take a tumble.

As they walked past the map, Harry wished he could have looked at it on his own without everyone watching him because he was getting a little confused about the layout now that they were heading down another corridor.

Harry’s mortification was ebbing as he listened to Hermione chattering on about how excited she was to check out the library. She was rushing a little and guiding him around people to get closer to the library and occasionally rising up on her toes to get a better look. Again, it sounded like big doors were being opened.

“Oh, Harry, it’s an amazing library. So much bigger than Hogwarts!”

Her glee was barely contained. He could smell the books - they had a familiar dusty, musty aroma that reminded him of Hermione - in the best possible way. She was trembling under his hand as they passed through the doors into the room that felt big, but not echoey like the other rooms. The light was bright in here and Harry shut his eyes against it.

Healer Jordan was explaining the history of the library and how it came to be a part of the center. Hermione was twitching now and he knew that she was fighting with her nature to listen attentively to Healer Jordan and her desire to run to the stacks and start reading. He couldn’t pay attention to Healer Jordan with Hermione nearly bouncing next to him.

When Healer Jordan said they could have a few minutes to explore the room, Hermione hastily took Harry’s hand and placed it on her dad’s arm and took off.

“Hi, Dr. Granger,” Harry said awkwardly.

“Is there something you’d like to look at, Harry?”

“I dunno,” Harry mumbled. “Is there something interesting nearby?”

“Well, over here there’s a globe of the world and it is pretty large and all the continents are in relief. You might find it interesting,” Dr. Granger said as his torso twisted away from Harry. He started walking toward it and Harry followed. Dr. Granger lifted Harry’s hand off his arm and placed it on the globe. Harry’s staff struck the base of the globe’s stand at the same time and it announced: “The James Holman Globe of the World.”

Harry was intrigued by the texture on the sphere and started following the texture with his fingertips. The afixi in Harry’s ear started talking, “Dubai is a city in the United Arab Emirates known for…” as he moved his fingers, it continued to give him facts about the cities and countries that he found.

“That’s pretty cool,” Harry admitted.

He worked his way through the middle east toward India. He noticed that in addition to the audio provided by his afixi there were also braille notations and the rivers were etched in a different texture.
than the lines dividing countries. Mountain ranges were easy to discern by their distinctive texture.

One of the little kids from the family was also exploring the texture of the globe with a running
dialog of what they were finding in a chirpy little voice, “here’s the ocean where the whales sing,
and here’s a big mountain where the bears sleep in caves.”

Harry was reminded of little Oliver Franklin Evans from the park in Little Whinging. The child
wanted to spin the globe and it would lurch, but Harry would steady it with his hands and the child
would stop the attempt. Harry wondered if Dr. Granger who was standing quietly next to him was
giving quelling looks to the child.

Harry was in China following the Yangtze river to Wuhan when Hermione joined them again,
breathless from her explorations.

Healer Jordan had indicated that they were going to continue the tour and Harry could hear the group
moving toward the door.

“What did you find, Hermione?” Harry asked curiously as he grasped her arm.

“Oh, well, they have an extensive section in braille and a balance of muggle and wixen publications.
Do you think they’ll let me come here and study? There is so much I’d like to explore,” she went on.

“It won’t hurt to ask,” Harry encouraged, a warmth spread through his chest at the thought of
frequent visits from Hermione, even if it meant many trips to the library. *It’ll be way better than
Privet Drive on any day.*

“Yeah, I’ll ask Healer Jordan before we leave,” Hermione said enthusiastically, squeezing Harry’s
arm gently.

“I wonder when we’ll get to the owlery,” Harry wondered.

A voice behind them interjected, “That’ll be at the end of the tour, Mr. Potter.”

Harry recognized Godric Burbage’s voice, and he realized that he was also the person who’d been
keeping up the rear of the tour and the same person who’d been using the staff to navigate.

“You’re blind, too?” Harry blurted out without thinking, and then added, “Mr. Burbage?”

“Yes,” replied Mr. Burbage chuckling.

“Sorry. I just didn’t know,” he said hoping he didn’t sound rude.

“It’s okay. I’m a graduate of the Center and now I work here,” explained Mr. Burbage. “After we
tour the dorms and you meet your roommates, we can go down to the owlery and see if your owl has
arrived.”

“Thanks, that would be great,” Harry said with relief.

They followed the group through the library entrance and back into the corridor, where Harry
wondered how close they were to the kitchens because the aroma of cooking food seemed to fill the
hallway, making him even more hungry.

“Oh, it smells like Shepherd’s pie,” Harry noted. “Mmmm.”

“That does smell good,” agreed Hermione.
“It smells like raw sewage if you ask me,” muttered snorting girl, the wheels of her wheelchair clanged against Harry’s staff as she passed them and he edged closer to Hermione, wondering if she was going to run over his toes.

Harry held back a snort of his own and then started to cough.


“What?” the girl challenged.

“Nothing,” answered Hermione shortly.

“I thought so!” said the girl as she moved on.

The group had stopped again and Healer Jordan was addressing them.

“Before we go to the dormitories, we’re going to stop by the Orientation and Mobility room, often called O&M,” Healer Jordan was explaining. “Like the classroom spaces, the room can change to accommodate the lessons for the day, so make sure to check the layout of the room that will be posted outside before entering so that you don’t walk into a swimming pool when you’re expecting a running track,” Healer Jordan laughed nervously at this, but Hermione stiffened.

“That doesn’t sound safe,” she said sounding more like Molly Weasley than a twelve-year-old girl.

“When has the wixen world ever been safe,” Harry reasoned.

“Well, I guess that’s true,” Hermione said softly and turned her head. Harry suspected that she was glancing at her dad to see if he had overheard.

“Right now the O&M room is set up for swimming,” Healer Jordan explained and then led the group through the doors.

Even before he entered the room, he could feel the humidity and heat from the room and hear waves breaking on a beach.

“Is it an ocean, Hermione?” he asked, closing his eyes against the painful light.

“Oh, yes… oh wow,” she said and seemed spellbound.

As he stepped into the room, he sank into sand and could feel the warmth of the sun on his skin. Overhead, seagulls were calling and he could hear wind rustling through leaves that were high up in the sky.

“Are they palm trees? Are we in the tropics?” Harry asked in wonder. Ahead, he could hear the little kids shouting in glee as they ran toward the waves and their parents calling after them to come back. A flock of birds erupted into flight.

“Well, this is a load of crap!” exclaimed the snorting girl at the entrance to the room.

“Here, Ms. Lee,” said Godric Burbage, “there is a panel to the right of the door, and if you press the button labeled ‘ramp’ it will pull up a walkway for your wheelchair. Just be mindful of the people ahead of you…”

Suddenly the sand under Harry’s feet was moving and Hermione fell against him, they both pitched into the sand and prickly grasses. People were yelling, the seagulls were in an uproar and Godric Burbage seemed to have lost his cool and was laying into Ms. Lee who was shouting back at the top
of her lungs, “How was I supposed to know it was going to do that? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Harry had a mouth full of sand, he had lost track of his staff (which had shouted a warning, but there wasn’t anything Harry could do except fall) and he was pretty sure he had smashed the sandwiches in his book bag. He sat up.

“Hermione, are you okay?” he asked feeling the sand around him, trying to locate her.

“I’m right here, Harry,” she reached out and touched him.

“Are you okay, Harry? Hermione?” Dr. Granger was asking from near the doorway.

He must have been behind the upending Ms. Lee as they were walking into the room because it took him a moment to reach them.

Someone had grabbed Harry by his armpits and was hauling him up.

“Hey!” Harry exclaimed in surprise.

“Oh, sorry. I thought you needed some help up,” an apologetic voice said near his ear, releasing him.

“I was just surprised,” Harry explained, “a warning that you’re going to touch me is nice, otherwise it is a big surprise to me.”

“Right. Do you need help up?”

“Um, sure. Thanks,” Harry stuck his hand out and the person grabbed it and Harry got to his feet.

Harry heard Hermione standing up, too, and brushing the sand off her clothes.

“I’m Harry by the way,” Harry said introducing himself to the person who’d help him.

“I’m Bing Lee. Mei’s brother. Sorry about that,” he said softly. “She’s having a really hard time.”

“Yeah, it was an accident,” Harry said, turning to Hermione he asked her again, “are you okay, Hermione?”

“Yes, just surprised,” she replied.

Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and smelled Dr. Granger’s familiar scent.

“You kids okay?” he asked.

“Yes, though I dropped my staff,” Harry said. Harry heard someone walking through the sand nearby.

“Here it is,” and Bing pressed it into Harry’s outstretched hand.

“Thanks,” Harry said as he swung it to the side to see what it was that dumped them into the sand. It sounded like a low wooden bridge - a boardwalk, that was now elevated a little over the sand.

The argument between Mr. Burbage and Mei had ended and other people were coming over to see if they were okay.

Healer Jordan seemed to be mediating between Godric and Mei. Mei’s mother seemed to also be joining in. Then Harry heard Mei’s wheelchair as it came down the boardwalk, sand grinding under
the tires.

“Sorry,” she said grudgingly as she went by. Her mother clunked along after trying to get her attention. “Mei, Mei!”

Harry shrugged.

“Like I said,” Bing said apologetically over his shoulder as he stepped back onto the boardwalk, “she’s having a hard time.”

As his footsteps retreated, others came nearer.

“I’m so sorry about that, Harry!” Healer Jordan asserted.

“We’re okay,” Harry assured.

“Well, thank goodness for that. I should have brought up the boardwalk to begin with. Do you want to come down by the water?”

“Sure, let’s go. I’ve never been to the beach before,” Harry confided.

He didn’t count the trip to the shack at sea when the Dursleys were being pursued by his Hogwarts letters. There really hadn’t been a beach there. Just rocks.
Waves

Chapter Summary

Harry and Hermione play in the ocean before Hermione and Dr. Granger have to return home.

“Hermione, I want to take off my shoes and feel the sand and ocean between my toes,” Harry said as they neared the crashing waves and inhaling a deep breath of the briny sea air. “Do you think we have time?”

“I guess. Other people are doing it, too, and Healer Jordan is talking with Mei now,” Hermione observed.

“I wonder what her deal is,” Harry said under his breath.

“Yeah. She looks really angry,” agreed Hermione, “I almost feel like she did that to us on purpose.”

“Why would she do that?” Harry wondered.

“Who knows? You’d think she’d be happy to be near the ocean…” Hermione said.

“Why’s that?” Harry asked.

But Hermione didn’t answer… she had stopped and was bending over. Harry let go of her arm.

“Let’s take our shoes off here before we step in the wet sand.”

Harry used his staff for balance as he stripped off his shoes and socks. He set his book bag on the sand next to them.

The sand was hot, almost too hot and he stepped from foot to foot.

“Oh, wow! That burns!” Harry was surprised.

“Oh, yes, it does. Let’s move this way, it’ll be cooler over here where it is wet,” Hermione tapped the back of his hand and he grasped her arm and they stumbled in the sand until they reached the firmer, wet sand.

“That’s much better,” Harry sighed as the water-cooled sand soothed his feet. He could hear the children shrieking with delight. It sounded like they were chasing the waves and the seagulls in turns.

“Wouldn’t it be cool if Hogwarts had a room like this that opened up to the ocean?” Harry speculated, “do you think we’re traveling to the actual ocean or we’re in a room that simulates the ocean?”

“I don’t know. It looks real,” Hermione offered.

“Either way, it is really incredible,” Dr. Granger volunteered behind them, “this is an amazing world you get to experience.”
“I want to put my feet in the ocean,” Harry stated as he bent down and rolled up his jeans.

“I bet it is cold.” Hermione said as she led him toward the water. Harry stepped on something sharp and winced.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t see that shell, Harry. Did it cut you?”

Harry felt the bottom of his foot. “I don’t think so.”

A wave washed over his feet and it felt frothy and warm.

“It’s warm, Hermione,” Harry said laughing.

He wanted to run into the water just like the little kids were doing and he pulled on Hermione’s arm and then let go and just started running and stumbling into the waves.

“Wait, Harry!” she laughed, “we’ll get wet!” She ran after him. Another wave broke over their feet and dowsed their trouser legs and Harry shouted in surprise and delight.

One of the kids ran close by them, sand flicking up from their feet as they passed and splattering their legs.

Hermione laced her fingers through Harry’s hand and he pulled her forward, wanting to go deeper into the water. He didn’t care that his trousers were getting soaked.

Another wave came and splashed up into their faces and they retreated a bit, sputtering at the water, laughing gleefully.

Further down the beach, Harry heard Healer Jordan trying to get their attention.

“I guess we have to head out. I hope we can come back here. This is amazing,” Harry declared happily.

“Yeah, it is incredible,” Hermione agreed, hugging him unexpectedly; her hair blowing across his face.

They made their way back to their shoes and tried to brush off as much sand as they could before sticking their feet back into their socks and shoes. The salt water on Harry’s legs felt like it was tightening on his skin as it dried, but he didn’t care. It was as if the waves had washed away some of the misery he had experienced in the last month.

He picked up his book bag and they staggered back up to the boardwalk, stepping up after some people had passed them. It seemed like the visit at the beach had done most of them a world of good as well.

Harry wondered if Mei Lee also got to enjoy the beach, but from the way she was complaining loudly, it didn’t sound like it. Now he could pick out her brother’s voice, too. He sounded patient, but tired as he tried to cajole her into a happier mood.

The threshold was apparently charmed with a spell that removed the sand from their clothing and shoes as they walked through as well as dried their clothes. Harry was amazed that it also removed the sand that was stuck to his feet inside his socks.

It was strange to be back in the hallway with the aroma of Shepherd’s pie enveloping them again and to leave behind the hot sun and humidity of the O&M room. He wondered what the swimming
lessons would be like in there.

*Maybe I’ll learn how to swim!*

“We’re going to head to the dormitories now. A number of you are starting your residency program today, others will be joining us during the day. Our day students are welcome to tour the dorms or continue exploring the classrooms. I’ll be giving our residents their room assignments and then we’ll meet in the dining hall at 11:00 for questions. I understand some family members need to leave, so I’ll give you a few minutes before we head to the dorm to say your goodbyes. We’ll meet here by the door to the dormitories in five minutes.” Healer Jordan announced.

Harry heard Dr. Granger murmuring to Hermione on her other side. “Harry,” Hermione whispered, “Dad and I need to head out so that he can get back to work.”

Harry felt like he sank a few inches into sand. He had momentarily forgotten that they were leaving. He was going to have to follow the tour group on his own, meet his roommates, and get the layout of a new living environment by himself.

“Oh, yeah, right,” he said trying to put on a brave face, fairly certain that he’d failed.

“Oh, Harry!” Hermione lamented, “I hate having to go. I want to stay.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said flatly.

He took in a deep breath.

“Hermione. It was the best thing in the world when I heard your voice at the train station. I’d never had made it here if you and your dad hadn’t come when you did,” he said as he felt a tightness lace up his chest.

He turned to where he thought Dr. Granger was standing.

“Dr. Granger?” he asked.

“Yes, Harry?” Dr. Granger responded.

Harry adjusted his stance so he was facing him more directly.

“Sir, I really don’t know how to thank you for what you did for me to today. Thank you so much for bringing me here, for the train and underground tickets, for being here, for bringing Hermione…” Harry wanted to say more; he was amazed that managed to choke out what he did, but his voice felt thin.

“Harry…” Dr. Granger seemed to be at a loss for what to say. “Harry,” he tried again, putting a hand on Harry’s shoulder, “I’m very glad we were able to come today. I’m just sorry that… that you were facing this alone. If you ever need anything, please don’t hesitate to call or… send an owl.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said warmly.

Hermione pulled Harry into a tight hug. He wasn’t too surprised by it. Her cheek was wet against his and he felt tears pricking in his eyes. He blinked them back, afraid he wouldn’t be able to stop if he started crying. He really didn’t want to cry in front of all these people he didn’t know.

“Bye, Harry. I’ll write you lots - either by muggle mail or owl. Let me know when Hedwig makes it back, okay?”
“Okay, I will. Thanks again, Hermione,” Harry squeezed her and let her go.

“Bye, Harry,” Dr. Granger said and their steps retreated down the corridor.

Harry could hear other families around him having similar conversations. He stood for a moment listening to get his bearings. He knew he wasn’t too far from where Healer Jordan had asked them to gather for the tour to the dormitories. He could hear Mei Lee whining to her family; he didn’t want to get too close to them.

He swung his staff in front of him and started walking toward the sounds of the small group. His staff hit something soft. *Someone’s foot,* Harry thought.

“Sorry about that!” Harry said, stepping to the side.

“No worries,” was the response.

*Hey, why isn’t my staff saying anything?*

Harry realized that it hadn’t been giving him information since they left the beach. He tapped it twice with two fingers and moved it over the area in front of him, and was relieved to hear the familiar voice describing the area. *It must have turned off when I dropped it.*

The staff told him when he’d reached the edge of the small group of people standing by the door to the dormitories and he stood slightly apart from them, waiting. He felt as if he had just crawled out of a warm nest covers and now was shivering in a cold room.

*But not as alone as I feel at the Dursleys,* he reminded himself and that helped lift his spirits.

“Hi,” someone said nearby and Harry looked up, wondering if they were talking to him.


“Hi, Tony,” Harry replied, feeling at a loss. He didn’t remember anyone named Tony. He sounded older, “I’m Harry Potter,” he stuck out his hand for a handshake and continued, “and yes, I’m in Gryffindor.” But Tony never grabbed his hand to shake it, so Harry finally put it down feeling heat creeping up his neck.

“I heard you got hurt in the Chamber of Secrets by some monster… that’s wicked, man,” Tony sounded a little excited and Harry found that off-putting. He was still trying to place him.

“Yeah, well,” Harry said shrugging, not really wanting to get into it. “What house are you in?”

“I’m a seventh-year Slytherin. Well, I’ll be in seventh year when terms starts again.” Tony answered, “So what happened down there? Are you really blind?”

“Um, yes,” answered Harry shortly.

“Was it really a 50-foot-long serpent?”

“Um, I really don’t want to talk about it,” Harry said firmly.

“Oh. Well, geez, man. I guess the ‘Heir of Slytherin’ is too high and mighty to condescend to tell us about what really happened,” Tony laughed harshly, another voice joined in the laughter. Still laughing, they stomped off.
Harry clenched his jaw and managed to restrain the retort riding on his tongue.

*Great. With my luck, he’ll be my roommate.*

Harry heard Healer Jordan’s quick footsteps approaching the group and was glad to move on. The Shepherd’s pie aroma was almost torture now, he was so hungry.

Healer Jordan asked the group to follow her through the large doors into the dormitory area. The group had stopped and Harry shifted from foot to foot impatiently while she explained that even though it was a small center that served no more than twenty people at a time, they believed that having roommates helped students feel more included and less isolated. They had sixteen residents at the time that would be grouped by age. She reminded the group to respect each other’s privacy. Harry sighed heavily. There were individual changing rooms/showers/toilets that were adapted to the needs of the residents, so even though residents were sharing a living space they’d each enjoy privacy when they needed it.

Harry wondered how many people he’d be sharing a room with.

*Did this mean that Mei would be a roommate? What about Tony? Was he a resident or a family member of someone who was residing here.*

He wished Hermione was still there so he could ask her.

“I’m going to read the list of residents for each room as we move through the dormitories. When you hear your name, you can enter the room, meet your roommates, choose your area (each area has a bed, wardrobe, and desk), and get settled. Remember that we’re meeting the dining hall at 11 am,” Healer Jordan explained.

The first room was for the youngest residents, Healer Jordan explained and Harry heard his name along with Gemma Boot, Aminah Khan, Mei Lee, and Tony Montague being called.

Harry heard Mei Lee kvetching loudly to her mom about having to share a room with boys as she passed through the doorway. He decided to hang back a moment. Healer Jordan moved on with the rest of the group. Harry started to move toward the door when he felt a gentle hand pressing on his arm.

“Yes?” Harry asked, wondering what they wanted. They didn’t answer.

“Nothing, just that this is your room. If you want to go in, go in. If you don’t, I’ll help you choose your bed.” The motherly sounding woman had approached them. With her was a sound of fluttering paper as if she were flipping through a book.

“Hi, dear,” she said and Harry figured she was addressing him.
“Hi,” he answered.

“Gemma is… well, she can’t hear or speak. A terrible bout of spattergroit this spring - incurable,” she explained in a low voice.

“Are you coming into the room to chose your area? Better come on in before you have no choice. I’m Mrs. Boot, by the way, Gemma’s mother.”

She pressed her hand to his back and pushed him toward the door.

Gemma was still holding on to Harry, guiding him gently toward the door.

“Thank you,” Harry said, feeling as though he could have managed this better on his own.

In the room, Mei was continuing her tirade of complaints.

If she’s trying to convince her family to take her home, she’s going about it completely wrong. Who’d want to put up with that! Harry thought, pressing his lips into a thin line.

Mrs. Boot hurried Gemma off to another part of the room and Harry stood in the entrance, unsure as to how to proceed. At last, it occurred to him to ask his staff to take him to the unclaimed bed and it did.

It was right next to Mei Lee’s area, of course.
The Owlery

Chapter Summary

Harry visits the owlery.

For a second, Harry was missing his little room at Privet Drive and the moments of being completely alone there - then he shook his head.

That’s ridiculous! he laughed at himself.

I just feel weird here because everyone can see me and I can’t see them. Well, actually, I don’t know if everyone can see me. Just assume that they are not staring at you, Harry, he told himself sternly, affecting a Hermione tone in his head. They are busy getting settled. They don’t care about you.

He used his staff to map out his area, figuring out the distances between his bed, wardrobe, and desk - touching each surface to gain an understanding of them. They were all wood - carved, not particle board like a lot of the flimsy furniture the Dursleys put in his room. The linens on the bed reminded him of the linens at Hogwarts - clean and stiff. He thought about unpacking his staff, but decided to do that later. He did unpack his book bag and put everything into his staff. Now that he was in a magical environment, he didn’t need to worry about using it in front of muggles.

He knew he was supposed to be getting to know his roommates, but he really wanted to get to the owlery. Besides, I already have met most of them. Just one… what was her name? It started with an ‘A’, ” he tried to talk himself out of his guilt, I’m going to have plenty of time to get to know them later.

He sat on his bed for a moment as he debated about whether or not to head to the owlery. As he struggled internally, he listened to his roommates, trying to figure out who was where and what they were doing. He was listening to the girl on the other side of the room whose name he couldn’t remember, talking to someone in a low voice.

“Why are you staring at me?” Mei asked.

“What?” Harry was astounded.

“Quit staring at me,” she insisted.

“I’m not staring. I can’t see. I’m not looking at anything,” Harry felt heat rising in his neck.

“Right. Likely story,” Mei said disbelieving.

“Mei,” her mother pleaded, “hush. Leave him alone. He really is blind. Remember, Tony was telling you.”

“Yeah, Tony also said that he’s ‘The Boy Who Lived,’ and you know that’s a lie.”

Harry stood up and said, “Navigant owlery.” He walked swiftly to the door and out into the corridor. He had a feeling he’d be spending very little time in his room during the next month.
As Harry made his way back down the corridors that they had traveled through on the tour toward the owlery, he wondered if he should try to find Mr. Burbage first or just go to the owlery on his own. He finally decided to try to find Mr. Burbage in the reception area and told his staff as much.

His staff took him directly to the reception desk. There was a steady and very loud clacking noise that put Harry in mind of an old fashioned typewriter, but not quite. “Mr. Burbage?” Harry asked and the noise stopped.

“Yes?” Mr. Burbage responded.

“It’s Harry. I was wondering if we could go visit the owlery now?”

“Oh, sure. Let me just tell Healer Jordan where I’ll be,” Godric got up and Harry heard the tapping of his staff and then a door open and close. Harry’s mind was on Hedwig and a litany rang through his head, *Let her be okay, please be here, let her be okay…*

Mr. Burbage came back through the door.

“Harry?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m over here,” Harry responded.

“We can head over to the owlery now,” Godric stated as he walked back to the reception desk.

“Um, should I just follow you or should I cast the navigation spell to the owlery?” Harry wondered.

“That’s a good question, Harry. You know the adage ‘the blind leading the blind?,’ right? We get to do a bit of that today. We’ll use the sighted guide technique that I think Healer Jordan taught you, except for the sighted part,” and he chuckled at his little joke as he came around the desk to stand next to Harry.

Harry groaned begrudgingly, giving into the bad humor. He switched his staff in his left hand and found Godric’s arm with his right. Wow, he’s tall. Why didn’t I notice how tall he was earlier?

Harry wondered why this felt more awkward with Godric than it did with Healer Jordan or Hermione. Was it because Godric was blind? Or because he was male? Or maybe it was because he was taller than Harry by a considerable amount?

*He’s definitely taller than Dr. Granger. Maybe it is all of it together making awkwardness?*

He puzzled over it. He was touching more people in the last week than he had all last year. It was kind of weird to be so intimate with people he didn’t really know… and with some people it was more uncomfortable than with others.

*Like, I didn’t feel uncomfortable Healer Jordan - she seemed really professional, as if she knew what she was doing. Confident, comfortable. Hermione is a friend and how many times did we walk around the castle under the invisibility cloak? It did feel a little strange with her dad, but that’s just because I don’t know him as well. Madam Pomfrey was a mess, so that was awkward.*

Harry stumbled and realized that he needed to pay closer attention to what he was doing.

“Are you alright there, Mr. Potter?” Mr. Burbage asked.

“Yep, just need to pay attention to my feet, that’s all,” Harry chided himself.
They passed into the corridor and went right across the hallway. When Godric opened the door, Harry was overwhelmed by the owlery odor and for a moment thought he was at the owlery in Hogwarts.

*It’s so odd that the owlery is located across the hall from the reception area, though I imagine that’s convenient for the office staff.*

He had thought for sure that it would be on top of a tower. He realized that he had created a mental image of it in a tower similar to Great Ben and overlooking the Thames, with owls flying in and out and perched on a jungle-gym of rafters that went up high into the roof.

As they stepped into the room, Harry realized that there was a breeze moving through the room as if it had windows open all around. From the windows he could hear the sounds of London, but from far below and it felt as if the building itself were swaying ever so slightly.

*Maybe it is at the top of a tower, just like I imagined.*

“Whoa! Are we high up in a tower?” Harry asked as he slipped on some owl droppings under his feet and caught himself by pulling heavily on Godric’s arm. “Poop! Sorry about that!”

“Yes, I guess the view is spectacular - a panoramic view of London. At night, it sparkles with all the lights,” Godric explained.

Then there was a cooing hoot, explosive flapping and Harry felt feathers and wings dashing against his face and side of his head as a weight landed heavily on his shoulder, piercing claws digging painfully into his skin. Tears sprang to his eyes - the result of both joy and pain.

“Hedwig!” he shouted.

He reached up to feel her familiar form with his right hand, while bracing his left shoulder by gripping his staff.

She launched off his shoulder and landed nearby. Harry followed, using his staff to locate the base of the perch she was on.

“Watch out, there are droppings everywhere,” Godric cautioned as something brittle crunched under his feet (a tiny rodent skeleton?).

“Oh, Hedwig, I’m so glad you’re here!” Harry was euphoric.

“Harry, I’ll return to the desk now that you’ve located your owl, alright?” Mr. Burbage asked.

“Yes, thank you so much for your help!” Harry said as he stroked Hedwig’s wing and accepted her nips on his fingers.

“There’s a mat outside the door that you can wipe your feet on when you leave so that you don’t track anything in the hallway,” Godric advised as he exited the owlery - it sounded as though he were taking advantage of the mat.

“Okay, thanks!” Harry turned back to Hedwig after the door closed.

“Oh, Hedwig, I wish you could tell me where you’ve been!”

As if responding, she hopped on one foot and stuck the other one out to Harry. He followed the contours of her body down to the foot and found a couple bundles of scrolls.
“Who else was sending letters, Hedwig?”

He was curious, and untied them, but just stuck them into his pocket to read later. He didn’t want to sit down in here. In fact, he was getting worried that he was going to get pooped on from all the owls up above.

He did accio one of his sandwiches from his staff and tore off pieces to share with Hedwig who greedily gobbled them down. She nuzzled into his cheek, too. He didn’t remember her ever being so affectionate before.

“It seemed like a long time, girl, didn’t it,” he smoothed her head. “It was four days. That’s a lot.” He had felt her entire body and was relieved to find no sign of injury. He had been worried that she had been hurt.

He didn’t want to go, but he checked the time and it was nearly eleven. He hated the thought of walking into the dining hall late.

“Hedwig, I’ll be back soon. Okay?”

She hooted dolefully in reply and he felt terrible leaving her.

He left a big chunk of sandwich with her and said, “Navigant dining hall,” pausing only to scrape the owl droppings from his feet.
Speaking with Gemma

Chapter Summary

Harry and Gemma figure out how to communicate.

As Harry neared the dining hall, he wondered if the big doors would be open or closed. It had seemed like Healer Jordan had used magic to open them earlier, but he hadn’t heard her say a spell. Was there a panel like in the O&M room that was charmed to open and close the doors - kind of like a muggle elevator?

He imagined he could ask his staff to locate things like that if he knew what to ask it. Maybe that will be part of the training.

He reached the doors and his staff informed him that he’d reached his destination. He felt the area with his staff and discovered that the doors were open. That’s a relief. I’ll have to ask Healer Jordan about them later. It gave him an idea: “Navigant Healer Jordan,” Harry tried, but his staff responded, “Location unknown.”

“Navigant group of people,” worked though, and soon he was at the edge of the group of family and residents waiting for Healer Jordan. He was glad he had a chance to nibble on a sandwich with Hedwig because the food aromas in the dining hall were making him salivate.

He heard someone approaching him and again felt a small hand on his arm. He turned his face toward them, “Hi, Gemma,” he said. He was pretty sure it was Gemma.

She lifted up his arm, and gently coaxed him to turn it palm up, then her finger was tracing something on his palm. He furrowed his brow in concentration, trying to figure out what she was doing. Then it hit him, she’s spelling. “Hi,” Gemma had spelled H - I into his palm.

He smiled and she squeezed his hand warmly. Then his smile faltered. Could she understand him when he spoke? He cast around for something to ask her. Well, he had a million things he wanted to ask, but they were too complicated, he needed something simple.

She was spelling into his hand again and he had to focus to understand what she was writing.

“W-H-A-T,” she waited a few seconds, then wrote, “I-S,” waited again, then, “I-T?” It took him a bit to get the last one, the question mark. He mouthed each letter as she wrote it and a gentle squeeze from her left hand supporting his let him know that she understood when he got the letter.

So he tried just telling her, “I don’t know if you can understand me when I speak,” he confessed. He could hear the people around him getting quiet and wondered how much of an audience they had. He felt his ears getting hot. He was tempted to drop it and walk away, but didn’t want to hurt her feelings. She was being really brave approaching him when she didn’t know if she’d be able to communicate with him.

She didn’t squeeze his hand, so he guessed she didn’t understand. He wondered if he should take her hand and try spelling into it, but then she was writing on his again.
She wrote one word: “S-L-O-W-E-R.”

So he tried again, he figured he didn’t really need to voice what he was saying as long as his lips were making the motions, so he tried slower, but barely breathing the words so they were very quiet. This time he phrased it as a shorter question, “Can you understand me?”

She squeezed his hand. He breathed and the corners of his lips lifted in a small smile.

That’s a relief.

She wrote two dots and a curved line that, for a second he didn’t get, and then he smiled in response. A smiley face.

More people were gathering around them. And then Gemma’s mom was there and with her the flapping paper noise again. He puzzled at that. Why did it always sound like she was waving a piece of paper around?

“Gemma, dear. There you are. Always running off. Oh, trying to talk with… what’s your name, dear?” Harry realized that she had directed the last question to him.

“Harry, Harry Potter, Ma’am,” he replied politely.

“Oh, Is that right? Well, they said you were here. Hmmm,” She was quiet and Harry had the distinct impression she was staring at him. He resisted the temptation to flatten his bangs over his scar.

“Gemma, Healer Jordan’s here and you can ask her your questions now. Come on, let’s get closer, okay?” Mrs. Boot had turned her attention back to her daughter and Harry felt Gemma’s hand being pulled away from his. But then she pulled on his hand as if wanting him to follow. He pulled his hand out of hers, then traced it lightly to above her elbow and waited for her to go. She held still for a second, then started following her mother’s footsteps. Harry held his staff in his left hand out a little, not sure if Gemma would understand how to guide him around obstacles. At first, his staff ran into some things (people’s shoes, he figured by the sounds of surprise as he passed), but then she adjusted to allow more room for him.

Harry figured that they were closer to the doors leading to the classroom spaces now. Gemma stopped and grasped his hand and started pulling down on his arm. He resisted, not knowing that’s what she was doing. “What?” he asked, angling his face with the hope that his lips were visible to her. She stopped pulling and turned his palm face up again and wrote, “C-H-A-I-R,” Oh! Harry reached out and found the back of the chair directly in front of him, and sat down it while Gemma settled into the one next to his. She took his hand palm up again on her knee and wrote, “W-H-E-R-E,” space, “S-I-S-T-E-R,” space, “D-A-D?” He was confused. How was he supposed to know where her sister and dad were? He shrugged his shoulders. She wrote, “Y-O-U,” space, “S-I-S-T-E-R,” space, “D-A-D” and then she tapped a finger on his chest for emphasis.

Oh! She means Hermione and Dr. Granger. He started to explain, “They aren’t my…” but then Healer Jordan started addressing the group in her amplified voice, asking if there were questions and Harry stopped.

Gemma shook his hand slightly, a bit impatiently so Harry pointed in the direction of Healer Jordan’s voice, while on the other side of her Mrs. Boot said, “hush dear, Healer Jordan’s speaking,” and the paper sound fluttered around her again.

Harry wasn’t sure if it was directed at him or Gemma, though it struck him as odd that she’d hush Gemma, who hadn’t uttered a sound as far as he could tell.
He wondered how Gemma was understanding what Healer Jordan was saying.

A lot of the questions were about things that Healer Jordan had already addressed on the tour, but she patiently explained them again. One of the parents (Harry assumed from the question) why they had male and female residents sharing rooms, and Healer Jordan explained the importance of community and also went over the guidelines again about proper conduct and the Center’s expectations for how residents would behave and respect each other. She also hinted that there would be consequences if the guidelines were not followed.

Harry could hear a quill scratching on paper on Gemma’s other side and thought that Mrs. Boot must be taking notes, but then he realized that she was writing messages to Gemma. Was she translating for her? He decided it was too sporadic for that.

Harry hoped that someone would ask how to open the big doors to the dining hall. He also wanted to ask about a muggle phone, but thought he’d better ask that one in private. Finally he raised his hand. “Yes, Harry?” Healer Jordan addressed him. He was glad she used his name, as he had heard her responding to other people without their names, and wondered how he’d know she was calling on him.

“I was wondering how do you open the doors to the dining hall and the library?” As he said it, he realized it sounded silly. Someone a few seats behind him snorted loudly, confirming his fears.

Healer Jordan answered thoughtfully, though, with no judgement in her voice, “Great question, Harry. The dining hall doors will be open at meal times and if you need to enter the space outside of that time, there is a panel located either side of the door, at the right as you’re facing the door, with braille markers indicating what the buttons do. I’m happy to show you when we’re done here,” she explained.

There were a few more questions. Harry wondered if Gemma was going to ask hers, but if she had, he couldn’t tell.

Healer Jordan invited them to enjoy the lunch and told them that they would have free time until one o’clock to rest and get settled and say goodbye to their families, and then the residents would meet their instructors in the first classroom, called ‘Mont Blanc,’ that they had visited.

Healer Jordan came over to Harry after she was done, “Hi Harry, it’s Healer Jordan,” she politely told him, “Is this a good time to check out the panels for opening the doors to the dining room?”

“Oh, yes, thank you,” Harry responded as he stood up.

Gemma must have asked Healer Jordan something because then she addressed her, “Yes, Gemma, I’ll bring him back here. We’ll just be a moment,” she said.

He could hear some paper fluttering near Healer Jordan now. He was beginning to wonder if it had something to do with communicating with Gemma. Healer Jordan had tapped the back of his hand with hers, and he grasped her arm above the elbow and noticed that she seemed to be making movements with her hands - *sign language!*

“I noticed that you and Gemma have figured out a way to overcome your language barriers to converse,” Healer Jordan observed, her voice conveying pleasure and curiosity.

“Er, yes,” Harry agreed, though he felt as though their attempts were pretty cumbersome and awkward.

“Um, what is that paper noise that I heard when you and her mom were talking to her?” Harry asked
as they walked through the dining hall, toward the entrance.

“Oh, that’s a handy little charm that writes out what you’re saying on a slip of paper. Gemma’s using it now because she’s still learning BSL,” Healer Jordan explained.

“What’s BSL?” Harry asked.

“Oh, right, British Sign Language,” Healer Jordan explained.

“Okay, we’re here in the entrance. I’m going to take us so that we’re approaching the door as you would if you were coming from the reception area, okay?”

Harry nodded.

“So, if you’re using your staff to help you find your way, you can ask it to ‘Navigant door panel.’ And that should work on any entrance that has a magical panel for controlling the door. This one is set in the alcove of the entrance on the right-hand side, about three feet from the ground and about two yards from the door,”

“Oh, why is it so low?” Harry wondered, imagining little children wreaking havoc with it.

“So anyone can reach it, even if they are using a wheelchair,” Healer Jordan explained patiently.

“Oh, right,” said Harry.

Healer Jordan took Harry’s hand off her arm and guided it toward the panel. “Here is the panel, and here is the open button, there are two arrows embossed on the surface that are pointing away from each other, can you feel that?” she said as she moved his fingertips over the surface of the button.

“Oh, yes,” he moved his hand over the button, and then found another button that had the two arrows facing each other.

“And this one is the close button?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s right,” she confirmed.

He could feel smaller bumps under the symbols, but they were indistinguishable to him.

“Similar panels are on all the entrances with heavy doors throughout the center,” Healer Jordan explained.

She had tapped his hand to indicate that she was ready to guide him back into the dining hall.

“Could you teach me the charm for writing my words so that I can speak to Gemma more easily?” Harry asked.

“Oh, yes - that charm should be embedded in your staff. It is ‘Scribunt loqui.’ Why don’t you try it?” she said, guiding Harry to the side of the walkway through the dining hall.

He held his staff and said the words, but muddled them the first few times. Healer Jordan helped him get the pronunciation and finally, he heard a little piece of paper fluttering near his lips. He reached for it, and felt it for a second before it disappeared.

“Where did it go?” he asked, surprised. Then he heard it again, and this time it lingered longer before it vanished.
“It doesn’t stay long,” Healer Jordan explained, “so you need to know that the person you’re talking to has seen it, which will be a bit of a challenge for you.”

“When you’re done, you say ‘Finite scribunt loqui,’” she continued, “There are other methods for communicating between people who are deaf and blind that you’ll be learning about in the coming weeks. I’m sure you and Gemma will find a system that works well for you,” Healer Jordan started guiding them back to the table.

“Okay, here’s your chair, Harry,” Healer Jordan placed his hand on the back of his chair.

“Enjoy your lunch,” she said as she walked away, already being addressed by someone else who had approached her with a question.

“Thank you,” Harry said as she left and heard the paper fluttering by him. He sat down in the chair once he figured out that it was now facing the table.

He felt Gemma’s small hand on his arm again.

“Hi, Gemma,” he said and she squeezed his arm when the paper fluttered by his lips.
“Gemma, Healer Jordan taught me the *Scribunt loqui* spell!” Harry was eager to tell her, and then kicked himself.

*Obviously, you dork, she can see it,* he said to himself as the paper fluttered by him.

“I wanted to answer your question from before,” he said and she squeezed his arm.

“You asked about my sister and dad earlier?” he asked, “They are friends, not my family. My friend Hermione and her dad, Dr. Granger. Dr. Granger is a Dentist and he had to go to work, so they weren’t able to stay.”

Gemma took his hand and spelled, “**D-A-D?**” space “**M-U-G-G-L-E?**”.

Harry was a bit taken back by this and it must have shown on his face. She hastily wrote, “**M-I-N-E**” space “**T-O-O.**”

“Oh, yes. Hermione is muggle-born, too.” Harry was relieved.

As Gemma was explaining “**M-U-M**” space “**W-I-T-…**,” on his palm, someone across the table snorted. Harry reflexively looked toward the noise. He felt Gemma pause as she was writing and then finish with “**C-H**.” He decided to ignore the snort.

“Oh, I was raised by Muggles, but my parents were wixen,” Harry explained.

“**W-I-X-E-N?**” Gemma asked.

“It means Witch or Wizard or both,” Harry answered.


Harry deflated a bit and Gemma squeezed his arm. Someone across the table was muttering something that Harry was trying hard to ignore. He wished he knew who was sitting across from them and also wished that they weren’t listening in on their conversation.

He sighed.

“My aunt, uncle, and cousin weren’t able to come,” he said heavily, not really wanting to get into it with strangers eavesdropping.

Apparently, Mrs. Boot was also actively following the conversation, because she leaned over Gemma and patted his knee (knocking Gemma against him in the process - he realized that Gemma was even more petite than he had originally guessed) and said, “Well, dear, that’s too bad. It’s good that Gemma took you under her wing. She’s always collecting waifs.”
Harry heard Gemma blow out an exasperated breath. “Oh, don’t look at me like that, Gemmie - you
are,” Mrs. Boot shushed her daughter. “You have a heart of gold.”

Mrs. Boot’s voice sounded a bit weepy and Gemma leaned away from Harry. He thought she might
be hugging her mom.

Harry took issue with being described as a waif. Though, now that he thought about it, he probably
was looking pretty waifish - in Dudley’s baggy hand-me-downs, bruises on his face, who knows
what his hair looked like (he resisted the urge to try to flatten it), and then there was the weight he
lost during the month with the Dursleys.

_I sure wish lunch would be served. I’m starving._

He actually felt a little lightheaded.

_It’s good I nibbled on that sandwich with Hedwig._

“I wonder when lunch will be served,” Harry said to Gemma. He kept feeling the table to see if
platters of food had magically appeared as they did at Hogwarts, even though he knew he’d smell it
and hear it first.

She tapped his arm with her fingers.

“What is it?” Harry asked softly.

“**F-O-O-D**” space “**H-E-R-E**,” she spelled into his palm.

“Where is it?” He felt the table with his free hand, reaching out farther to see if he had missed
anything and felt the vase that Hermione had described in the center of the table, but no silverware or
platters.

“**B-U-F-F-E-T**” she explained.

“Oh, well that sounds like a train-wreck waiting to happen.”

“Where is it? I can’t hear it or smell it.” The food aromas were the same as when they entered the
dining hall. He started sniffing the air around him and then stopped abruptly as the person across the
table from him broke out into peals of laughter. He felt the table shake and marveled that they
thought it was so funny.

_Glad I can provide some entertainment_, Harry thought wryly.

“**F-L-O-A-T-I-N-G**” space “**T-R-A-Y-S**” space “**C-O-M-E**” space “**O-N**,” she pulled at his
arm, urging him to stand up.

Harry grimaced. Floating trays sounded like a disaster. Would his staff warn him in time before he
ran into someone’s floating tray?

Mrs. Boot, who had been thankfully engaged in a conversation with someone on her other side, now
seemed to notice that Gemma and Harry were getting up.

“Oh, is it our turn to get our food?” she asked. “It smells divine!”

Harry took Gemma’s left arm with his right, which took a little bit of rearranging, since he had been
sitting on her right. He heard as her mother had gone on ahead of them. Gemma seemed to have
learned a lot in the short amount of time that she’d guided him before and he felt more comfortable, even though she was so much shorter than he was and his hand was nearly up to her armpit. He realized that she was about the size of Ginny, maybe a little smaller and wondered if she was also a first year. He saved that question for later, though, she wouldn’t be able to answer while they were walking. He wasn’t even certain she’d see the slip of paper since he was a step behind her.

There was a moment where she pulled him quickly to her side, shoring up the distance between them and he felt something graze by his forehead at the same time that his staff warned him of the danger.

A floating tray. Only wixen would think of such a thing. What’s wrong with having food magically appear on the table? That seemed like a reasonable use of magic.

“Thank you, Gemma!” Harry said, hoping she saw the slip of paper hovering by his mouth. He was tempted to grab it and hand it to her to be sure.

She laid her other hand on his, letting him know that she’d seen it.

Her mother was talking to them from a distance. As they approached, Harry could make out some of what she was saying, but other people were talking, too, so it was hard for him to hear. It sounded like she was reading food labels from the buffet to them.

I’m impressed that Gemma knew how to spell buffet. I don’t know if I would.

Harry didn’t care what the food was - he just wanted something to eat.

“Here you go, dear,” Mrs. Boot pushed something thin and hard across his chest and he let go of Gemma’s arm to figure out what it was, his other hand was holding his staff. Oh! The tray.


He held onto the tray, and tapped his staff three times on the floor to collapse it and put it in his pocket. Gemma didn’t leave his side and he was glad. And then he realized they were standing in a line. He could hear people ahead of them handling china and the clang of metal against metal.

The aroma of food was almost more than he could take. He found himself drumming on the tray with his fingers trying to distract himself. The tray was kind of floating at chest level though he was holding onto it. He switched hands so that he could hold onto Gemma’s arm again. He didn’t want to let the tray go - where would it end up? I’ll never eat.

Behind him, he could hear Mei approaching with her mother. Great. Just what we need.

Ahead of him, Harry could also hear Tony arguing with a parent (Harry assumed). Harry caught a bit of what Tony was saying in a low hiss that was still audible, “… don’t want to eat out here where everyone can see me…” and he felt a slight pang of empathy, which he quickly dismissed.

Stinking Slytherin.

He wondered if it had been Tony who’d been snorting at their conversation about muggles.

Ridiculous blood status crap.

Gemma moved forward and Harry followed.

Mei was a couple people behind them in the line. She was continuing to complain about the food. Harry tried to block her out.
It must be nice to be able to turn up your nose at free food.

As they got closer to the food (Harry could tell by the sounds and smells), he began to wonder how he was going to tell what there was to eat. He could ask Gemma, but they’d stall the line with that process. He could imagine having to listen to Mei behind them complaining loudly about how long they were taking. He could ask Mrs. Boot for help, but cringed at the thought. She seemed a bit oblivious anyway.

It sounded like the family with children was getting their food now. He listened carefully to a mother who was patiently trying to coax a small child to take a spoonful of peas on their plate.

Mmm. I love peas. Dang! How am going to eat peas?

The rhyme “I eat my peas with honey, I’ve done it all my life. They do taste kind of funny, but it keeps them on my knife,” ran through his head. He chuckled to himself as he thought about actually employing that method. Gemma touched the back of his hand on her arm and drew a question mark.

“I was just thinking about how I’m going to eat peas,” he explained as the charmed paper flapped by his mouth. She drew another question mark on the back of his hand.

“It’s just really hard to get small things that roll to your mouth when you can’t see them. I’m just learning. I’m sure I’ll get better at it,” he reassured himself as much as Gemma.

“Can you see what the food is?” Harry decided to ask.


Harry said the name of each word as he understood it, so that Gemma could read the Scribunt loqui charmed papers and know that he got it.

“Thank you! Can you see what kind of soup?” Harry asked. She was up on her tiptoes again and then she dropped his hand and seemed to be getting the attention of her mother.

“What’s that, Gemmie? Oh, the name of the soup? Lemme see, oh, yes, it’s Minestrone,” Mrs. Boot answered. Harry wondered how Gemma was communicating with her mom. It seemed faster than how she and Harry were talking. Maybe with sign language? Harry remembered a couple students at his primary school using signs - they also had hearing aids. He wondered if the wixen community had anything similar.

They were finally nearing the food. Harry heard Mrs. Boot put her tray on something metal (the sideboards?) and start sliding it. She was giving a running commentary about the food - so Harry was feeling more comfortable about what he was about to encounter.

Gemma moved forward and Harry heard her put her tray on the metal sideboard. He dropped her arm and moved to her other side. She reached across him and he heard a plate land on her tray - a bit loudly and he winced. She put her hand on his left arm and helped him find the sideboard. The floating tray seemed to stick to the sideboard - that was handy. Gemma took his hand and guided it toward the plates. He placed one on his tray. She took his hand and wrote: “S-O-U-P?” He shook his head.

Soup seems like it would be a mess and take forever to eat. I’ll wait.
She guided his hand to something and his aftí spoke in his ear, surprising him, “Forks,” it said. He pulled out one and put it on his tray.

“Gemma, my aftí is speaking to me.” He touched his ear where the aftí was attached to his ear helix.

“This must be a charmed buffet. It’s telling me where things are.” She tapped his arm twice to let him know that she understood and let him find the rest of the silverware on his own.

She moved down the buffet, he followed by keeping his shoulder close to hers. He could feel her reaching and then hear her placing food on her plate.

He was so hungry, but he knew from previous experience that overeating would make him sick. He had to pace himself. He could put some rolls in his pockets and save them for later, maybe go share them with Hedwig in the owlery when he had a chance.

He tentatively stuck his hand forward and his aftí said, “Shepherd’s pie, serving spoon to your right.” He found it without sticking his fingers in the Shepherd’s pie, which he considered a victory and put a small scoop on his plate.

Harry proceeded down the buffet and even felt brave enough to try a small scoop of peas. He had to remember where he’d placed things on his plate and felt as though he’d done a pretty good job. He resisted the urge to start nibbling on the food while he was in the line. His legs felt a little shaky as they reached the end of the line. Gemma guided his hand to her arm and handed him his floating tray to hold lightly as they made their way back to their table. Her mother was deep in conversation with the person in front of her. They were talking about the best place to buy robes for school and seemed oblivious to anything around them and in fact, stayed a few feet away from the buffet debating whether Madam Malkins was better than Twilfitt and Tattings.

Gemma deftly guided Harry and his floating tray (and he imagined, her own) back to their table. There they unloaded their trays at their place settings and the trays floated away. Harry hoped that he didn’t need to do anything except let it go, because that’s what he did with Gemma’s nonverbal urging.

He had been careful to set down his plate so that he knew what was where. He was really hoping he wouldn’t make a mess of his first meal in front of Gemma. He realized that he had managed to block Mei’s complaints successfully during the whole process. He wondered if he actually had, or if she had finally stopped moaning.

*That would be nice*, he thought as he dug into the Shepherd’s pie.
Chapter Summary

Harry gets a pitcher of water dropped on him.

Harry was pretty sure it was the best Shepherd’s pie he had ever tasted. The mincemeat and mash had more flavoring than Aunt Petunia used in her recipe and they had included generous helpings of small cooked vegetables that were firm, not soggy. It was both comforting and surprisingly flavorful. Though he was in the habit of woofing down his food as fast as he could, he tried to go slowly and savor it. He was glad he took a small scoop because it didn’t take long to feel full. He used his knife to help corner his peas and get them on his spoon and worked on keeping the spoon level as he moved it to his mouth. Most of the time, there were peas on the spoon - if only a few. A couple times he was surprised to put his mouth around an empty spoon and hoped that no one had noticed. Everyone at the table seemed to be focused on eating.

He was pretty sure it was Tony across the table from them. He was quiet though, giving short, almost angry responses to the man sitting next to Harry who was asking him about his food.

Then he hissed angrily, “Dad! It’s dripping down my chin. Wipe my chin off, would you? Hurry up!” and Harry was certain that it was Tony. With a jolt, it occurred to Harry that Tony’s dad must be feeding him. No wonder he didn’t want to eat in front of everyone. He wondered why his dad would be feeding him. When Harry had spoken to Tony earlier, it sounded like Tony was getting around just fine on his two feet, no sounds of crutches and he was standing, not sitting in a wheelchair like Mei.

It dawned on him that he had paused mid-bite and that if Tony was watching him, he’d know that Harry had been listening, so he quickly took the bite and continued eating. His challenges suddenly didn’t seem so hard. If Tony needed help eating, then he probably needed help doing other more private things and the thought of relying on other people for those things was mortifying.

Not that that gives him an excuse for being a blood-status snot, though, Harry grumbled.

Harry noticed that Gemma had stopped making noises next to him - her fork was no longer scraping against the plate. He put down his knife and fork and wiped his mouth on his napkin. He was thirsty but hadn’t noticed any beverages when they went through the buffet line and hadn’t thought to ask.

“Gemma?” he asked, uncertain if she would see the paper slip.

She tapped his hand twice that he had laid on the table between them.

“Is there water or something to drink on the table?”

She tapped his hand twice again and then was reaching across him, but then took his palm and wrote into his hand, “C-A-N’T” space “R-E-A-C-H” space “Y-O-U” space “A-S-K”.

Harry listened for a moment to see if this was a good time to interrupt Tony and his dad.

When would be a good time?
It seemed as though they might be done eating, too. So Harry turned toward Mr. Montague and cleared his throat.

“Excuse me, Mr. Montague?” he tried politely.

“Yes?” was his impatient reply.

“Could you please pass me the water?” Harry asked.

“Sure,” he said.

Harry waited patiently.

Then Tony interjected, “Dad, he’s blind. You have to tell him that you’re holding it in front of him.”

Harry felt his face grow hot and reached forward tentatively as Mr. Montague mumbled, “Oh, sorry. It’s here, in front of you.”

Harry’s hands found a pitcher of water and he put his hands around it, but it was slippery with condensed water and it dropped suddenly in his hands as Mr. Montague let go before Harry had a hold of it. Cold water splashed all over his front and lap and the pitcher bounced to the floor as Harry scooted his chair back quickly and yelped.

“Oh, sorry, son, I thought you had it,” Mr. Montague seemed genuinely apologetic, which caught Harry off guard. He’d been expecting something of a Lucius Malfoy.

Mrs. Boot and Mrs. Montague (Harry pieced together that Mrs. Boot had been deep in conversation with Mrs. Montague during the whole meal) came rushing over by the sound of it. Several people were pressing napkins onto Harry’s lap, which he found rather alarming, and he shouted in desperation, “Stop! Can’t someone perform a drying charm?”

Mrs. Boot stopped and exclaimed, “Oh, how rude! I was just trying to help,” to which Harry responded with an exasperated, “Sorry, it was just rather, well… uncomfortable…” he didn’t know what else to say.

Mr. Montague said, “Calidum Siccum” and Harry felt instant relief and warmth. He realized that Gemma’s hand was on his shoulder - she released it.

“Thank you, Mr. Montague,” Harry said, relieved. He heard someone pick up the dropped pitcher and place it back on the table.

“I’m so sorry about that…” Mr. Montague began, but then paused awkwardly and Harry realized that Mr. Montague didn’t know his name.

“I’m Harry Potter,” and he stuck out his hand, which Mr. Montague took after a moment and shook heartily. He was a bigger man than he was expecting from his gentle voice. He heard Mrs. Boot and Mrs. Montague return to their conversation and sit back down in their seats.

“You mean… the Harry Potter?” he asked and Harry heard Tony behind him groaning.

Harry blushed again, “Er. I guess so,” he said reluctantly. He was surprised that someone with a Slytherin son would ask with so much awe in his voice and he felt uncomfortable.

Maybe they are from different houses?

He cast around for another topic, “Water,” he said firmly. “Is there any more water? I am awfully
“Sure, let’s get you some, but this time let’s not dump it in your lap.” Mr. Montague said with a laugh. “Can I ask you why there’s a slip of paper that writes out your words by your mouth as you speak?”

Harry heard a glass of water being filled and then, “Here you go,” Mr. Montague said. “You’ve got it?” he said before he released it. “Yes, thank you,” and no one was doused this time.

“Sure, that’s so Gemma can understand what I’m saying,” Harry said and he took a sip of water and set it down carefully by his plate. He reached for Gemma and found her hand.

He turned to her and said, “Gemma, this is Mr. Montague, Tony’s dad. Do you know Tony?” he asked her.

She tapped twice on his arm. “Mr. Montague, this is Gemma Boot,” he said turning to Mr. Montague. He could feel Mr. Montague reaching across him, close and Gemma reaching to shake his hand.

He felt very adult making these introductions. He thought, Aunt Petunia would be proud, for a split second before that thought left him crestfallen - she’s never proud of me, and he shrugged it off.

There was an uncomfortable silence, then Mr. Montague asked, “What’s the spell you use to make your words show up while you speak?”

“Oh, it’s ‘Scribunt loqui,’” Harry explained and Mr. Montague cast it. Harry guessed he was successful right off that bat because he could hear the paper fluttering.

“Tony, do you want to try it?” Mr. Montague asked eagerly.

“Dad, you know I can’t!” Tony said.

“Oh, well, that’s right, but that’s why you’re here, right? So that you can learn how to cast spells again.”

Tony’s chair screeched and then clattered loudly on the floor as he stormed off.

“Sorry about that,” Mr. Montague said hurriedly, and then Harry gathered that he had also left the table, most likely running after Tony. Mrs. Montague stopped talking with Mrs. Boot to ask, “What’s going on?”

Harry figured he was the only one who could answer, so he attempted, “I guess Tony was upset and he left and Mr. Montague went after him?”

He felt like it was a poor explanation, but he heard her get up, too, explaining to Mrs. Boot that she’d better go and see if there was anything she could do.


Harry perked up, “Yes!” he said and his enthusiasm must have made the paper flutter more because he felt it flap against his lips and he laughed.

She tugged at his hand and he stood up, shaking out his staff and finding her arm. He could feel her arms moving.
“Okay, dear. Bring me back a couple shortbreads, would you?” Gemma’s mom asked.

Gemma led Harry in the direction where the buffet table was located, but Harry couldn’t smell the food anymore, so he suspected that it had been cleared while they ate.

He could hear Mei’s voice as they approached the area, decrying the lack of custard creams from the selection.

He sighed and hung back a little. Gemma urged him on.

She reached for something and then pressed a plate into his hand, which he dutifully held, collapsing his staff first and tucking it in his pocket. He could feel her placing some biscuits on it and he tried to hold it steady, knowing from experience that they could slide off a plate very easily. He wondered what kind she was picking out and was tempted to feel them, but thought that might gross out Gemma so he waited patiently.

“Bing, get that Florentine for me - I can’t reach it,” Mei said.

“Oh, hi, Harry. It’s me, Bing,” Bing said.

“Hi Bing. This is my friend, Gemma Boot,” Harry said, introducing Bing to Gemma. He could feel Gemma reaching to shake Bing’s hand.

“Bing!” Mei said impatiently.

“Mei, have you met Harry Potter and Gemma Boot?” Bing asked, as if he hadn’t heard his sister’s demands. Harry felt as though he were in a film featuring a dull dinner party and fully expected Bing to blow a mouthful of smoke at him. It was weirdly formal.

“Well, we’re roommates aren’t we?” she demanded.

“Yeah, I suppose,” Bing conceded.

“Gemma, is there tea, too?” Harry asked. He felt as though he had caught a whiff of it as they crossed the room. She tapped twice on his arm in response, but maybe Bing didn’t catch that, because he answered, “Yes, there’s tea at the tables.”

“Okay, thanks,” answered Harry.

“What’s that paper by your mouth?” Bing asked.

“That’s the *Scribunt loqui* charm so that Gemma can understand what I’m saying,” Harry explained.

“Why…?” Bing started to ask and then stopped himself.

“She’s deaf, you dofus,” Mei interjected, “Obviously she had spattergroit. Look at her face. She’s not still contagious, is she?”

Harry stepped forward trying to shield Gemma from Mei’s words. “Why are you so mean?” he blurted out and then was shocked when Mei burst into tears.

*Oh great.*
Fish tales

Chapter Summary

Harry learns something surprising.

Gemma had left his side and he guessed she was hugging Mei from the muffled sound of Mei’s sobs. He stood there holding the plate of biscuits and feeling like a jackass.

“Sorry,” he muttered to Bing.

“No worries, man,” Bing replied. “It’s messed up. It’s all messed up,” Bing muttered to himself.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Harry shrugged.

There was a plinking sound like someone had dropped some beads and a whiff of fish.

_Huh? I wonder if we’re having fish for dinner?_

“Did someone break a necklace,” Harry asked confused.

“Oh no, I’ll get those,” said Bing. And it sounded like Bing had gotten down on the floor and was picking up the beads - he could hear them rolling around and the sound of Bing grunting as he bent over.

Harry, feeling a bit useless, fished a biscuit off the plate and ate it. _Mmm. A chocolate bourbon._

Soon, Mei’s sobs quieted to hiccups. Harry got his staff out his pocket and _accio’d_ a clean handkerchief from it without managing to spill the biscuits (he was feeling pretty skilled about that) and offered it to Mei, taking a step toward her wet sounds.

“Blimey!” Harry exclaimed as something rolled under his foot and he almost fell, but Bing caught his elbow.

“Oops, missed one,” Bing said.

“Thanks, mate.”

Harry tried again to hand the handkerchief to Mei.

“Cheers,” she replied, sniffing while taking it from him.

“Want to have some tea with us at our table?” Harry invited, unsure what to do.

“Sure, I guess,” said Mei grudgingly.

“The charm is _Scribunt loqui_ if you’d like Gemma to be able to understand what you’re saying,” Harry offered.

Mei huffed.
“Hey, Mei,” Bing said. “I’ll help you do it.”

Harry repeated it. After many attempts, Harry heard the tattletale crinkling of paper.

Gemma had come back over to him as they worked on the charm, her hand on his arm.

Mei hesitantly greeted Gemma and Harry could sense her hands moving in a signed response. He also heard a little bit of paper flapping by Gemma which he hadn’t noticed before.

Curious, he asked her, “Gemma, do you have a charmed bit of paper, too, for your signs?” She tapped his arm twice, affirming.

“Oh, that’s cool,” though he felt a bit sad, a little left out and then he shook his head to get rid of the feeling.

She tapped his hand and they made their way to the table. Gemma guided Harry’s hand to the tabletop and he placed the plate on it. Harry felt for his lunch plate, worried that he’d put the biscuits on top of them accidentally, but couldn’t find them.

“Did someone clear our plates?” Harry wondered out loud. Gemma tapped twice on his arm.

Bing was moving a chair away so that Mei had a place at the table next to Gemma, and Harry sat on her other side, and Bing next to him.

Harry had a moment of thankfulness that the spilled pitcher earlier had not been hot tea when he took a sip of the tea that Bing had poured out for him.

He became aware that Mei and Gemma were in an intense conversation. He gleaned this from Mei’s responses, but Harry was having a hard time following it because he was only hearing half of the conversation. It sounded like Gemma was really saying a lot more than he’d ever known her to say.

Well, probably because our communication is limited to writing in the palm of my hand. It’s hard to get into depth when it is so slow.

“Bing, Can you tell me what Gemma’s saying?” Harry leaned over and asked.

“Sure. She was signing a bit, but I think she’s just learning how to sign, because now she’s actually just writing on a notepad to Mei. That must be faster,” Bing said.

Bing was leaning around Harry, trying to see what Gemma was writing.

“Hey, Mei, Gemma!” Bing interrupted, “Can you sit so that I can see what you’re writing? I can read it to Harry.”

He turned to Harry, “Let’s trade seats, then I can see what Gemma’s writing and read it to you.”

“Geez, Bing. Why do you have to make everything so complicated,” Mei complained.

“Come on, Mei. Don’t be so difficult,” Bing cajoled, “Let’s include Harry, too. You know you hate to be left out.”

She responded with a hrumphing sigh.

Harry was ready to let it go, but he heard Bing stand up, so he pushed back his chair and followed the edge of the table to find Bing’s seat as Bing walked behind him and took his seat. Bing helped sort out their tea and plates. Harry moved his fingertips forward on the tablecloth until he located the
saucer of his tea cup, then took a sip and waited. He wondered where Mrs. Boot was.

“Bing, is Mrs. Boot at the table,” Harry asked quietly.

“No, why?” Bing responded.

“Oh, she just wanted some shortbread. Could you put some on a plate for her?” Harry requested.

“Oh, I think Gemma already did that. There is a plate where she was sitting with the biscuits on it,” Bing replied.

“Oh, okay. That’s good,” Harry sighed.

“Okay, Gemma’s pointing to spot on the page that she wants me to share with you, Harry,” Bing said, his voice directed away from Harry, but loud enough for Harry to hear even over the din of the dining room.

“She was telling Mei about how she was really, really sick with spattergoit last year and they thought she was going to die, but she pulled through. She missed her first year at Hogwarts because of it. She said at first when she started recovering, she was so out of it that she didn’t realize that she couldn’t hear anymore or speak… all she did was sleep and she barely ate or drank. I guess she lost a lot of weight,” Bing relayed.

“When she did finally feel well enough to notice that she couldn’t hear anything at first she was really scared and she tried to hide it from her family. I guess she was afraid that they wouldn’t want her anymore if they knew that she couldn’t hear or talk on top of being disfigured,” Bing said grimly.

Mei seemed to be comforting Gemma now. Harry wondered if Gemma knew what Mei had said earlier about her face… if she had read Mei’s lips. He wondered at Gemma’s capacity for forgiveness… What would cross her line?

Bing continued… “but her family figured it out and, of course, they weren’t going to kick her out. She and her family have been learning sign language at home with a private tutor, but she was finally well enough to come to the Center for more diverse training - not just sign language, but also to learn other things such as nonverbal spell casting so that she can go to Hogwarts in September.”

Harry leaned forward, hoping that Gemma could see that he wanted to speak to her and said, “I’m glad you’re here now and that you’ll be at Hogwarts in the fall.”

He was glad to hear more of her story and was curious about Mei’s, but knew how it felt to have people constantly wanting you to recount a very difficult experience. He wondered if this was the time to tell Gemma and Mei about what happened to him.

*It might make Gemma not want to go to Hogwarts! A giant serpent roaming the corridors turning students to stone and a mind-controlling diary that almost stole a first-year's soul.*

He thought about Hermione - of all people - lying to her parents about what happened because she was afraid they wouldn’t let her return. He wondered what she told them about what happened their first year with Professor Quirrell teaching the whole year with Voldemort living in the back of his head.

He decided to wait.

Harry nibbled on another biscuit, a shortbread. He slipped one in his pocket for later, for Hedwig. He had put a piece of roll in there, too, earlier.
“Looks like you’ve got quite the stash of food in your pocket, Potter,” Bing teased.

“Oh, um,” Harry felt his face grow hot, “it’s for my owl, Hedwig,” he confessed.

“Yeah, right,” Bing laughed.

“Do you go to Hogwarts, Bing?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, I’ll be a sixth year,” Bing said, “I’m in Hufflepuff,” he offered.

“Do you play Quidditch?”

“Yeah, but I’m not on the team,” Bing admitted, “But I saw you play. You’re really good,” Bing said enthusiastically, but then uttered a heavy, “Oh,” and got quiet.

“Yeah,” Harry said, addressing the unsaid thing, “it sucks,” was all he was able to add, kicking himself for bringing up Quidditch at all.

Harry realized that Mei and Gemma were quiet, too.

“Mei, too,” Bing said heavily, “She was really good at Quidditch before…”

“I turned into a fish…” Mei angrily interjected.

That surprised Harry. “Wait - What?” he was really confused.

“Oh, come on! No one told you?” Mei hissed venomously, “That prissy, frizzy-haired know-it-all didn’t tell you that I have a fishtail? I can’t believe that after the looks she gave me when I accidentally dumped you in the sand. I didn’t know that would happen. No one told me!”

Harry noticed that the rest of the dining hall seemed to be quiet as if everyone was listening to Mei ranting.

“No… no one told me,” Harry said, quietly.
Quidditch Adaptations

Chapter Summary

Mei and Harry talk Quidditch.

Harry paused for a moment. He had a million questions he wanted to ask Mei.

*How did you turn into a fish (or a part fish)? Does that make you a mermaid? How are you out of water? Don’t mermaids tails transform into legs when they are on land?*

But then he remembered what it was like to have Tony and other people hounding him with questions about what happened to him and how exhausting it was to be an oddity.

*And really lonely.*

He took in a deep breath.

“So you were really good at Quidditch? What position did you play? Were you on a house team?” he asked.

Mei let out a big breath as well, as if she’d been bracing for the onslaught of questions.

*It must be so much worse for her, Harry thought. No wonder she’s such a crab.*

He was really glad he didn’t say that out loud.

It sounded like the dining hall had gone back to normal conversation. Harry was glad they were no longer the center of attention.

Mei answered in a voice that he almost didn’t recognize… he was so used to her angry pitch. “I was okay,” she started slowly, “I played keeper a lot for Bing and his friends growing up, but I really like being a chaser and seeker isn’t so bad.”

Harry’s throat was closing. This was a hard conversation.

“You were more than okay, Mei,” her brother encouraged. “You would have been chosen for the team this year had you been able to try out…”

“Why didn’t you try out?” Harry asked without thinking. “Can’t you still sit on a broom?”

“Ha! See, I told you, Mei!” Bing said triumphantly.

Harry was confused again.

“Yes, I can sit on a broom still, especially if I can use a modified broom - one with a seat,” Mei’s voice was defiant now. “Hogwarts thought it would give me an unfair advantage over the other players…” she finished quietly.

“What? That’s ridiculous. It would just give you the same advantage the other players have,” Harry was up in arms now. “Did you protest?”
“No, I was also not wanting to draw attention to myself. I was getting too much as it was,” Mei continued.

“Also, I need to have breaks to rehydrate. I can’t last a whole Quidditch game without hydrating. If they weren’t willing to allow a seat, then there’s no way they’d allow 20-minute breaks to allow me to rehydrate. It was too much to ask. Also, my Jiāorēn magic messes with my wixen magic.”

“It’s not fair,” Bing said, then explained, “that was Gemma. She agrees that it is not fair.”

“Thanks, Bing,” Harry knew that Bing did that for his benefit. “So you were at Hogwarts last year? How did I miss seeing you?” Harry asked, then berated himself. How could he get through this conversation without falling all over his own words?

“Well, I was there for the first couple of months, then this happened…” Harry guessed she was motioning to her fish tail. “And I was out for a bit, then I tried to go back after the holidays, but I wasn’t in a good place…”

“What happened?” Harry asked.

There was a heavy silence.

“Mei, she was…” Bing wasn’t able to continue.

“I was hurting myself,” she stated bluntly.

“Oh,” Harry didn’t know what else to say.

“Yeah, well. I’m done with that. So, you really didn’t hear about me?” Mei asked, her tone changing dramatically.

“Yeah, well, no. Sorry,” Harry confessed.

How could I miss that a student had come back to school after the holidays with a tail? Hermione had to know.

“What house are you in?” he asked.

“I’m in Ravenclaw, I’ll be a fourth year in the fall.” Mei said. “My mom helped me keep up with the coursework, and so did Tony. He came home every weekend to help me with my work.”

Harry could hear the affection in her voice.

It must be nice to have a sibling you like - who looks out for you.

“Gemma, will you start as a second year next year?” Harry asked.

“She says ‘yes’ as long as she passes the exams for first years over the summer. That’s part of her training here - to prepare for the exams,” Bing related Gemma’s notes to Harry.

“Did you have to take the third year exams at the end of term, Mei?” Harry asked.

“Yes, but they were easy,” she said like a true Ravenclaw.

“Oh, I’m starting to dry out. I have to go hydrate,” Mei said, distracted. He could hear her running her hands over something - he realized it must be her fishtail.
“How close it is to 1 o’clock?” Mei asked.

Harry put his hand in his pocket and said, “Tempus. It is 12:30.”

Bing got up and turned to Harry, “I’m leaving after we go back to the dormitories and Mei starts hydrating. So, I’ll see you and Gemma later, maybe on the weekend? And definitely on the visiting weekends. It was really nice to meet you both. I’m really glad that Mei has you as roommates.”

Bing was responding to Gemma, “You, too, Gemma. Take care. Thank you for everything.”

Bing clapped Harry on the shoulder as he was leaving the table.

Gemma came over to Harry and laid her hand on his arm.

“What do you want to do now, Gemma?” Harry asked.

She lifted his hand and wrote, “M-Y” space “M-U-M-?” into his palm.

Harry listened carefully, he couldn’t hear her mom anywhere, so he shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t hear her. You can’t see her anywhere?”

She tapped once which he understood as “No.”

“We could look for her,” Harry suggested.

He could feel Gemma making a sign and he caught her hands lightly in his to try to make out what it was she was doing. She repeated the sign as he held onto each of her hands. She was holding her fingers cupped toward her and crossing her hands in front of her mouth.

“What does that mean?” he asked intrigued.

“V-E-R-Y” space “F-U-N-N-Y” she spelled into his hand.

“Oh, Ha Ha. I get it,” he said smiling. “Where should we start?”

He turned back to the table to find the plate with the biscuits and tucking the remaining biscuits into his trouser pocket.

She grabbed his hand, still crumbly with biscuits and wrote “W-H-A-T” space “D-O-I-N-G?”

He felt his face flush, “Getting some snacks for Hedwig… Oh, did you want some?” he asked as an afterthought, chagrined.


“Oh, she’s my snowy white owl,” Harry said. “Do you want to meet her? She’s in the owlery.”

She tapped his hand twice, “Yes.”

“Maybe that’s where your mom is,” he said chuckling and he felt her also laughing silently next to him.
Harry and Gemma meet another roommate.

As Harry and Gemma were walking through the dining hall and then down the corridor toward the owlery, Harry was thinking about how dramatically things had changed for him in a month. He could have never anticipated being where he was now. Never. He was thinking about Mei, her anger and how she had been hurting herself. He understood it in a way he would have never understood before.

They were at the door of the owlery - the odor bowled him over as they pushed open the door and crossed the threshold. Gemma stood still for a moment when they first walked in and he heard her take a sharp intake of breath.

“What is it?” he asked.


She walked over to a window. He followed her arm down to the windowsill she was leaning against, feeling the peeling paint under his fingertips. The warm summer air blowing in through the window lifted London’s unique aroma up – a mixture of petrol, bakeries, rubbish, and curry. Down below, horns honked, trains rattled, voices rose and fell. The afternoon sun felt good on his face and took in deep breaths and let some of the tension release from his shoulders.

“Yeah, it is pretty spectacular, isn’t it,” He agreed.


“I can hear the cars honking their horns, the rattling of the train as it moves on the tracks, people’s voices, and some buskers’ songs along with the owls hooting and grumbling behind us,” he told her, the paper rattling next to his lips as he spoke. He heard her grabbing the paper and then stuff it into her pocket.

“What is it?” he asked.

“She took up his palm and wrote, “C-A-T-C-H” space “I-T” space “S-T-A-Y” she explained.

“Nice.”


“I can feel it, too,” Harry confided.

“The sun is too bright. It hurts my eyes.”

She shook his hand gently, as if she were excited, “Y-O-U” space “S-E-E?”

“Just bright light, nothing else.”

Her hand stroked the back of his as if she were petting a cat, soothingly.

He shrugged. He realized he was getting used to not seeing.

“Can you hear anything?” he felt it was fair to ask.

She tapped his palm once, “No.”

Harry heard the flutter of wings behind him and claws scratching on a wood post and Hedwig’s cooing call behind him. He was amazed that he could pick out her voice from all the other owls. He turned, wanting to walk over to her, but not sure what was between them in the room. They had walked straight to the window from the doorway without going around anything, but Hedwig was in an area of the room he hadn’t been in before. “Hedwig’s here,” he said to Gemma. He didn’t fancy running into a poo-smeared post.

She tapped the back of his hand and they walked over to Hedwig. Harry reached out his hand to find her downy warmth and smiled, wanting to bury his face in her feathers. Gemma hung back a little.

“It’s okay, Gemma. She’s gentle,” Harry said suspecting that she was nervous because of Hedwig’s size. He reached for Gemma’s hand and she met his and he guided her hand to Hedwig’s wing.

“Hedwig, this is Gemma. Gemma, this is Hedwig,” he smiled at them both. He remembered the bit of roll and biscuits in his pocket and fished them out to break into small bits for Hedwig. She pecked at his hand, picking them up with her beak.

*I should have saved some of the mincemeat for her, but … ew… that would have made a mess in my pocket.*

After a bit, Hedwig hooted and opened her wings wide. Harry and Gemma stepped back and she flew back to her perch.

“She must want to sleep,” Harry laughed. “We’ve been dismissed.”

Gemma led Harry to the window again and they stood side by side feeling the pulsing city through the reverberations of the window ledge. Harry heard a bell tolling and realized that it must be Big Ben sounding the quarter hour. *We should head back.*

“Can you see Big Ben?” he asked Gemma, wondering what direction they were facing.

She tapped twice on his hand.

“It is tolling now - the quarter hour. We should head back,” he said. She tapped, “yes,” on his hand and he took her arm.

“Bye, Hedwig,” Harry called up to her and heard her growling coo in response.

They wiped their feet at the door. The door closed behind them, shutting off the sounds of London and the owls along with the pungent odor of the owlery and they were back in the center with its fragrance of potions. He smelled the pepper up potion and wondered why it was needed.
“I wonder where your mom is,” Harry asked Gemma, he caught the paper and handed it to her, certain she hadn’t seen it. He felt her shrug in response.

Then he heard Mrs. Boot’s voice coming from behind them, “Gemma! There you are!”

Harry squeezed Gemma’s arm and stopped and said, “Your mom’s behind us.”

“Where have you been, dear? I’ve been looking for you!” Mrs. Boot closed the gap between them. Harry dropped Gemma’s arm so that she could sign more freely with her mom.

“Hi, Harry! So you took Gemma to visit your owl, Hedwig?” Mrs. Boot addressed him.

“Yes, Mrs. Boot,” Harry answered. “We were also looking for you.”

“Yes, well, Gemma said that. I just went to the ladies’ room. I guess I missed you. And now it is time for me to leave,” Mrs. Boot sounded forlorn.

“Gemma, I’ll let you say goodbye to your mum, and I’ll meet you back in the dining hall, okay?” Harry said as he reached in his pocket for his staff and shook it out.

“Thank you, dear, that’s very kind,” Mrs. Boot answered. “Oh, wait a sec. Gemma wonders why you want to meet in the dining hall. Don’t you need to go back to that classroom? What was it called, Gemma?”

There was a pause while Gemma signed to her mom, “Oh, yes. Mont Blanc.”

“Oh, that’s right! Thanks, Gemma!” Harry was glad she remembered.

“You’re sure you can make your way back alright?” Mrs. Boot asked skeptically.

“Yes, it’s not a problem Mrs. Boot,” Harry tried not to sound irritated.

Gemma made a swishing movement across the back of his hand, which he took for a wave.

“See you soon, Gemma, and it was nice to meet you, Mrs. Boot,” Harry said as he started walking away.

“Yes, nice to meet you, too!” she responded inattentively.

Harry muttered, “Navigant Mont Blanc classroom,” and made his way down the corridor toward the now stale smell of lunch that hung on the air.

_I really need to use the loo_, Harry thought.

He stopped and said “Navigant toilet,” and was relieved that it was close by and on his way to the classroom. It was actually a bit of a dream of a loo - just like the buffet, it was charmed to let him know what things were as his hand hovered near them. Also, as someone who had spent a lot of his childhood cleaning bathrooms, it smelled really clean in a wixen way which was much more pleasant than Aunt Petunia’s toxic chemicals.

His staff was taking him through the dining hall to get to the classroom. He wondered if there was another corridor that went around the dining hall.

When he reached the dining hall, he discovered that the doors were closed and his staff let him know that someone else was in the entrance.
“Hello?” he asked.

“Oh, hi,” said a tremulous female voice.

“Are you okay?” Harry asked.

“Oh, sure,” she hiccuped. “I just can’t figure out how to open these doors,” and her words were seeped in frustration.

“They are super heavy and I think there must be a way to open them with magic…” she said in exasperation.

“Oh, yes, there’s a panel by the door on the right. Healer Jordan showed me how to use it” Harry offered.

“Oh, thank goodness. I pounded on the door earlier and no one seemed to hear me, I’m glad you came along.”

“See, here’s the panel,” Harry offered, he had just located it with his hand and was running his fingers over the raised symbols for opening the doors.

“Are you standing away from the door? It will open toward us, I think,” Harry asked before pressing the open symbol.

“Oh, yes, I’ll get out of the way,” she said and that’s when he heard her using a staff and realized that she must also be blind.

“Here, if you come over here. I can show you the panel. He was tapping his staff on the ground so that she could hear his location, and accidentally collapsed it. “Oops,” he laughed at himself.

“What?” she asked curiously.

“Oh, I just accidentally collapsed my staff - I was tapping it so you could find me,” he explained as he shook it out again.

“Oh, I did that the other day!” she said, her voice filling with mirth, “except I was just nervously tapping it.”

She was near him now and he could hear her hand on the wall by the panel.

“I’m still not finding it,” she said.

“Try a little lower. It is at a height so that people who are sitting down can reach it,” he explained.

“Found it. Thanks!” She seemed relieved.

“Why don’t you do the honors?” Harry offered.

“I’m not sure which buttons open it, do you know? I don’t read braille yet,” she asked.

“Healer Jordan just explained it to me before lunch, but yeah, I don’t read braille yet either. I guess we’re going to learn here. I’m Harry Potter by the way,” he thought he’d better introduce himself.

“Oh, everyone’s been talk… ” she left off mid-sentence awkwardly, “um, I guess I shouldn’t tell you that. Privacy and everything,” she mumbled, clearly embarrassed. “I’m Aminah Khan,” she offered, recovering.
“Yeah. I know. So, Aminah, the button that opens the doors has two triangles pointing away from each other, their flat sides in the middle, to close the doors, press the button that has the triangle points pointing toward each other in the center.” Harry felt like Healer Jordan had explained it more clearly.

“That makes sense. Okay, I’m opening them,” Aminah said and they listened to the doors opening. Harry heard Aminah walking through and followed a little behind her as she navigated through the dining hall to the doors that led classroom on the other side. Harry heard running footsteps behind him and wondered if the little kids were still here from the tour, then as a little hand rested on his arm, recognized Gemma by her scent… something faintly cinnamony.

“Hi Gemma! That didn’t take long,” Harry greeted.

He called ahead to Aminah who had slowed down when Gemma was running toward them, “Aminah, have met Gemma Boot? She’s in our room, too,” Harry explained.

“Hi Gemma,” Aminah greeted.

“Um, Gemma can’t hear or speak, so I’m using a Scribunt loqui charm that writes out what I’m saying so she can read it - it writes it on slips of paper that flutter by your mouth and then disappear, unless you grab them - then you can keep them.”

“I was wondering what that paper sound was - I kept hearing it today,” Aminah said. “How does Gemma communicate with you, then?”

“She spells words on my palm and if you speak slowly she can read your lips, but I guess that’s pretty hard to do,” Harry explained as Gemma took his hand and started to write, “T-E-A-C-H” space “C-H-A-R-M.”

“Gemma wants me to teach you the charm,” Harry conveyed.

“Do we have time? Isn’t it close to the time we’re supposed to be at Mont Blanc?” Aminah asked.

“Oh right. Gemma, I’ll teach her when we get to the classroom, okay? So we’re not late,” he explained. Gemma tapped twice on his palm, then guided his hand to her elbow so she could guide him. Harry collapsed his staff.

The classroom wasn’t too far beyond the dining hall. Gemma pressed the button that opened the dining hall doors to the corridor.

Harry was feeling a bit nervous as they approached the classroom. He was wondering what their instructors would be like… would they be severe and exacting like Professor McGonagall? Deadly boring like Binns? Earthy and congenial like Professor Sprouts? Ditzy and self-absorbed like Professor Lockhart? Demanding and brooding like Professor Snape?

As they got closer to the classroom, Harry could hear people saying their goodbyes with their families in the corridor. Gemma stopped and grabbed Harry’s hand and started quickly writing, “A-S-K” space “A-M-I-N-A-H”… There was an urgency in the way that she was spelling into his hand that he didn’t get until he realized that Aminah was getting confused ahead of them with all the people to navigate around. He called out to her, “Aminah, Gemma wants me to ask you if you’d like her to guide you into the classroom since there are a lot of people out here,” and he turned his face to Gemma, “Is that what
“you wanted?” She tapped his hand twice.

Aminah sounded relieved when she answered, “Yes, that would be great. Thank you.”

“Gemma, she said yes, please,” Harry said to Gemma, and she let go of his hand and went to Aminah.

Harry took his staff out of his pocket and shook it out and tried to follow them, but there were too many people talking loudly in the corridor for him to be able to track them. The little kids were running around, giggling gleefully and more than once ran into his staff (to which his staff exclaimed loudly, but it didn’t really help him avoid the collision because it happened too quickly). He muttered, “Navigant Mont Blanc classroom,” to his staff and found the door eventually.

“Hi Harry,” a voice greeted him from a seated level - Mei at the entrance.

“Hi, Mei. Are you ready for this?” Harry asked.

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I imagine,” she said grudgingly.

“What’s the room set-up? Can you describe it to me?” Harry requested.

“It’s like it was before - outside in the mountains with a rocky terrain and benches set in a theater seating facing a lake.”

“Thanks! Are you going to pull up the ramp?” he asked.

“Fortunately, it’s already in place. You’re safe,” she teased back, “Here comes your girlfriend.”

Harry felt his face heat up, but he was glad Gemma was back. She tapped his hand and he found her elbow.

“Do you want to sit with us, Mei?” Harry asked.

“Sure, I’ll follow you,” Mei seemed pleased at the invitation.

Gemma led Harry down the ramp and then their feet were crunching over a sandy landscape that also had little tufts of grass and random rocks that Harry kept slipping on. Not the easiest ground to navigate. He could hear Mei struggling behind them.

Gemma had grasped both his elbows and was gently pushing him backward. He was confused until the bench hit the backs of his knees, and he sat down.

“Harry?” Aminah asked from the bench next to him.

“Yes, it’s me,” Harry responded. Gemma sat next to him and he could hear Mei putting the brakes on her wheelchair on the other side of Gemma. He wondered if Tony was nearby. He didn’t want to say it out loud or have it written by his lips, so he took Gemma’s hand and wrote "T-O-N-Y?" into her hand. She tapped once, “No.”

“Harry, will you teach me that charm now? It would be really handy to be able to speak with Gemma,” Aminah asked.

“Sure,” Harry responded and they spent the next few minutes working on it while they waited for the next session to begin.
Overturned

Chapter Summary

Upsetting events.

Harry was tapping his foot nervously waiting for the introduction of the instructors. Mei had transferred from her wheelchair and was sitting on the bench next to Gemma. “Knock off the nervous twitching, Harry! You’re going to bounce me right off this bench,” she hissed.

“Oh, sorry!” Harry hadn’t even noticed he was doing it.

Harry could hear the man who had been arguing earlier about going home each night chatting with someone in the row behind him. He thought maybe it was the mom from the family with children. From her nervous comments, he gathered that the father had taken the children home, but he wasn’t sure if she was glad her children were gone or if she was missing them - maybe both, Harry thought. Then the mother whispered to the man that there was a girl with the most beautiful iridescent fish tail sitting in the row in front of them that made Harry very worried that Mei would hear her. He didn’t think that would go over well. The man seemed surprised, “What? She has a fish tail? How is that even possible?!”

Harry turned his head and tried to give them a quelling look. He was surprised when it had the effect he wanted, but then he realized that something must have been happening… maybe the instructors were coming in the room? But then a noise emerged as if from a great distance that was like a fog horn, deep and resonate. Harry tapped Gemma’s hand and whispered, “Do you see anything?” knowing that the paper would write out the message, “I hear a horn,” he explained.

She wrote, “O-L-D” space “S-H-I-P” on his palm - but the way her hand was jittering he could tell that it was more than an old ship. She was just as enthralled with what she was seeing as she had been when they were up in the owlery tower.

Aminah leaned over to Harry and whispered, “What did Gemma say?”

“She said ‘old ship,’” Harry shrugged as he told Aminah, “but she seems really excited like it is so much more than that.” Gemma squeezed his hand, which made him think she’d seen what he was saying to Aminah.

Aminah questioned, “old ship like a Viking Vessel or a Spanish Galleon?”


They sat in eager anticipation as it approached, now Harry could hear bells clanging as well. This seemed like a rather grand entrance and he wondered what it could mean for their instruction. It seemed like the wind was picking up - the whispering of the aspen leaves that Hermione had described had become more frantic. Harry shivered. He hadn’t dressed for stormy mountain weather. He thought about his hoodie that he had stuffed back into his staff during the train ride with Hermione and Dr. Granger that morning and wondered if he should get it out again.

After a bit, when the wind didn’t relent, but seemed to be bringing in an even colder air, Harry
noticed that Gemma was shivering, too, and so was Aminah and he could hear Mei was cursing the cold wind under her breath.

Harry took his staff out of his pocket and accio’d his hoodie, his winter coat, and two of his school robes from the staff. He passed them out to his friends who were mostly grateful for them (he nearly grabbed his winter coat back from Mei when she grumbled about it’s sorry state) and put on his hoodie.

Gemma seemed to be getting more excited as the wind picked up and Harry was eager to know what was going on.

Harry heard someone’s footsteps crunching toward the center of the amphitheater, then Healer Jordan addressed them with her amplified voice. “Thank you all for gathering this afternoon to meet our instructors for our training course. We’re eagerly awaiting the arrival of our guest instructors who have traveled here from great distances.”

Mei was muttering, “Why all this fanfare? Is this the circus or something?” and Harry had to admit, it seemed a bit over-the-top.

“While many of your hours each day will be spent learning how to adapt to the changes that have recently occurred in your lives, and this work can often be tedious and at times frustrating, you will have moments of profound insight as well as small personal triumphs.

At the center, we have an unofficial motto taken from the words of Mother Teresa who said, ‘Do your best and trust that others are doing their best. And be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies.’”

Here Mei made a snide comment about strength lying and while he could see the humor, he was feeling buoyed up by Healer Jordan’s words, which really weren’t all that lofty or out of reach. He wasn’t sure why Mei felt like she had to cut down every good feeling, every encouragement and then the message of the words that Healer Jordan had just quoted hit him, “Trust that others are doing their best.” He remembered where Mei had been a few months ago.

She’s doing her best. Maybe she has to let her sarcasm out before it eats her up.

Harry shifted on the hard bench and took a breath of the fresh mountain air. It was still a bit chilly, especially when compared to the hot London air that he had just been inhaling at the top of the owlery tower with Gemma. He wondered if they were really in the Alps.

He heard someone approaching from the ramp they had all entered the classroom (if it could be called a classroom), their footsteps changing as they transitions from the planks of the ramp to the sandy terrain of the mountain top they were perched on.

Tony asked Mei to budge up so that he could sit next to her and he felt the ripple effect as Gemma scooted closer to him. Harry moved closer to Aminah who moved down a bit.

“What are you doing coming in so late?” Mei lashed out, “And sit on the other side of me. I need to sit on the end.” There was a hint of desperation in her tone and Harry wondered why.

Healer Jordan had continued as if there hadn’t been an interruption, but Harry could hear the people behind them making noises of impatience as Mei and Tony continued to needle each other.

“None of your business,” Tony retorted and Harry felt the bench rock as he sat down on the other side of Gemma.
He realized that Healer Jordan was talking about one of the instructors and he had missed the first part and was just now catching on that she was talking about someone who was a great world traveler.

“… traversed the globe, fought the slave trade in Africa, survived captivity in Siberia, and helped chart the Australian outback…”

Harry felt Gemma press into him again, and realized that she needed more room. The bench seemed to be rocking more as Tony and Mei were pushing against each other.

He apologized to Aminah as he slid closer to her. She whispered back, “I’m right on the edge. I can’t move over anymore without falling off.”

Harry whispered to Gemma that Aminah was on the edge, in case she hadn’t seen Aminah’s fluttering note. She tapped the back of his hand with a “yes” as the bench continued to rock.

With all the commotion, he missed even more of the introduction of the new instructor catching only that he was a Lieutenant of the British Royal Navy.

As the rocking got more vigorous and Mei and Tony’s hissing and whispered insults louder, Harry began to wonder how strong the bench was and if it could withstand the onslaught of the two.

There was a loud noise, like an explosion. Something stung his thigh. Gemma grasped his hand and suddenly Harry felt himself being launched backwards as the bench toppled beneath them. He heard people screaming in surprise and pain. His back collided with the ground and against something hard and sharp as well as something soft and pliable. Someone fell against his legs.

Voices were crying out in alarm. People nearby were asking him if he was okay and grabbing him, trying to pull him up, and then letting go when they realized that he was pinned down. Someone’s hand groped his face, fingers pushing into his mouth uncomfortably. He turned his head away, sputtering in disgust.

“Sorry, mate.”

He tried to sit up, but the person (Gemma?) was still sprawled across his legs and he realized that he must be pinning down Aminah as she was groaning underneath him and trying to extract her arm and shoulder.

“Sorry, Aminah. Gemma is on top of me,” he explained breathlessly, still struggling to get up and release her from under him. Gemma was also struggling to sit up.

“Get off me, you armless wanker!” Mei’s screech cut through the chaos and a hush fell around them. Harry heard a flopping noise that put him in mind of a very large fish and he realized that it must be Mei’s tail.

Tony’s guttural response was so raw that it cut into Harry’s innards and what was at first a hush, was now utter silence that erupted into alarmed calls to help out and the sound of people running. A singed smell hung in the air that had an ominous fish odor clinging to it.

Beneath him, Aminah was still. Only Gemma continued to struggle and was finally able to get to her feet.

She tugged at Harry’s hands and he sat up and then tried to help up Aminah. Tony’s cry had dissolved into heaving sobs that were muffled as if he’d been pulled into an embrace. He couldn’t hear Mei anymore. Crunching footsteps and curt voices barking instructions filtered in through the
Harry pulled his legs off the toppled bench and kneeling, felt for Aminah who still seemed to be lying down. She was crying quietly and when his hand found her arm she yelped in pain and Harry recoiled. Gemma was standing next to Harry now, her hand squeezed on his shoulder.

“Aminah, are you okay?” Harry probed.

“My arm’s hurt,” her voice was laced with pain.

“Just stay still Aminah, don’t try to get up.” Healer Jordan had knelt next to her on her other side.

Tony’s sobs had quieted to hiccups. It sounded like he was still on the ground. Harry thought that he heard Mei was crying, too, and it sounded like another necklace had broken. Someone exclaimed, “Pearls!”

*Man, we’re a mess,* Harry thought. His back felt bruised.

“Man, we’re a mess," Harry thought. His back felt bruised.

“Aminah, stay still. Your shoulder is dislocated, I’m going to put it back in place,” Healer Jordan assured her with a gentle voice. There was a magical pop and Aminah cried out in pain.

Healer Jordan explained to her, “I’m going to ice your shoulder with a spell to help with the healing.”

Godric Burbage was speaking to Mei and another voice that Harry didn’t recognize had addressed Gemma briefly - her hand left his shoulder and she seemed to turn away from him - and then he gathered that they were speaking in sign, because he couldn’t hear anything, except for the sound of hands meeting occasionally.

“Harry, how about you? Are you hurt?” Healer Jordan asked.

“I’m okay,” Harry replied, though his back hurt where he had landed on the rock. He didn’t think it was the kind of injury that would merit looking after.

People in the room seemed to be talking amongst themselves now. The bench was still lying on the ground, presumably because Aminah was still resting. Something moved past Harry that made a whirring sound and stirred up dust. He wondered if it was a levitating gurney.

Harry turned to Gemma, reached out and found her back. He could tell she was still talking in sign language by the way she was moving. She stopped and laid her hand on his arm. He could hear the person she had been talking to move away from them.

“Are you okay,” he asked her.

She tapped his arm twice, “yes,” and took his palm to write, “**Y-O-U**” space “**O-K**?”

He nodded.

Healer Jordan made her way past Harry, checking in with the people who had been sitting behind the overturned row and then he could hear her talking to Mr. Burbage. It sounded like Mei had been helped back into her wheelchair and that Healer Jordan and Mr. Burbage were attending to her injuries. Harry wondered how badly she was burned, he tapped Gemma’s arm to get her attention.

“Is Mei hurt?”

“Yes,” she tapped on his arm.
“How badly?”

She wrote a question mark in his hand which he took to mean that she didn’t know. He wasn’t sure where Tony was. “Is Tony okay?” he asked. She drew another question mark on his hand.

Harry slowly lowered himself to the ground again to check in with Aminah who was still lying down. “How’s your arm feeling now?” he asked her.

“It’s better,” she said.

“I’m really sorry about landing on it,” Harry apologized.

“Like you could help it!” she protested.

Healer Jordan addressed the room with her amplified voice, “Folks, I’m sorry to say that we’re going to have to reschedule today’s events until tomorrow as we need to attend to the injured. We’ll meet again tomorrow morning at 9 am. You may retire to your rooms or explore the center, nonresidents may leave the center to return tomorrow. Please review and abide by the Center’s safety and privacy procedures. Meals will be served at the scheduled times. Anyone who was injured should stay here until we’ve had a chance to assess the injury. We apologize for the inconvenience and unexpected nature of this event.”

Harry was surprised that there wasn’t a collective groan, then remembered that most of the people here were adults.
The group begins to talk.

The bench had been righted and Aminah was helped to a seated position. Healer Jordan had summoned glasses of water for everyone who stayed behind.

Healer Jordan had summoned a tent that was equipped with healing supplies, camp beds, and a curtain so everyone was able to get out of the wind. Harry wondered why they didn’t all just travel to the healing offices in the center, but didn’t voice his concerns. Healer Jordan and another healer that Harry didn’t know performed diagnostics on everyone and started working on Mei and Tony first, then Aminah. Gemma’s bruises were quickly attended to.

Harry gathered from the quiet snippets of conversation between the healers that Mei and Tony had sustained burns and cuts. He wasn’t sure how. Aminah seemed to be recovering - she was talking with Gemma - allowing Gemma to write into her hand on her uninjured arm.

Harry drifted off to sleep while he waited for his turn - the camp bed that Healer Jordan provided while she was tending to the others was more comfortable than he realized a camp bed could be.

When Healer Jordan gently shook him to wake him, Harry was grateful that it no longer smelled like burnt fish.

She spent a little more time with Harry than he expected and had to ask Gemma to give him some privacy. Gemma had caught a glimpse of his back apparently and was very concerned and Healer Jordan had to be quite firm with her.

She had healed his other bruises in addition to the new ones. He gingerly pressed his fingers to his face where he had run into a door again that week and it was no longer tender. He felt better than he’d felt in over a month which made him feel a little giddy. He hadn’t really noticed how achy he was until the pain was gone. She had made small noises when she was working with him that made him think that she wasn’t done with him. And that made him nervous.

“Harry, I want you to drink this potion. It will help you heal faster,” Healer Jordan said pressing a small vial into his hand.

“What is it?” Harry asked sniffing it.

“It’s a nutritional supplement.”

He took a sip and found that it was delicious and eagerly downed the rest. He wanted to lie down on the camp bed again… with the potion warming his belly and the relief from his aches and pains, he felt like he could sleep for a year. He laid down again and was surprised when Gemma was pushing against his shoulder nudging him awake.

“What is it?” he asked groggily.

Gemma took his hand and wrote, “T-I-M-E” space “T-O” space “G-E-T” space “U-P .”
Harry rubbed his eyes and realized that his glasses weren’t on his face. He moved his hand through the air by the camp bed hoping to find a table. Gemma wrote a question mark on his hand.

“Do you know where my glasses are?” he asked.

She reached over him to the other side of the camp bed and he heard his metal frames being drug across a wood surface.

“Thanks,” he said as he put them on.

She pulled on his hand urging him to stand up. He followed reluctantly - wishing he could sleep more. It sounded like Healer Jordan was asking everyone to gather. When he left the tent enclosure, he heard a pop of magic and felt a whoosh of wind and realized that it had been magicked away.

Healer Jordan invited the five roommates to sit on tree stumps in a close circle in the center of the amphitheater. This time they were not all squinched onto one bench. Gemma guided Harry to one and he heard Healer Jordan helping Aminah find another. Gemma sat next to Harry on his left side, she was close enough that she could lean close and touch his arm. Tony sat on the tree stump next to him.

There was a heavy silence and it finally dawned on Harry that a conversation was brewing. He felt dense. Healer Jordan was going to talk to them about what had happened and why. His stomach contracted and he had a sudden desire to flee the room. He didn’t see any good coming out of talking about the incident.

And why do I have to be there? I was just an innocent bystander.

He pressed down on his leg which seemed to be hopping around as if it were filled with Mexican jumping beans. He was surprised that Mei didn’t jump all over him for it. He noticed how quiet she was - that in itself was unnerving.

He heard her wheelchair moving over the sandy, uneven mountain earth and get stuck on something. Mei growled in frustration and Tony barked, “Why on earth are you using a stupid muggle contraption when you could have something magical that actually works?”

Harry had been wondering the same thing, but had been too afraid to ask. He froze - expecting another explosion to send him hurling backward again.

These two are combustible.

“You can’t put two and two together, can you?” Mei retorted scathingly.

Tony was sputtering when Healer Jordan interjected from the other side of Tony, “I hear a lot of anger and frustration from both of you. All of you have recently experienced severe trauma that has unalterably changed your lives. It is perfectly normal to experience a wide range of emotions as a result, including anger and frustration. You might even feel as if the emotions have control over you rather than you having control of these emotions. And that’s why we’re here, and this is as good a time as any to start sorting through what you’re feeling. Over the next month, you will be working on healing both in your mind and your body and you will learn how to ride the wave of the emotion rather than being pulled out to sea by the undercurrent or dashed onto the beach.”

Mei’s characteristic snort interrupted directly across the circle from Harry, “Next you’ll be telling us to form pearls from the sand in our wounds.”

Healer Jordan was silent for a moment, then she quietly responded, “That’s fair, Mei. I should have
drawn my metaphors from something that was not quite so painfully close to home for you. I am sorry. I apologize.”

Harry was shocked. He hadn’t heard an adult admit to making mistakes, especially to such a caustic teen as Mei. It seemed to also take the wind out of Mei’s sails and he heard her let out a breathy sigh.

“Before we continue with our conversation,” Healer Jordan continued, “we need to make sure we can all understand each other. Tony, I’m going to help you cast the *Scribunt loqui* spell so that Gemma can see what you’re saying. Harry and Aminah, I’m going to cast a spell that allows you to hear what Gemma is saying. It will still write out your words, Gemma, so that you can see them, too.”

Healer Jordan first worked with Tony. Harry could feel her robes brushing against him as she helped Tony hold his wand against the stump of his wand arm and coached him to focus his magical energy through what remained of his appendage so that he could cast the spell. It took him quite a bit longer to cast the spell, but when he was finally successful, it felt like a huge achievement.

“Nice going, Tony!” Harry leaned over to acknowledge his success on along with the others. Gemma clapped enthusiastically when his words fluttered on the parchment, “Did that work, Gemma?”

What was truly amazing, though, was to hear Gemma’s voice. It was not the voice Harry imagined she’d have (the magical voice sounded older and deeper than what he’d expected) but to be able to hear the stream of her thoughts rather than the truncated versions he’d been getting was like being caught in a downpour after a drought. She dove right in, “Oh, Harry, I’m so glad that we can finally talk easily! I have so much to tell you!”

Harry laughed, “Great! I suppose we won’t get any sleep tonight!”

“Not a chance!” she rejoined. Mei groaned in response, but without her usual bile.

Healer Jordan brought them back to the topic at hand.

“Okay, we need to talk about the events of today to try to heal through processing what happened and why,” she encouraged. “Typically we would build our community norms as a group, but right now I’m going to introduce some of the tools we use in council when we are sharing difficult thoughts and feelings. First, what happens in council stays in council - if someone shares something that you want to process outside of the group, then you need to ask permission from them to discuss it. I’ll also ask you to speak from your heart and listen from your heart as well. Do your best and know that others are also doing their best. We’ll pass a talking stick and only the person who is holding it can speak - when it is passed, say so aloud and state the name of the person you’re passing it to.”

Here there was a light jingling of bells and Harry thought that the stick must be decorated with the tiniest of bells.

Healer Jordan continued, “If you’d like the talking stick, indicate so in a respectful and unobtrusive way - raise your hand, snap your fingers, tap your foot. Speak from your own experiences and use I statements. Be mindful of your contributions to the discussion - if you’ve been contributing a lot, maybe it is time to sit back and listen, if you’ve been listening, maybe it is time for you to lean into the discussion and share your thoughts. Make sure to respectively question things that you don’t agree with, though don’t attack others for their beliefs.”

She took a breath and paused. Harry thought she was done, but she went on.
“Council conversations are often uncomfortable because we’re digging into areas that maybe are easier to leave buried, but by uncovering them we are able to release toxins that are hurting us and others and then start healing in earnest. I know that this is not the way the wixen community typically addresses challenges and that it will feel very foreign to many of you. Trust that here at the Center, we’ve been practicing and refining these methods for generations and most of our graduates have found them to be very effective.”

“I’ll get us started by passing the talking stick around.”

The bells tinkled again as if she were shaking it in the air.

“And I’ll ask you each to say your name and share something about yourself that you’d like everyone to know. I’m going to ask that we observe a minute of silence first to help ground us in this work.”

She was silent and the bells were silenced, though Harry could hear her steady breaths from where she sat on the other side of Tony.

Harry listened as the others shifted on their wooden tree stumps… the sounds that Tony was making - his labored breathing, the sharp movements of his feet made Harry think that he was very uncomfortable with this impending discussion. Mei was rocking the wheels of her chair back and forth slightly and the sand made a loud crunching noise under the wheels - louder now that everyone was so quiet. Aminah who must have been sitting between Mei and Gemma was virtually undetectable by Harry. He really couldn’t tell if she was there or not. Even though Gemma couldn’t hear how noisy her feet were shuffling back and forth on the rocky ground, Harry found it reassuring.

The minute stretched on much longer than a minute, Harry was pretty certain. He found himself listening to the chattering of the birds in the aspen groves and the way the wind made the aspen leaves shiver and shake. He could feel the sun emerging from behind a cloud and warming his face.

When a gentle bell broke the silence with its clear high pitch, Harry was jarred back to the present. He had drifted off somewhere peaceful for a moment. Healer Jordan let the bell’s quiet resonance fade and then shook the bells on the talking stick and spoke.

“Okay, I’ll start now. I’m Archimedea Jordan and I’d like to share with you that my impetus for working at the Center is connected to my desire to prevent others from feeling the isolation and estrangement that my brother felt after he was disfigured during the first Wizarding War.”

Her voice had a thick quality to it that made Harry feel as though there was a lot more to the story.

“I’m going to pass the stick to Tony and place it so that he can hold it with his knees.”

Harry knew that she was explaining this for his benefit. He was going to have to find the stick when it was his turn. He felt heat rising in his neck.

Harry held his breath, waiting for Tony to speak. It sounded like the others had as well. He could hear Tony shifting slightly making the bells on the stick tinkle quietly.

“I’m Tony Montague,” he said and then he was very quiet. Harry wondered after a bit if he was done and if should take the stick, but then Tony spoke again. “I don’t want to be here and I don’t want to do this.” He said it with a finality. Harry could hear the bells on the stick moving. “Harry, I’m ready to pass the stick to you,” he said gruffly.

Harry stretched his hand out to the center of the circle in front of Tony, then started passing it
through the air toward the sound of the bells. Tony muttered, “down a bit, mate,” and then Harry found it and took it. He held it in his hands and felt along the length of it. It was embellished with beads and bells of different sizes. It wasn’t just a stick.

“I’m Harry Potter and…” he was torn. He wanted to share the truth, that he was glad to be there, but it seemed like it would be seen as though he were sucking up to Healer Jordan by Tony and Mei. He fought with his general distrust of adults and their systems. Deep down, he felt safer here than he’d felt in a long, long time. “I’m not sure why we’re doing this… but I guess I’ll try… to do it.” It was hard to get it out, but he finally managed.
Chapter Summary

Council continues.

Just admitting out loud to a group of, well, not strangers exactly, but new acquaintances that he wanted to trust the Center took a toll and Harry broke out in a sweat that prickled under his arms. He tensed for a second waiting for the backlash from his peers. When nothing happened he hurriedly passed the staff to Gemma, remembering at the last second that he was supposed to say what he was doing so Aminah would know, “I’m passing the staff to Gemma,” he added in a rush. He admonished himself for opening up so easily. There was something about this place and Healer Jordan (Archimedea - who names their child Archimedea? - wixen - no wonder she goes by Jordan - I thought Jordan was her first name - like Healer Andy) that he felt really good about and that’s why he was inclined to trust it. But trusting was scary and even more so was saying so. Out loud. To people. People who had violent outbursts. Why did I do it?

The bells tinkled as Gemma took the talking stick from Harry’s hand and then stopped. Harry imagined she held the stick between her knees as she signed.

“I’m Gemma Boot and I’m glad to be here and to be making new friends who don’t shut me out because I can’t hear and who don’t cringe and turn away because of my scars.”

Her magical voice said all these things without emotion, but Harry knew that there was emotion behind the words. He wondered if he would have turned away from her scars if he’d been able to see them or shut her out because she couldn’t hear if he had met her before he was in the same boat. His first impulse was to deny that he would have been so cruel, but then he had to admit to himself that he didn’t know.

*I wouldn’t do it knowingly*, he acknowledged, *but what about unconsciously? I might not have even noticed her.*

But then he reminded himself that he did tend to notice the kids on the fringe because that’s where he usually was. Though sometimes he was so caught up in his own stuff that he didn’t notice what was going on in other people’s lives.

*Gah. This talking about feelings stuff is worse than venturing into the Forbidden Forest knowing that the Acromantula are lurking in dark places.*

Harry’s skin felt clammy.

“I’m passing the talking stick to Aminah,” Gemma continued.

The bells rang gently as it was passed.

“Thank you,” Aminah said softly.

Harry leaned forward in an effort to hear her.

“I’m Aminah Khan. “I’m going to try to … trust the Center… and this process,” she said quietly.
“I’m passing the stick to Mei.”

The bells rang quietly. They were silent for a second, then they rang again quietly. “Mei, would you please take the talking stick from Aminah,” Healer Jordan pressed.

The gentle tinkle of the bells became violent as if they were being shaken hard. Harry sat back and heard Aminah’s feet shift on the rocky terrain, imagining she did the same.

“Mei, you can do this. It’ll be okay,” Healer Jordan encouraged.

Mei let out a big sigh and then gulped in a breath.

“You know that I’m Mei Lee. Obviously, I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to have a fishtail. I don’t like this body that I’m in. I can’t live in the ocean and I can only live a half-life on the land - using a stupid muggle wheelchair because my Jiāorén magic clashes with my witch magic. I didn’t ask for any of this!”

She was shouting by the end of it. Her pain was palpable - it emanated in waves that crashed against the small group. Harry recoiled. He felt his staff in his pocket respond to it as if he were being stung by a stinging hex. He grabbed his leg and cried out. Aminah shrieked and next to him he heard another explosion and Tony fell off his tree stump, careening into Harry.

Healer Jordan jumped up and cast a protection spell, “Protego!” and the sparking in his pocket stopped. Harry twisted and helped Tony get to his feet by leaning against him and putting his arm across Tony’s broad back and grasping him by his torso, just underneath his armpits. Tony was quite a bit bigger than he was and heavy, so Harry was just able to support him. His hands had passed over what he realized must be the remnants of Tony’s arms, stumps that contained bones and muscles, rotating within his shoulders in sleeves that were pinned up as if they were trying to reach out, but too short to be effective.

He uttered, “sorry,” when he realized what he was touching. When he felt Tony get his feet back under him and start to stand up, he let go.

“Thanks, man,” Tony muttered.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” Mei was yelling - her voice sounded like it was enclosed in a box.

“Mei, it is okay,” Healer Jordan was consoling. She was going around the circle and checking in with everyone to see if they were okay and collecting the staffs and wands from the teens. She explained that she’d put them at a safe distance from the discussion and give them back when they were done. Harry listened as she walked several feet away and heard the clatter of the wooden objects on a bench on the outer circle. When she got back to her spot, she sat down.

“Mei, is this what happened on the bench earlier?” Healer Jordan asked.

Harry wasn’t aware of his staff sparking before, but remembered the sting on his thigh. He was going to speak up, but closed his mouth when he remembered that Mei still had the talking stick and waited patiently.

“Yes, I was mad because Tony sat down next to me when there wasn’t enough room on the bench and he must have a wand in his pocket because there was an explosion and it burned my fin.” Mei’s voice was still coming from behind the Protego spell, though it sounded like her anger had quelled.

“There was enough room!” Tony interjected angrily. “How was I supposed to know that you’d set off my wand?”
“Tony, would you like the talking stick? Can you use I statements, please?” Healer Jordan patiently reminded Tony of the norms she had laid out earlier.

“I was,” Tony grumbled under his breath. Harry was pretty sure he was the only one who heard it, but then the paper fluttered.

“Let’s remember that everyone is trying to do their best,” Healer Jordan prompted.

Harry heard the tattletale bells on the talking stick. Healer Jordan narrated, “Mei is passing to me, and I’m passing it to Tony,” as the bells traveled from Mei to Tony.

“Tony, please tell us what happened from your perspective,” Healer Jordan asked.

“I arrived late and saw that all my roommates were sitting together, so I thought I should sit with them and the only spot was a gap between Mei and Gemma, so I sat there. Gemma moved over to let me sit, but Mei scooted toward me instead of away. Harry and Aminah made room for me, too, and Gemma scooted farther away, but every time there was extra room it felt like Mei took it instead of letting me sit. So, finally I just sat before she could take up the room and that’s when the explosion happened and the bench fell over. She did it on purpose to embarrass me. And then she called me an armless…” Tony trailed off, but Harry remembered and his mind supplied, “wanker,” unwittingly. It seemed especially cutting and mean-spirited with the feeling of Tony’s amputated arms fresh in his memory.

“Tony, while you may feel you know why someone did something, no one can really know except the person who did it. Let’s keep our statements to the facts that we know and allow others to inform us of their motivation for their actions,” Healer Jordan’s voice was steady.

“I was telling you there wasn’t room and to sit somewhere else and you refused to listen and just sat down anyway!” Mei shouted.

“Let’s use the talking stick, Mei,” Healer Jordan reminded.

“You can shove it up your…” Mei stopped herself before she finished, apparently appalling even herself, “Sorry,” she muttered.

“Thank you,” Healer Jordan acknowledged the apology in a terse tone.

“You can give her the talking stick, Healer Jordan,” Tony suggested and Harry heard the tinkling bells as it was transferred to Mei.

“Here, Mei. Can you state what happened from your perspective?” Healer Jordan encouraged.

“I didn’t want him to sit there, so I moved over so he couldn’t when I felt like he wasn’t listening to me. I’m sorry that I accidentally caused an explosion that made the bench fall over,” she said somewhat contritely.

“Can I have the talking stick, please?” Tony asked, his voice low. It was passed and he said, “I’m sorry that I budged in. I just wanted to feel like I belonged. I’m sorry that the bench fell over and that you all were hurt,” his apology seemed heartfelt.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe they could go soon.

Gemma’s magic voice asked, “May I have the talking stick, please?”

“Sure,” said Tony.
Harry realized that it was up to him to pass it and he reached out for it again, and Tony verbally guided him until he found it and he passed it to Gemma.

“Thanks,” Gemma acknowledged, “I’m sorry, too. I should have realized what was going on, but I could only understand Mei’s side of the conversation. I should have offered you the spot between me and Harry,” Gemma’s voice was almost mechanical in its emotionless aspect, but her words conveyed her feelings.

“May I have the talking stick, Gemma?” Aminah asked.

“Sure, here it is,” and Harry heard it being passed to Aminah.

“Thank you, Tony, for your apology and you, too, Mei,” Aminah said. “I’m concerned, though, that Mei’s magic is so out of control and we’re roommates. Will this happen every time she gets angry? ‘Cause my staff got hot when she shouted earlier and it was sparking when the bench fell over. And I need my staff to get around, I can’t just quarantine it while Mei’s near me.”

“Aminah, can you direct your question to Mei instead of asking about her?” Healer Jordan encouraged.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.” Aminah sounded embarrassed. “Mei, is there anything you can do to make sure this doesn’t happen again?”

Harry heard the bells and knew that Aminah had passed the stick to Mei.

“Um, yeah. I dunno. Leave the center?” Mei said sarcastically.

“Mei, what are some other options?” Healer Jordan suggested.

“I really don’t know,” Mei sounded defeated and sad. “I mean, this is why I’m here because I keep having these outbursts and I can’t be around magic things, even my broom channels my mermaid magic strangely. I was hoping that I’d learn some ways to control it.”

“That’s good, Mei. That’s what we’re going to try to do. What can you do about it in the meantime?”

“I can try not to get so angry, I guess.” Mei conceded.

“It isn’t that you shouldn’t get angry - right? Because that’s just how you are feeling. That’s an emotion - it happens. It is what you’re doing with that emotional energy that is hurting the people around you and yourself. What are some of the strategies we discussed earlier?” Healer Jordan asked.

“Counting to ten, breathing, leaving an area until I calm down…” Mei listed mechanically.

“Mei, can I have the talking stick?” Tony asked.

“Okay,” Mei responded. It tinkled as it was passed and set between Tony’s legs.

“Mei, I didn’t know about your accidental magic issues. That’s rough. I think the hardest thing for me about losing my arms is not what is so obvious - that everyone is pitying me about - like being able to feed myself, go to the bathroom, get dressed, pick up something, but that I can’t even use my wand so that I can do these things with magic. I think it would be hard to have to stay away from anything magical. It’s like a double whammy,” Tony’s tone was filled with an empathy that Harry didn’t expect from the Slytherin.
Harry wanted to add something… but he didn’t know what. He was having a hard time finding the words.

Healer Jordan asked if anyone else wanted the talking stick. Harry hedged and then the opportunity was gone.

“Okay, I want to commend you all for your good work today finding a constructive way to talk about the events of this afternoon. We’ll have many more opportunities for discussions like this. You have the rest of the day to relax and take care of your needs.”

“Healer Jordan, what time is tea served?” Aminah asked.

“Oh, it’s served at 3 pm,” Healer Jordan said over her shoulder. She must have been walking toward the bench where she had put the wands and staffs. She returned them to Tony, Aminah and Harry. Harry ran his hands over his and wondered if he’d be able to tell it apart from Aminah’s.

He shook it out and accio’d his bottle of water - when he felt the familiar shape of the bottle in his hand, he knew he had the right staff. He took a sip of water and thought about what he wanted to do for the rest of the day.

*It'd be nice to sleep some more…*

Gemma came over and asked him, “Do you want to go back to th…” but her words were cut off mid-sentence. Harry furrowed his brow and waited for a bit, thinking that she had been distracted by something she saw, but then her hand was on his arm, pulling his palm up, so she could write on it. She drew a question mark.

“Why did you stop talking?” Harry asked.


“Oh well. It was nice while it lasted,” Harry shrugged. “Yes, let’s go back to the dorm.”
The group of roommates made their way back to the dorm together, subdued and quiet in their progress. Harry wasn’t sure if the group therapy approach to dealing with student infractions was better or worse than detentions. He felt a bit queasy as a result and he had never felt that way leaving detention.

*And I didn’t even cause the disturbance - I was just in the way.*

He wondered how Tony got through each day - all the little things that add up to big things.

*People probably wonder that about me, too. I’m just doing what I have to do. I imagine that Tony’s doing the same.*

He wondered what Mei’s mermaid magic was and how it was different from wixen magic. Maybe he could ask Hermione? Would that be violating the privacy piece they’d all agreed to.

*Probably.*

He could ask Mei, but he was afraid of setting her off again. Maybe he could go to the library and use his *anagnóstis* to read up on it.

*His anagnóstis!* He’d forgotten about it, but he and Gemma could use it to communicate! She could write and he could read what she wrote!

*Why didn’t I think of it earlier?*

He was so excited that he wanted to stop right there and tell Gemma all about it, but decided to wait until they were in the dorm and he could actually show her.

Gemma touched his hand and he realized that he was squeezing her arm. “Sorry, I was thinking about a way we can talk more easily. I’ll show you when we’re back in our dorm,” he told her.

She squeezed his arm to let him know she understood. The way her hand fluttered on his made him understand that she was excited about it, too.

“Aminah, where are you headed?” Mei called out.

“I’m going to our dorm, am I going the wrong way?” Aminah asked from across the corridor.

“Yeah, it’s over here. That’s the dorm for the older residents.” Mei told her.

“Oh, thank you!” Aminah said as her steps approached, “I guess I didn’t give my staff the right directions.”

“What did you tell it?” asked Harry, curious in case he made the same mistake.
“I said ‘Navigant dormitory room,’ but I guess I need to tell it which one.” Aminah answered.

“What’s our dormitory name?” Harry asked.

“It’s ‘Montmorency’,” said Mei, with exasperation in her voice, “Everything is named after places in France, I guess.”

As they filed into their dormitory, Harry sniffed the air - it was warm and humid and smelled like the ocean. Gemma led Harry to the end of his bed and waved across his hand.

“Bye,” Harry said in response.

Harry could hear Mei’s wheelchair in her area, next to his. He couldn’t really hear Tony… he must be in the loo, he could hear someone in there.

He followed the contour of his bed to the desk next to his bed. The layout of the room was weird, he was noticing. It wasn’t a square as he was expecting, it was circular, but different than Gryffindor tower which was pretty spacious and each bed in Gryffindor tower had a lot of space around it. This was pretty cramped.

*Like a powder keg.*

He was surprised by the sound of something being splashed in water really close to him and instinctively turned his head to the sound.

“Potter, don’t look!” Mei blurted out.

Harry froze for a second, “I can’t see, Mei. Remember?”

“Oh, yeah,” she admitted, “but it looks like you’re watching… like you’re looking with your ears. It’s kind of freaky.”

“I was just trying to figure out why it sounds like there is a pool in here,” Harry responded indignantly.

“Oh, that’s because there is. My hydration pool. I’m about to get in it. I hate it when people watch me,” Mei said, her tone a bit more complaisant.

“I promise I’m not,” Harry said with a little less tetch in his voice.

Harry sat at his desk and tried to look as if he were absorbed in retrieving his *anagnóstis* from his staff along with the scrolls that Hedwig had delivered earlier. He remembered he hadn’t read them yet.

Harry unrolled one of the scrolls as he heard Mei move from her wheelchair and slide into the water. Droplets of warm water splashed on his neck, side of his face, and the back of his hand. He imagined she had flicked her tail. The water had a briny smell and he was reminded of how much fun it had been to splash in the waves at the beach earlier with Hermione. Mei sighed and made noises that made him think that the water must feel good. He wondered if she’d sleep in the pool, too. Then it sounded like she dove underwater and he was splashed with a considerable amount of water. He ran his fingers over the parchment he had unscrolled and was getting ready to read and realized that it was pretty wet. He used the bottom edge of his t-shirt to soak up the water and hoped that the ink hadn’t run. He thought about the possible stain on his shirt afterward and shrugged it off. It probably had mustard stains on it already from being a hand-me-down from Dudley.
He was expecting Mei to resurface and splash more water, so leaned over the paper and tried to protect it from getting wet, but she didn’t come back up. After a bit, he was starting to get worried. He rolled up the scroll and stuck it back in his pocket and stood up tentatively.

“Mei?” he asked the air in front of him. “Are you okay?”

No answer. Gemma and Aminah seemed to be involved in a conversation - Harry could hear Aminah’s side of it, or at least her low voice murmuring. He gathered that Tony was still in the loo.

“Hey, Mei - can you hear me?” he asked a little louder.

Still no answer. Also, the water seemed completely still. He wasn’t sure how big the tank was. From the sounds she made earlier, he was guessing it was about the size of a bed. The room wasn’t that big and he imagined she had room to maneuver in her wheelchair and that she had a desk and a wardrobe as he did, maybe even a bed in addition to the tank. Or maybe the tank was in place of the bed. It hadn’t smelled like the ocean the first time he’d entered the room.

He walked to the end of his wardrobe and felt around for the beginning of Mei’s space, trying to find something that he could identify to help orient him. He stuck out his foot, too, feeling the ground in front of him. He remembered his staff, and pulled it out of his pocket and squeezed it twice for the description of the area and found the edge of the tank with his hand. It was shorter than he thought - more like the height of the bed than the desk. It was made of metal, not glass like a fish tank - he realized that he was imagining something where Mei would be visible swimming around as if she were in an aquarium.

*She wouldn’t want to be on display like that.*

“Mei, are you alright?” he asked again.

*She’s a mermaid, right? She can stay underwater for a long time. But she said she couldn’t live in the ocean - so maybe she can’t stay underwater? Should I be worried?*

He thought about sticking his hand in the water and feeling around, then thought about what Mei would do to him if she was fine and he was interrupting her hydration time - or if, Merlin forbid, he accidentally touched her tail while she was in the water.

*I can’t imagine that going well, he thought.*

*What if I get Aminah and Gemma’s attention and they help me figure out if Mei’s okay? Then what if we’re all standing around her tank and Mei surfaces and gets really mad and hurts them because I called them over?*

He stuck his hand in the water to see if he could feel Mei - just below the surface, moving it back and forth in a widening arc. He put his hand down a little deeper, nothing. He moved along the side of the tank and his staff warned him of the wheelchair in his path. He tried to move it, but the brakes must have been on because it didn’t budge. He walked around it and swished his hand through the water again.

“Mei, are you okay? Are you in there?” he tried again.

No answer. This time he leaned over and stuck his hand down to the bottom, but it went farther down than he expected - beyond the floor.

*Of course, it is magically extended, so she has more space to swim. Maybe she swam out to sea.*
Suddenly Harry was being hauled forward into the water by his arm that he had left dangling in the water. He dropped his staff as he tumbled into the water.
A cold hand with a vice-like grip had latched onto his wrist and was pulling him down and down into the seemingly endless depths of the tank. Harry had barely been able to gasp a breath of air before he was submerged. At first, he fought to rise to the surface but the hand that held him was so strong and torpedoing through the water, that he finally went limp and allowed himself to be pulled. His lungs were burning and just when he thought he would explode from the pain, they burst to the surface.

He gasped for air and flailed, trying to keep his head above the waves that were tossing him around - he was certain that they were no longer in the dormitory. The air whipped around them, the water heaved in swells that carried him up and then dropped him down. The briny water filled his mouth and stung his nose. He spat it out and gulped in air. It felt so good to breathe. The hand had let go of his wrist and he wasn’t sure where Mei was or even if it was Mei who had grabbed him.

He was totally disoriented and dizzy - it seemed like they had traveled straight down and then the world tilted upright when they emerged on the surface of the water. He had his eyes closed tight against the blinding sun and the stinging salt water.

A wave buoyed him up and then he was crashing down and he went underwater and then he wasn’t sure which way was up. He opened his eyes under the water hoping to be able to figure out up from the sunlight. The sea salt stung his eyes and he closed them again, but he’d gotten a sense of up from the glimpse of light that he’d seen and realized that he’d been moving down instead of up and righted himself. He burst to the surface again and the hand grabbed his wrist again.

“For Merlin’s sake, I thought you’d be able to swim, Potter!” Mei bellowed at him. “Those cursed papers. Damn.”

It sounded like she was swatting at something, but Harry bobbed underwater for a second, then came sputtering up to the surface with the help of Mei’s hand on his arm.

He was trying to scream “I can’t swim!” but he kept going under water. A big fish fin rubbed against his leg and he started, thinking it must be a shark, and then realized it had to be Mei’s tail.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“I sputter ‘can’t’ gasp ‘swim!’” gurgle.

“Yeah. I figured that out. Now, I’m going to get imprisoned for drowning the Boy Who Lived,” Mei sighed, “that’s just what I need.”

“Hey!” Harry protested throwing his head back to keep his mouth above water. He kicked his feet and his torso rose a bit out of the water. His trainers felt like they weighed a stone each.

“Don’t worry - I’m not going to let you drown,” Mei consoled.

“Don’t” gulp “ever” sputter “do” gasp “that” sputter “again” gulp.

“Okay, okay. Settle down, Potter. But why were you sticking your hand in my tank? That wasn’t cool!” anger flashing through her voice again.

She held him by both arms so that his head stayed above water and he was finally able to speak without getting waterlogged.
His anger was abating now that he could breathe. “I thought you were drowning. I couldn’t hear you and you weren’t answering and I didn’t know where you went.”

Harry realized how silly it sounded now that he was saying it out loud.

Mei barked a laugh in response that sounded like the seals at the zoo. He had a vision of a selkie from a book he’d read in the library as a kid and wondered what her tail looked like.

“I’m not going to drown! I’m part sea creature. I can be in the water for a long time,” she hooted with laughter.

“But you said you couldn’t live in the ocean,” he reminded her, feeling chagrined for his blunder.

“Right, I can’t live out here, but I can stay underwater for a lot longer. I just need to surface to breathe air - like a dolphin. I’m a mammal and still part human, not really a full-fledged mermaid. I can’t live at the bottom of the ocean with my relatives - I have to be near the surface. My great-great-great grandmother was a true jiāorén and somehow I got the blood. They thought the blood had been bred out after a few generations of children without a hint of jiāorén - no more pearl tears or anything fishy and then I… ,” she trailed off, her anger tinged with bitterness.

Harry bobbed in the water, held at arm’s distance from Mei.

“That must have been hard - to be so different from your family,” Harry said, thinking about his own family, even though in his case he had been elated to find out the reason for his profound difference from the Dursleys.

“Yeah. I feel really alone,” she said heavily, and her tail slapped on the surface of the water surprising Harry with a spray of salty water in his mouth.

“I tried visiting the jiāorén when it first happened - I thought that maybe they’d be able to help me or something… accept me… but I felt even more out of place among them. Their world is so different from ours… everything I did was wrong-footed,” she snorted and then a little sob escaped.

“I miss my feet.”

“Yeah. It sucks, doesn’t it,” he agreed.

“Everyone talks about how cool it is that I can swim so fast and stay underwater and everything, even that my tail is beautiful. And yeah, that’s true. But I just want to be normal me again. I don’t want this. I didn’t ask for this,” Mei said.

“Yeah,” was all Harry could think to say. Mei sighed and gently squeezed his arms in a way that made him think that it was what she needed to hear.

They bobbed in the water. Then she let go of him with one hand for a moment and it sounded like she was trying to catch something in the water between them.

“Here you go. You should keep this,” she said as she pressed her fist into the palm of his hand. She turned his hand upward and opened her fist on his palm, letting something small drop into his hand. He closed his fingers around it. It felt small, smooth, and round. He screwed up his face in confusion, and then the pieces fell into place.

“A pearl?” he asked.

“Yes, a pearl,” she sighed, “I’ve been crying lots of them lately.”
“Oh, well. That’s kind of cool,” Harry admitted and then realized how that sounded.

“I mean, not cool that you’ve been crying a lot lately. The pearl is cool. Thank you for the pearl,” he felt like he was tripping over his tongue.

“I should probably take you back. I bet everyone’s freaking out. It’s too bad you can’t see the view here, though. It’s pretty incredible,” Mei said, her voice moving away from him as she turned around in the water to look.

“Oh, is it? We’re not just out in the middle of the ocean with nothing to see but sea?” Harry asked.

“No, we’re off a coral reef that’s teeming with all sorts of colorful creatures and there’s an island not too far away with a volcano that rises up and disappears into the clouds. I explored some of it after lunch after we got this setup,” Mei described.

“Oh, yeah. I can hear the gulls. Maybe we can come back?” Harry said. “Hey, is this connected to the beach we visited earlier today?”

“No, I think this is a different beach, I think that one was in a different part of the world. I think this one is in the South Pacific and that one was more Caribbean. I wonder if we could get the center to connect the beaches - then I could go to class through my tank and not have to worry about getting my hydration time in,” she laughed. “Though if we’re going to spend more time in the water, you’re going to have to learn how to swim. I’m not going to haul you around the ocean making sure you don’t drown,” Mei warned.

“I kind of figured that we’re going to learn how to swim since that room was a beach today,” Harry said.

“True,” Mei agreed. “Well, take a big breath of air, we’re going back.”

Harry filled his lungs and Mei plunged down into the depths of the ocean, hauling Harry behind her by the wrist. Again, he couldn’t figure which way was up until they burst through the surface into the dormitory room. Harry imagined that his bed got a healthy dousing of water. This time he had enough air in his lungs, so the journey wasn’t quite so painful as the first time.

They were greeted by a scream and a shout. Harry thought it must be Aminah and Tony, and then felt Gemma’s small hand on his shoulder.

Aminah and Tony were talking over each other, both were pretty agitated.

“Oh, settle down, would you?” Mei yelled at them. “I told you that they’d be freaking out,” she whispered, her voice was right in Harry’s ear as she pushed him to the side of the tank. Gemma’s hand had grabbed his arm and helped him find the edge to hold on to. He still had the pearl clutched in his fist.

“Harry, come over here … to this side,” Mei said, “there’s a ledge that makes it easier to get out.” He edged along the side toward her voice until his knees banged into the ledge and he was able to then stand up, sending seawater cascading into the room. Gemma kept her hand on his arm as he clambered out, staggering a bit as he found he was still dizzy from the journey to the other side of the world.

Aminah and Tony were still harranging Mei about why she’d pulled Harry into the tank - it sounded like Gemma had seen it and alerted Aminah who shouted for Tony’s help - and that they were all surprised to learn that the tank was actually a tunnel that led who knows where.
“An island in the South China Sea,” Harry provided. He heard the paper flapping by his mouth again and wondered if all the papers from when he was floating around in the ocean were sinking to the bottom of the ocean.

“Are you okay, Harry?” Aminah asked.

“Yeah. Just wet and a bit dizzy,” he swayed on his feet.

Will this be the last time today I’m going to be knocked around by Mei or would there be more.

“Anyone know how to do a drying spell?” Harry asked. Both Aminah and Tony said, “No,” and Mei said, “I can’t do magic until I get my Jiāoréns and witch magic sorted out.” Gemma tapped his arm once, “No.”

Harry heard Gemma’s footsteps retreat and then return and she wrapped a towel around his shoulders.

“If you’re sure you are okay, I’m going back,” Aminah said. And Tony agreed and he heard them both walking away.

Gemma touched his clenched fist and drew a question mark on the back of his hand. He revealed the pearl to her. She picked it up and then set it back on his palm. He put it in his pocket where he found the scrolls in his pocket - sopping wet - and had a sinking feeling that he’d never know who’d written them or what they said.

He pulled them out and held them out to Gemma. “Gemma, what do you think, any chance I’ll be able to read these?” he asked.

He could hear her unrolling the wet paper. She drew a question mark into the palm of his hand.

“Are they completely blank then?” he wondered.

“Yeah, it looks like the ocean washed the ink off the parchment, Harry,” Mei said, “Sorry.”

“Okay, I think I’ll go change,” Harry said.

He wished he could remember the spell that Tony’s dad had used earlier when he dropped the pitcher of icy water on his lap.

Gemma pressed his staff into his hand.

“Oh, thanks, Gemma!”

She took his palm and asked, “G-L-A-S-S-E-S-?

Harry felt his face. They were gone.

He turned toward Mei, “Mei, do you know what happened to my glasses?”

“No, why do you need them anyway? Your eyes don’t look weird. They are actually kind of nice. You shouldn’t hide them behind those glasses,” she stated.

“They help me with the bright lights that hurt my eyes,” Harry explained.

“I thought you couldn’t see?” Mei asked.
“I can’t, except for bright lights, but that’s all I see and it hurts, so my shaded glasses help protect my eyes,” he said. Am I going to have to explain this to people every single day?

“Is that why you were closing your eyes when we were out on the ocean,” she asked.

“Yes, and the seawater stung,” Harry said. “Can I accio my glasses from the water?”

“It’s worth a shot,” Mei said and Gemma tapped his arm twice, “Yes.”

He held his staff over the water and said, “Accio glasses.”

He was reminded of Ginny in the Chamber of Secrets, when he was wet with blood and venom, uttering the same words.
Harry stood by the tank he’d just stepped out of, a little less dripping wet because of the towel that Gemma had grabbed for him. He tried to still his trembling legs, but they continued to knock together. He held his staff over the water, trying to summon his glasses from the depths of the tank - from the ocean floor. The South China Sea ocean floor. Maybe that was too great a distance for the summoning charm to work. It didn’t seem like his glasses were going to come racing toward him, though he held out his hand expectantly.

“Accio glasses,” he said again. His arm was shaking from the tremors that were racking his whole body.

“I don’t think they are coming,” Harry admitted.

“Geez, what a pain,” Mei complained.

Anger flared up in Harry’s gut, “Hey, you didn’t have to haul me out into the middle of the ocean. I can’t even swim!” The fear he’d felt as he’d been dragged underwater hit him full in the chest - the complete disorientation, and then when he realized that he was in the middle of the ocean with nothing to hold on to and no idea if there was even a shore to swim toward, if he could manage to make his way through the water. His throat burned from the sea water and from trying hard not to cry.

“You didn’t have to stick your hand in my tank… ” she dug in.

“I thought something was wrong,” he yelled. “I thought you were drowning…”

She was quiet for a little bit, while his chest heaved and he tried to get his trembling under control.

“Sorry,” Mei muttered, “I’ll go get your glasses.”

He was deluged with a wave of water as she dove down into the tank.

Gemma’s hand on his arm was almost fluttering with concern.

“Sorry, Gemma,” he didn’t know why he was apologizing to her - maybe for scaring her.

He moved his staff to his dominant hand and moved it in front of him, trying to figure out where he was. He needed to get out of his wet clothes.

Gemma tugged at his arm as if she was saying “this way.”

He curled his fingers around her upper arm and let her guide him to the loo. She put his hand on the doorknob.

“Thanks, Gemma. I want to show you how we can talk more easily once I’m dry, okay?”

She tapped twice on his arm, “okay.”

Once in the toilet, he squeezed twice on the staff holding it off the floor to get a sense of the room. It was spacious, everything was at least three yards away from where he was. There was a toilet and a bidet (what’s that?) to his left, a sink adjacent to them. Just to his right there was a shower and next to it, a bathtub. He learned that there was a wooden bench outside of the shower that had a rack of clean towels hanging over it. Harry made his way to the bench and sat down. He’d had enough of
bathtubs, but a shower would get the salt water off of him and maybe he could warm up. He was still really shivering.

He accio’d a change of clothes out of his staff, but he didn’t have another pair of shoes to wear. He wondered if a bidet would dry his shoes and went over to it to see if he could figure out what it was. The staff told him that he’d found the bidet - it sounded porcelain - like a toilet when his staff struck it.

He leaned down to feel it. It was shaped similarly to a toilet, too, but instead of a bowl filled with water, there was a shower head pointing straight up. When he ran his hand over it, water started spraying of it, right into his face. He stood up quickly. It finally occurred to him what it was intended for and he blushed.

Why is this here? Then it occurred to him: Tony needs this.

Okay, that definitely won’t help me dry my shoes.

He made his way back to the bench, found his pile of dry clothes, stripped out of his wet clothes and stepped into the shower. It took him a little bit to figure out the controls and at first he was blasted with cold water until he was able to adjust it to a warmer stream. It felt good just to stand under the water and let it warm him.

He finally stopped shivering. Feeling around the shower stall, he found smaller faucets that worked like the buffet and when he waved his hand near them, they told him which ones contained shampoo, soap, and conditioner. Finally, he shut the water off stepped out of the shower to dry off. He dressed though decided to carry his soggy trainers rather than put them on. Maybe someone can help me figure out how to dry them, he thought. He Tempus’d his staff and found out that it was after 3 pm.

He was feeling a lot better when he emerged from the bathroom.

“Hey, Potter!” Mei called to him from her tank, he could hear the water sloshing around her.

“Yes?” he answered.

“I found your glasses.”

“Oh, wow. How did you find them?” He thought they were gone forever.

He walked nearer the tank, his staff struck the bottom. He was a bit nervous about getting too near Mei.

“I just swam along our path and looked for them until I found them. Here you go,” Mei said, her voice subdued.

He held out his hand, and she placed the glasses in it.

“Thank you,” he said as he put them on. She grabbed his forearm and he flinched.

“Hey, settle down. I’m not going to pull you in again. I just wanted to tell you that… I’m really sorry. I get so angry and I don’t think. And I didn’t think how scary it would be for you to be pulled underwater like that. I’m sorry that I keep knocking you over. I really am.” The regret in her voice was unmistakable.

“Thanks, Mei. I’m sorry that I invaded your space,” Harry offered.
“Harry, I really will try to do better, okay?” Mei’s voice broke a bit.

“Okay. Me, too,” he said.

“Thanks for giving me another chance.”

He wondered if there would be more pearls.

“Are you going to go to tea?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m getting out of the tank now.”

He heard Gemma coming over.

“Hi, Gemma,” he turned toward her footsteps.

She grabbed his hand and turned over his palm so she could talk to him, “N-E-W” space “W-A-Y” space “T-O” space “T-A-L-K-?” she asked.

“Oh, right! My anagnóstis!” he remembered and felt around his wet clothes until he found his trousers and the pocket of his trousers. He was relieved to find that it was still there. He pulled it out. He didn’t think it would be harmed by being in the ocean - it seemed like it was solid metal.

“Do you have paper you can write on?” he asked Gemma.

“Yes,” she tapped on his arm and left his side.

He found hangers inside his wardrobe and hung up his wet clothes, hoping that they wouldn’t make too much of a puddle. As he closed the wardrobe doors (he was tempted to leave them open to help the clothes dry faster, but then remembered what it felt like to run into an open door), he heard Mei getting out of her tank. A bit of water splashed on his stocking feet.

I am going to really need to learn that drying spell, he thought.

Gemma came back quickly, he heard her put the paper and a pencil on the desk. He found the desk and pulled out the chair for her.

“Here, you write something quickly. We don’t have much time; tea already started,” he reminded her. She tapped his hand, “right.”

She pulled the chair closer to the desk and he heard the sound of the pencil scratching on the paper. He was glad she grabbed a pencil and not a quill - he didn’t want to have to wait for the ink to dry.

She tugged at his hand to let him know she was ready and stood up. He took her place at the desk and scooted his fingers forward until he found the paper. He lined up the anagnóst is with the top left-hand corner and started reading what she had written.

“Hi, Harry! I have so much that I want to talk with you about, but I know that we don’t have much time. I guess what’s most on my mind at this moment is knowing that you’re really okay after getting pulled into Mei’s tank.”

Her voice was just as he imagined it would be - lyrical and light, a bit bubbly, but not too much. He smiled softly and turned his head toward her, swallowing a bit of emotion that had risen in his throat. She squeezed his arm, it felt like a question.

“I can hear your voice. You sound like I thought you’d sound,” he said, his voice cracking a little.
She squeezed his arm a bit more firmly.

Harry turned his ear toward Mei’s side of the room. He was pretty sure that she was busy getting dried off.

He said as quietly as he could manage, “It was scary, but I didn’t get hurt. I’m okay. She’s really sorry, for what that’s worth,” he said.

She pulled the paper over to her side of the desk. He heard the bed creak as she sat on it while the pencil scratched over the paper. She pushed the paper under his fingertips that were resting lightly on the desk. He ran the anagnóstis over the paper and found her new sentence.

“Does this ana-thingy speak out loud in the room?”

Harry turned his face to Gemma and said, “No, it talks to me quietly in my ear. I don’t think other people can hear it,” he touched the aftí in his ear.

He realized that she probably couldn’t see it from what Hermione had told him about it. So he pulled it off and held it out on his palm so that she could see it. She touched it lightly and after a bit, he put it back on. Gemma pulled the paper toward her again and wrote more.

“I think she’s trying. She really is having a hard time. It is too bad that she keeps hurting us. I hope she gets it under control. Soon.”

He read her words with the anagnóstis and nodded in agreement.

Harry heard Tony’s footsteps and realized that Tony’s space was next to his. He had been pretty quiet this whole time - he wondered what he’d been doing and why he’d waited to go to tea.

He heard Mei going across the room - to Aminah’s space, he guessed. “Aminah, if you push my chair, I’ll guide you to the dining hall for tea,” Mei offered.

“Tony, are you headed there? Want to walk with us? Gemma, Harry? Let’s go, okay?” There was a grit in Mei’s voice - like she was steeling herself to be kind and thoughtful. Harry had to admit that she had a pluckiness that he admired.

Gemma’s back was to the room, so Harry was pretty certain she didn’t know that they were mobilizing.

He called out to Mei, “We’re coming,” and then leaned into Gemma and told her that the Montmorency group was headed down to tea now.

Gemma folded up the piece of paper and it sounded like she had stowed it in her pocket. Harry put the anagnóstis in his pocket. Maybe they’d be able to continue talking at tea. He found his staff, but collapsed it and put it in his pocket, too, and took Gemma’s arm to go to tea.

He ran his hand through his damp hair. The shower had been refreshing, but, boy, this first day had been exhausting so far.

The tea was set out at each individual table this time. Gemma poured out the tea for everyone. Harry was sitting next to Tony and he wondered how Tony was going to drink his tea and eat his biscuits without his dad here to help him. He leaned over and asked before he lost his nerve, “Um, Tony? Do you need any help with your tea or biscuits?”
There was a long silence. Harry wasn’t sure if Tony heard him, and then he heard Tony shift in his seat and he had a feeling that Tony was thinking about it, so he waited a bit longer.

“Um, yeah. There’s a straw on the table,” Harry started running his fingers lightly over the tablecloth, trying to locate it. “It’s in the center, about a foot straight ahead of you… that’s it.”

“Won’t the tea burn you if you drink it through a straw?” Harry asked. He held the straw, but then remembered that Tony couldn’t just grab it. Or maybe he’d grab it with his mouth when he was ready. He waited.

“Yeah. Could you put milk in my tea to cool it down?” Tony asked.

“Sure, where’s the milk?” Harry reached slowly to the center of the table trying to locate the milk.

“To you right about 10 inches,” Tony directed.

Harry could hear Mei and Aminah talking about a care of magical creatures class that had included unicorns on the other side of Tony.

Harry wrapped his hand around the milk pitcher. His other hand was still holding the straw.

“Here, I’ll hold the straw,” Tony said and Harry felt him take the straw in his mouth and then Tony tapped the teacup with the straw. Harry wasn’t sure if Tony did it on purpose, but it helped him locate Tony’s teacup and he moved the milk pitcher toward it. Tony tapped it again, and Harry clinked the pitcher against the teacup and then poured in some milk.

“How’s that?” Harry asked.

“A bit more, please,” Tony said through clenched teeth.

“That okay?” Harry inquired.

“Yeah. Tanks.” Harry heard the straw hitting the side of the cup and guessed that Tony was sipping it.

“Let me know when you want to put the straw down or want a biscuit, okay?” Harry offered.

“Kay,” Tony said.

Harry felt around for his own teacup and added a bit of milk.

“Did you want sugar, Tony?” Harry asked.

“No, tanks,” he said after an audible sip - the straw interfering with his enunciation.

It sounded like Gemma had sat back in her chair after finishing serving and he reached for her arm to get her attention.

“What kind of biscuits are there?” he asked.

She pulled out the paper from her pocket and he heard her writing. So he fished the anagnóstis so that he could read it. She guided it to the line on the paper.

“The plate is straight in front of you and to the left a bit. There is shortbread, chocolate digestives, ginger nuts, and fig rolls in that order from left to right on the plate. Do you want me to put some on your plate?” Gemma had written.
Harry salivated at the names of the biscuits.

“Sure, I’ll take a couple of chocolate digestives, a ginger nut, and a fig roll. Thanks!” He heard Gemma placing them on his plate.

“Tony, do you want biscuits,” Harry asked.

Harry heard the straw drop to the table and roll a bit.

“Sure,” Tony, “Gemma, could you please put a ginger nut on a plate for me, please?” he asked so politely that Harry almost forgot that he’d been snickering at their blood status earlier. Harry tried to push that out of his mind, though it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Gemma reached across Harry to set the plate in front of Tony, while Harry was trying to eat a shortbread. He bumped into Gemma’s arm as he leaned forward.

“Oh, sorry, Gemma!” Harry apologized. She squeezed his shoulder after she set down the plate.

“Tony, do you want me to hold the biscuit for you?” Harry asked, a bit nervously.

“Um, yeah, would you?” Tony seemed embarrassed.

Harry located the plate and the biscuit and held it in the air where he thought Tony would be able to get it. Tony grabbed it with his lips and Harry let go.

Harry found the straw again and held it up and after a bit, Tony mumbled, “Thanks,” as he grabbed it with his mouth and Harry heard it tapping against the teacup.

Healer Jordan had entered the room and asked for their attention with her amplified voice. The noisy buzz of conversation settled down.

“I hope you’re enjoying your tea,” Healer Jordan began. “We’ve made arrangements with the instructors to continue introductions tomorrow morning. We’ll start the day with a short hike in the Mont Blanc room and a talk with a special visitor. You can use the rest of this afternoon to rest and explore the Center.”

Mei groaned loudly.

Harry shoved the shortbread in his mouth while he thought about his wet trainers and how Mei was going to handle the hike. He figured that Healer Jordan would figure out how to make it manageable for her - but he couldn’t help but speculate about how Mei would send him tumbling this time. There’s definitely a pattern.

Gemma pushed the paper under Harry’s arm and he held the anagnóstis over it waiting for her to guide his hand to the line she’d written.

“Who do you think the special guest will be?” Gemma asked.

“I have no idea,” Harry responded. He really didn’t have a clue, “Who do you think it will be?” he asked, pushing the paper back to her.

“Maybe Albus Dumbledore?” Gemma wondered.

Harry’s gut seized at that and he wondered why. He’d be surprised to see Professor Dumbledore here. The last time he’d been with Dumbledore was in his office after the Basilisk attack and he felt weird about that encounter… like it hadn’t gone the way Professor Dumbledore expected.
“I don’t think it’ll be Professor Dumbledore. He seems busy with other things…” Harry left off.

“Who do you think will be our special guest, Tony?” Harry asked.

“I dunno,” Tony responded absentmindedly, “What’s that pen thing you’re using?”

“Oh, it’s my anagnóstis,” Harry held it up for Tony to inspect. “It reads text aloud to me.”

“That’s handy,” Tony said, “I’m going to be getting some magical arms soon.”

“That’s good,” Harry said, though he immediately thought of how Mei’s Jiāorén magic had made his staff sting in his pocket and winced at the thought of that happening to Tony and his magical arms. Maybe that’s why he doesn’t have them yet. That would be way worse than holding your staff and having it react - at least you could let go.

“What?” Tony asked, quizzically.

“What?” Harry echoed.

“Why’d you make that face?”

“What face?” Harry asked.

“You looked like you’d tasted something bad,” Tony said.

“Oh. I was thinking about…” He wasn’t sure he should talk about it. He listened to see if Mei was paying attention. She seemed to be engrossed in a rather intense, emotional conversation with Aminah.

“About what?” Tony prodded.

“About how when Mei blasted us with her magic, it made my staff sting me,” Harry said quickly, “and I was thinking about how much that would hurt if it was through your… arms.”

“Oh. What do you mean it made your staff sting you. Where was your staff? You didn’t have it with you when we were sitting on the logs,” Tony questioned.

“I had collapsed it, it was in my pocket,” Harry explained and pulled the staff out of his pocket to show Tony. “And it stung like a hex.”

“That would be bad. Maybe I’ll ask Healer Jordan about it,” Tony said quietly, “I don’t know if…”

“What?” Harry pressed.

“Nothing,” there was a finality to Tony’s voice that felt like a brick wall.

Harry shifted his mushy trainers underneath him, his toes pruning up in his socks. Harry sat quietly thinking about Mei’s outbursts. They seemed to happen when she was angry or frustrated. It put Harry in mind of his accidental magic before Hagrid showed up with his letter.

I didn’t feel any magic, though, when she pulled me into the tank. Maybe because she was in the water?

Gemma slid the paper on the table toward Harry. He put the staff back in his pocket and picked up the anagnóstis to read her note.
“Harry, I like being able to talk like this. I’m glad you thought of it. It’s a lot faster. My brother said you talked to a snake during a dueling club last year - he said it was really cool. His friends thought it was freaky, but Terry said it’s a really rare gift. He thinks you’re a good seeker, too, even though Ravenclaw beat Gryffindor the year before. He said if you hadn’t been in the hospital wing during that match that you would have given them a run for their knuts.”

The affi in his ear read Gemma’s note in the same clear, bubbly voice that he found both amusing and soothing.

Harry didn’t want to talk about being a parselmouth in front of Tony and he didn’t really know what to say to Gemma about the Ravenclaw/Gryffindor match… it still made his stomach drop to think about losing that match even though he knew in his mind there was nothing he could have done.

Harry excused himself from the group after tea and went back to the dormitory - he was too tired to explore the center. His wet trainers were really bugging him - water was squishing between his toes. He just wanted to sleep. It was all he could do to toe off his trainers (hoping they’d dry while he slept) and his wet socks and climb into bed. It was a little damp from water splashed from Mei’s tank - but he didn’t care as he sank into the soft pillow and pulled the sheets around himself.
A little hike

Chapter Summary

Harry walks on a mountain path.

When Harry awoke the next morning, he couldn’t believe that he’d slept through the entire night. His protesting stomach woke him up. He’d slept through dinner and now felt a bit trembly as he dressed for the day. He pulled on his trainers, grimacing as their clammy dampness encased his feet. He left the toilet quietly as he was up way before his roommates… it would be at least an hour before breakfast was ready. He made his way down the corridor wondering if the sandwiches in his staff were safe to eat.

Harry used his staff to locate a bench outside of the library and accio’d the sandwiches and his water out of his staff. He sniffed at the sandwiches and decided that they’d be okay and woofed one of them down followed by some gulps of water.

He decided to write a letter to Hermione telling her about the day he’d had yesterday after she left - also that Hedwig had arrived (she’d know as soon as she got the letter, of course). Harry summoned his writing materials from his staff along with his anagnóstis. He wrote out three versions of the same message, “You sent a note to me, Harry Potter, that arrived on Monday, June 28th that was accidentally destroyed. Could you please resend it? Thanks. HP.”

He used the anagnóstis to make sure the notes were legible - it was weird to hear his own voice through the aftí - then rolled them up. He’d ask Hedwig to take them to the people who’d sent the messages. He knew she’d understand what to do.

She’s a brilliant bird.

He cast the Navigation charm and headed to the owlery looking forward to spending some time with Hedwig.

He walked through the threshold and felt the very slight tug on his navel. The sounds of Charing Cross Road drifted in through the open windows along with the morning air, which seemed a bit warm for the time of day. He guessed it was going to be a hot one and was thankful that he wasn’t stuck at the Dursley's tarring the driveway or some other heinous task that they were likely to invent for him to do on an outrageously hot day. Remembering the garden, though, reminded him of Nio hus cherio kisa and he thought of his cool scales against his neck.

Little Friend.

Hedwig hooted from her perch high in the rafters and Harry lifted his face to her and smiled, "Hiya, Hedwig. It's good to see you, too,” he greeted.

She flew down to him in an explosion of feathers against his face as she dug her talons into his shoulder. He had time to brace himself, his staff had warned him she was coming right at him, and he adjusted his stance as she settled herself on his shoulder. He reached for her and pressed his face into her feathery belly, breathing in her pine-musty scent, a bit of a relief from the stench of the owlery floor that reeked of owl droppings.
"It's no wonder you sit high up in the rafters, Hedwig. It stinks down here," Harry whispered into her feathers.

"You could take her out to the courtyard, if you want to escape the fetor of the owlery," an ancient voice spoke from the wall near the door.

Harry started, "Oh, I didn't know anyone else was in here!" He turned toward the voice, balancing Hedwig on his shoulder.

"Well, I'm always here, aren't I," said the voice.

"Oh?" Harry questioned. Then he remembered his staff and held it off the floor and squeezed it to get a description of the room, and he hoped, of the person standing by the door.

But there was no person.

"Are you a portrait?" Harry asked slowly.

"Yes, what are you? Blind?" the portrait asked.

"Um, yes," Harry responded.

"Oh, right, then," the portrait had the good sense to sound embarrassed.

"You said there is a courtyard?" Harry queried.

"Yes, just over there," the portrait said unhelpfully.

Harry shook his head a bit in disbelief.

"Navigant courtyard," Harry said to his staff and it led him to a narrow doorway, down a few stairs (not nearly enough to reach the ground below the tower), and then out onto a cobbled pathway. The morning air was heavy with moisture and warmth, but also fragrant with the aroma of lavender. He could hear the breeze rustling leaves on a nearby tree. He squeezed his staff in the air to get a description of the courtyard and then navigated to the bench that it described under the tree.

Hedwig's talons on his shoulder were painful, so he encouraged her to hop down on to the bench and he fed her some of the biscuits he'd saved from tea. She growled contentedly while Harry took deep breaths - the garden in the courtyard was full of fragrant plants; herbs, Harry discovered as he ran his hands over some of the spiky plants that bordered the bench. He liked the coolness of the stone bench beneath his legs.

Finally, after a long while of just enjoying the quiet morning in the courtyard, Harry attached the notes to Hedwig's leg and asked her to return to the people who'd sent them. He knew one was headed to Hermione, but he wasn't sure who'd sent the other ones. I should have looked at them right when I got them, he admonished himself.

He took her back up to the owlery figuring it would be easier for her to leave from the tower than down in the courtyard and said goodbye to her before she hooted and took off.

"Did you enjoy the courtyard?" the portrait asked him as he was leaving.

"Yes, very much. Thank you for suggesting it," Harry replied.
He met up with Gemma and Tony at breakfast and then they headed to the Mont Blanc room for the hike.

Gemma paused at the threshold of Mont Blanc and Harry wondered if there was something about it that looked different. It smelled the same. He could smell and feel the cool mountain air wafting into the corridor from the room as they approached and even hear some birds trilling in the distance… at first he mistook it for someone whistling and then he realized it must be birds. It sounded like they were talking to each other almost - calling and answering over a distance. He was a bit entranced as it he realized it helped give dimension to the space inside the room. He could tell from the bird songs that the landscape sloped down in front of them and rose up behind them.

He realized that they had been standing there for a while, Gemma couldn’t be listening to the birds. *Maybe she’s watching them?*

He squeezed her arm so that she’d know that he wanted to say something and look, “What is it?” he asked.

Tony answered: “The benches are gone and there’s just a path leading down to the lake.”

“Do you think Mei will be okay on the path?” Harry wondered, conceding that he was thinking about himself as much as her.

“I dunno. She’ll probably pitch a fit,” Tony deadpanned.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed silently.

“Where do we go?” Harry asked, not liking hovering in the in-between space.

Gemma was moving her arms, likely signing to Tony. Harry dropped her arm so that she could sign more freely.

“What’s she saying?” Harry asked Tony.

He heard Gemma moving away from him, through the door and onto the crunching pathway. The birds got quieter with her noises.

“I don’t know - I think she’s asking Healer Jordan something,” Tony said.

“Is Healer Jordan nearby?” Harry wondered.

“She’s way down the path, but I guess they can understand each other,” Tony said, “Hey, let’s get out of the door. There are more people coming.”

Harry could hear the man he had noticed the day before, the one who had sat behind him when the bench fell over and tried to help Harry up, his tenor animated as he was recounting traveling on the underground to someone. It sounded like it was the first time he’d traveled on it.

He was talking to someone Harry hadn’t noticed before, or at least he didn’t recognize anything about the person.

Then Healer Jordan’s voice surprised him as it came from a space just to the right in front of him, “Please make your way down to the lake by following one of the paths. We will meet on board the deck of the HMS Eden.”

“Oh, hi Healer Jordan,” Harry said, but she didn’t answer.
He waited a bit more, rocking back and forth, listening to the water squishing in his shoes; he could hear the bells of the ship clanging in the distance. He then registered that Tony was walking ahead and leaving Harry standing in the doorway by himself. He quickly pulled out his staff, extended it and swung it back and forth, listening for the voice. He remembered to hold it with his index finger pointing down the length, and the *afit* started telling him about the doorway and the path in front of him. He moved out of their way and they came through the door behind him.

“Healer Jordan, am I on the right path?” he asked, but she didn’t answer, but instead repeated the same message.

“Please make your way down to the lake by following one of the paths. We will meet on board the deck of the HMS Eden.”

*It must be a recorded message,* Harry thought, flushing with the awareness that he’d been speaking to air again. He could hear Tony walking down the path, probably following Gemma and he started down the path after them.

He said, “*Navigant* HMS Eden,” to his staff and it led him forward. The birds had quieted down since more people entered the space, but he could still hear the more distant trills. There was also the scent of wood burning, but light as though it were distant - *a campfire*.

Harry could hear other people walking on the path behind him, but they were quiet except for their feet crunching over the sandy surface of the walkway. Harry was pretty sure he was still on a path - he was following the sounds of Tony’s steps ahead of him and listening to the directions from his *Navigant* spell. He thought about calling to Tony to wait for him, to help guide him, but then he remembered that Tony really couldn’t guide him easily. His memory brushed over the feeling of Tony’s remaining arms in his hands when Harry had been trying to help him right himself during council. *That would be awkward.*

He stumbled a few times as he tread on larger rocks and he brushed against bushes and other plants that grabbed at his trousers.

His staff warned him of a tree branch that almost hit him in his face - and he reached out his hand in front until he found it and held it away as he moved around it. It was laden with small leaves that whispered through his fingers.

He felt as though his progress was slow going and that Tony was getting farther and farther away from him. It was harder to tell if he was still on the path. The people behind him seemed to be moving even slower than he was and he was becoming conscious of a growing apprehension in his gut as he felt the gulf of distance between him and the other people. His breathing quickened.

And then he heard footsteps crunching on the path, coming up it, toward him, running, and getting louder as they approached. He stopped afraid they’d run into him. And then they stopped, not far in front of him. Their breathing was heavy from running up the mountain path.

“Hello?” Harry asked; the *Scribunt loqui* flapped noticeably in the breeze.

A few light footsteps, and then Gemma’s hand was on his arm.

“Oh, hi Gemma. Where’d you go?” Harry was relieved she was back.

She moved to his left side and lifted his palm to write in his hand, “*S-O-R-R-Y*” space “*I*” “*L-E-F-T-*” space “*H-.-J-.*”… Harry interrupted her work, “H!?J? Is that Healer Jordan?” She tapped his hand twice, “yes.”
She continued, “W-A-S - L A - T - E - N - E - E - D - E - D - H - E - L - P - F - O - R - M - E - I”. Harry furrowed his brow at this, Gemma had run it all together in her hurry and it took him a bit to figure out what she was saying. He repeated what he understood, “Healer Jordan was late and needed your help so that she could help Mei?”

Behind them, Harry could hear distantly the repeated message from Healer Jordan, “Please make your way down to the lake by following the path. We will meet on board the deck of the HMS Eden” as Gemma wrote in his hand.

She tapped “yes,” impatiently on his hand, and then wrote “IGOHELPMEINOWYOUGOTOSHIP” Harry said the letters as she wrote them and pieced them together until he understood them.

Before he could answer, she was off. He imagined that she could see Mei at the doorway. He felt a bit useless, standing there in the pathway as Gemma ran up the mountain path to help Mei and Aminah.

The people who had been following him had passed them by while they were talking and he felt alone again. He pointed his staff down the mountain path and continued on, stumbling over stones occasionally and straining for cues that he was staying on the path and nearing the ship. The path got steeper and started zig-zagging across the side of the mountain. Dust from the path seemed thicker on this part of the trail - he could feel it coating his lungs and depositing a layer on his sweating skin and caking his damp trainers.

He slipped on some loose gravel at the bend of one zig-zag and sat down rather suddenly on the hillside, sliding down on his feet awkwardly as he tried to regain his balance. A rock had jabbed uncomfortably into his backside, and his wrist felt a bit tweaked from the sudden jolt as he landed. He managed to stand up again and brush off the dirt. A little shaky, he kept going.

He could hear the bells on the ship more easily now; he knew he was getting closer.

He wished he hadn’t been squeamish about asking Tony to lead him. Better than tumbling down a mountainside. He thought about Nio hus cherio kisa and wished he’d been able to bring the little snake with him.
Harry heard some voices up ahead on the path and wondered what was going on.

*Is it Tony?* he thought, *maybe Tony talking to the two people who had passed me?*

He rubbed his sore butt cheek and then shook out his wrist and made his way toward the voices.

Tony’s voice sounded distressed - angry and a bit frantic.

“Stop doing that. Let me go!” Tony shouted fiercely. As Harry neared he realized that it was coming from the ground. Tony had also fallen down.

**Who thought up this hike idea?** Harry’s anger sparked and he didn’t listen carefully to his staff, stubbing his toe painfully on a rock. Resisting the urge to toss the staff down the mountainside, he bit his tongue to keep from crying out and limped along in his wet trainers. It was only the knowledge that there were people he didn’t know on the trail and concern that Tony might be really hurt that kept him from losing it completely. By the time he’d traveled close enough to ask what was going on without having to shout, he’d calmed down a bit.

“Tony, are you alright?” Harry shouted.

“Hey, do you know this young man?” It was the voice of the man who’d been talking about the underground.

Tony was cursing and it sounded like he was flailing, too.

“Yeah, is that you Tony?” Harry asked.

Tony grunted in response.

Harry’s staff told him that he was a step away from a person lying in the pathway and that there were two other people nearby.

“Hey, he won’t let us help him up. He won’t let us touch him,” the man explained.

“Do you know how he’s hurt?” Harry asked as he lowered himself down to the ground, using his staff to help keep his balance and then collapsed it and put it in his pocket. He slowly reached forward, tentatively feeling for Tony. He felt Tony flinch as his hand came in contact with his torso and pulled back. From what he could gather, he was lying on his back perpendicular to the path.

“He’s got some scrapes and bruises, but he’s not telling us where he hurts,” another man’s voice supplied, “and he won’t let us help him up.”

“Could you go get Healer Jordan?” Harry asked, “I’ll sit with him.”

“Are you sure you’re okay staying with him?” the second man asked, his voice was deep and
resonant, with a slight accent that made Harry think of far-off lands.

“Yeah, we’ll be alright,” Harry assured.

Harry sat quietly by Tony’s side as the two men walked away. Harry noted that the second man was mentioning the locations of rocks on the path for the first man using the face of the clock for reference. *He must be blind, too,* Harry thought. He wondered why the second man was here.

He let out a big breath.

_Why send all of us down this mountainside when we’re still learning how to get around in our newly broken bodies? It seems sadistic._

When he was pretty sure that the two men were out of earshot, Harry probed, “Hey, Tony? Do you want me to help you up or do you want to keep sitting here?”

He made an unintelligible grumble in response.

Harry shifted his position to get more comfortable (and off the bruise) - it seemed like they’d be here for a while.

Tony let out a sigh that hitched in the back of his throat like a sob. Tony’s feet started scrambling on the rocky earth, sending little rocks down the side of the hill by the sound of it.

“Are you trying to sit up?” Harry asked.

Tony’s answer was just a frustrated yell. He lay still again. The way his was gasping for air made Harry pretty certain he was crying.

“Do you just need something to push against to stand up?” Harry asked, guessing that Tony didn’t want him to haul him up by his shoulders. He was pretty sure that’s what the shouting had been about.

Harry crawled around Tony, near his legs, feeling the ground in front of him to navigate over the loose rocks. Up above on the path, Harry heard the sounds of other people coming toward them. Tony must have heard them, too.

“Yeah, the rocks keep moving - it's so sandy here,” Tony said. He had seemed to get control again.

He pulled his knees up and Harry sat in front of him. Tony pushed against Harry, but didn’t seem to be able to get the leverage he needed to sit up. He flopped back onto the ground and then groaned, “Just roll me down the mountain.”

The way Tony said it seemed kind of funny and sad all mixed up together. A chuckle bubbled out of Harry’s lips and he tried to catch it - mortified that he had laughed.

To his surprise, Tony started laughing, too. Tears squeezed from Harry’s eyes as he laughed harder than he’d laughed in a long time. It felt good. They settled down and Harry had an idea. He leaned forward and put his hands on Tony’s shoes, “Try now Tony!” he said as his held Tony’s feet down. They pulled away from Harry, and he pressed down, and he could hear Tony straining to sit up. Tony’s breathed out heavily near Harry’s ear. He’d done it! Harry moved away a bit so that Tony could get his legs under him and stand up. Harry stood up slowly, too, holding his arms out in a half circle around Tony, but not touching him - just there in case Tony started to fall again.

“Thanks, Harry,” Tony said quietly, though there was still a hint of laughter in his voice.
“No problem,” Harry said, a bit embarrassed, “do you want to keep going or just wait here for Healer Jordan?” he continued.

“Let’s go before Mei gets here,” Tony said hurriedly, his voice directed toward the mountain as if he were looking up it.

Harry took his staff out of his pocket and said, “Navigant HMS Eden.”

It sounded like Tony had started walking ahead of him again.

“Hey, Tony.” Harry's throat felt tight. He hated to ask.

“What?” Tony responded; it sounded like he had stopped and turned around.

“I could… use… your help… too,” Harry had a hard time getting the sentence out.

“Oh, right,” Tony said, “what do you want me to do?”

“Could you guide me? Tell me how to get around the rocks on the path?”

“I thought your staff did that?” Tony responded.

“Yeah, it does and I’m getting better at understanding the directions it gives me, but…” he trailed off.

“Never mind. Forget it.”

He stepped awkwardly on a clump of grass in the path and stumbled a bit, caught himself and kept going. He thought Tony would turn around and start walking down the path again, but didn’t hear any evidence of it and felt his face get hot as he realized that Tony must be watching him. His staff confirmed it, telling him that there was a person standing two yards in front of him and he stopped.

“Er,” Tony started, “I’ve seen Gemma guide you, and you hold onto her arm… and…”

Harry understood.

“Listen, I think if we’re going to get down this mountain in one piece, we’re going to need to help each other,” Harry said more matter-of-factly than he felt.

He knew there was truth in it. It was hard to ask for help, but easier to offer it. Maybe Tony felt the same way.

“So, how do we do this?” Tony hedged.

“How about I put my hand on your back? I think you’re too tall for me to put my hand on your shoulder,” Harry explained.

“Okay, we could try it. You’ll still use your staff?” Tony asked.

“Yeah. I’ll put my left hand on your back and use my staff in my right hand,” Harry said, stepping a little closer and holding his hand out.

“Okay, take another step,” Tony guided, he had turned around.

Harry found Tony’s back and dusted it off a bit.
“Whoa, you’re covered in dirt,” Harry said coughing. “Would it be okay if I held onto your shirt?”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Tony agreed. “Okay, I’m going to start. It’s going to get steeper soon after this switchback.”

“What’s a switchback?” Harry asked imagining a torture device that Filch would keep stocked in his office.

“It’s the turn on the trail when you zigzag across the side of a mountain to keep the trail from being too steep. My folks like to go hiking,” Tony explained. “Okay, there’s a big rock on the right, so go behind me a bit more.”

“Isn’t that kind of a muggle thing to do?” Harry asked as he tapped the rock with his staff as he passed it.

“Nah. Hey - what are you saying?” Tony stiffened.

“Nothing. I just haven’t heard of wixen hiking before,” Harry said.

“Wixen?” Tony asked, and then added, “Okay, watch out the path gets pretty narrow here. There are a bunch of trees with branches hanging down.”

Harry could feel Tony ducking and Harry followed right behind him, glad he was a little shorter.

“I just learned it - it means wizards or witches or both. It’s a lot easier to say,” Harry explained.

“That’s just weird,” Tony said.

“Do you think we’re really in the mountains or just in a magically enhanced room?” Harry asked.

“I think we’re in the French Alps, for sure. It is too much like the real thing to be magically enhanced. Okay, it’s getting a little steep here. Let’s go slowly. I think we went through some sort of portal. Do you feel it when we go through the door?” Tony wondered.

Tony slipped just then and lurched backward as he tried to catch himself. Harry hanging onto his shirt, pushed a bit and helped him right himself. Harry slid a little too on the sandy slope that was littered with tiny marble like rocks, but steadied himself with his staff and by leaning on Tony.

“Whoa”… “phew”… “thanks”… “yeah, thanks”… They recovered and kept going, a little more carefully.

Harry was surprised that Healer Jordan hadn’t joined them yet. Or that Mei and Gemma and Aminah hadn’t caught up with them. Or anyone else for that matter.

Didn’t Healer Jordan say there were something like sixteen people doing the residency program?

“Where is everyone?” Harry asked.

“Well, that blind guy went down to the ship to get Healer Jordan,” Tony explained.

“Didn’t both of them go?” Harry asked.

“What do you mean, both?” Tony questioned.

“There were two guys who were trying to help you get up…” Harry said and then started to doubt himself.
“There was just one guy,” Tony insisted.

“Their voices were totally different,” Harry negated.

“Yeah, I thought that was weird,” Tony agreed.

“Their voices were coming from two different places,” Harry went on.

“Well, I only saw one guy,” Tony was adamant and Harry decided to let it go, mostly because he had to really focus on what he was doing. It was a lot harder to follow Tony holding on to his shirt than it was to hold on to Gemma’s arm. When Gemma or Healer Jordan or Hermione had been guiding him, he got signals from their body language about what was coming up - slight pauses or subtle movements. Healer Jordan and Hermione added verbal cues that helped, too, but of course, Gemma couldn’t. She was really attentive, though, and really made up for it with how she communicated through the movement of her arm or she’d touch his hand with her other hand for additional information.

Tony’s shirt did none of those things. Still, it was better than his staff alone on this treacherous terrain.

“How much farther do we have to go?” Harry asked. This was a workout.

“We’re nearly there. Just a few more switchbacks and we’ll have reached the part that’s pretty level with the lake where the ship is anchored and then it looks like it is pretty straight and even until we get to the dock,” Tony described. “This is a pretty big step down here from this rock,” Tony said as he paused and Harry ran into his back.

“Omphff, sorry!” Harry apologized. “I didn’t know you were going to stop.”

Tony stepped down and Harry’s hand holding his shirt pulled it up a good foot or so. He moved his hand to Tony’s shoulder and explored the drop off with his staff. He moved over to Tony’s side slowly feeling the rock with his trainers (they weren’t quite so squishy anymore - though his toes felt like they were pickled) and took a deep breath and stepped off the rock to land next to Tony. His momentum carried him a step further and he lost his balance for a second, but Tony had planted his feet and Harry used his staff as a walking stick to stabilize himself and he didn’t fall.

“Wow, that was quite a drop-off. How’s Mei going to manage that?” Harry wondered.

Harry felt Tony twist around to look up the mountainside.

“It kind of looks like Healer Jordan is up there with them and that she’s levitating Mei,” Tony seemed perplexed.

“I thought she was down at the ship,” Harry said.

“There are people on the ship, but Healer Jordan is definitely up there with Gemma and Mei and that Paki girl,” Tony insisted, “she kind of stands out.”

“Her name is Aminah,” he felt a little nauseated. He was starting to like Tony and then he’d say something like ‘Paki.’ It made him really uncomfortable and reminded him of Uncle Vernon.

“And what do you mean?” Harry protested.

“You know,” Tony stalled.
“No, I don’t,” Harry stated.

“She’s so dark and her clothing is so colorful. She’s like a neon sign. And her hair - it looks like snakes,” Tony elaborated.

“Oh, well, I didn’t know,” Harry said, feeling like he was missing a lot or maybe it was Tony who was missing a lot.

“Right,” Tony got quiet.

The path had gotten a bit easier to traverse and they were moving a little more quickly. The bell on the ship was still ringing rather rhythmically and now he could hear a faint drumming as well. It kind of sounded like there was a party on board. Maybe for that reason, the birds were less chirpy.

“Oh, watch out for that bush - it has thorns on it,” Tony warned a little too late.

Harry felt the thorns catch on his trousers and he stopped, letting go of Tony’s shirt.

He bent to try to free them and recoiled when the thorns sliced his fingers.

“Oh, ow. I should have seen that coming,” Harry reprimanded himself.

“How could you?” Tony grunted.

“Just a figure of speech,” Harry retorted, the sting of the thorns making him less amenable.

“Yeah. It’s kind of weird, right? How we keep using words that no longer really apply. Like today I said that something was handy. And here I am, ‘Look at me, no hands, mum!’ Nothing is handy for me, except I keep saying it.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. He had freed himself from the thorns and sucked on his pierced fingertips.

He reached out for Tony again, and Tony backed into his outstretched hand.

“Thanks,” Harry said and they continued. His fingertips throbbed where they had been cut and he wondered if he was leaving blood stains on his staff.

I really need to learn some quick healing charms. I hope that is some of what we learn here.

They had just walked around the third switchback and the drumming on the ship was louder. The path was no longer zigzagging across the side of the mountain… they were heading straight for the sounds on the ship. Harry could hear the water lapping against the sides of the ship and footsteps on wood.

“Okay, we’re going to walk up a gangplank,” Tony warned.

Harry hesitated, pulling on Tony’s shirt as he stalled, “Wait, really?”

“It’s okay. It’s wide enough,” Tony assured.

“There’s no railing or anything?” Harry hesitated.

“No, it’s about two feet wide and there’s a raised board every foot or so, to give you some traction,” Tony explained.

“I don’t know about this. How high up does it go?” Harry felt his heart racing.
“It’s pretty steep. I’d say it’s about as high as the staircases in Hogwarts,” Tony had stopped and Harry could hear that his foot was on wood now, not the gravel path. “Come on, you can do this. Didn’t you kill a Basilisk?”

“Yeah and look where that got me,” Harry shot back.

“Good point,” Tony conceded.

Harry stepped forward, shifting his hold on Tony’s shirt to his left side so he was squarely behind him. Tony started moving up the gangplank, leaning forward to adjust his body’s weight to the incline.

“Potter, stop pulling me back. You’re strangling me,” Tony protested.

Harry slid his hand down a bit so that he wasn’t tugging on Tony’s shirt so much.

“Hey, you made it!” The second man from the hike called down to Harry and Tony. His voice seemed much farther away than Harry was imagining.

Harry flinched and then tried to relax and concentrate on finding the next raised wooden plank with his foot, shifting his weight deliberately and carefully. He was really disconcerted by the way the plank and the boat seemed to be moving with the water.

Slowly as they progressed up the gangplank, the sounds of the water lapping against the ship sounded farther away and the noises on the deck neared.

On the hill behind them, Harry could hear Mei’s loud complaints. At least they made it. And then it occurred to him that they’d have to go back down the gangplank and then hike up the mountain to return. The thought almost made him pitch over the side, but he steadied himself.
Harry boards the ship.

Harry felt like they were really high up in the air now. His legs were starting to tremble from the exertion and he had broken out in a prickling sweat that smelled pretty rank. He had stashed his staff in his pocket and was holding onto Tony’s waist now with both hands - steadying him as much as he was being guided by him. He could feel Tony trembling beneath his hands as well and knew it was as unnerving for him as it was for Harry.

*Maybe worse. He can see how far up we are. I’ve got the advantage of not being able to look down.*

Harry kept his knees slightly bent to accommodate the slight swaying and swelling of the boat and the gangplank. Each raised step beneath his foot felt reassuring as he made his way, one foot in front of the other, up the gangplank.

*Surely, someone would have put protective charms on this gangplank to keep us from falling into the lake. Healer Jordan wouldn’t put us in a hazardous situation that we can’t handle. Right?*

He tried to calm the doubts that were crowding his mind.

*I should have refused to go up the gangplank. I could have insisted that they find another way.*

Then he dismissed this idea. He didn’t want to stand out; didn’t want people noticing him.

He thought about how easy it was to cross the threshold into the Mont Blanc room and be transported to another place; the owlery had been the same way.

*Why can’t we do that here? Why does it have to be an ordeal like this? Are they testing us? We had a hard enough time just sitting on the benches before. Seems kind of risky to make us hike down a mountain and then walk up a gangplank. It’s almost cruel.*

The voices from the deck were encouraging and definitely getting closer. Harry was pretty sure it was the two men from the path who were waiting for them at the top. They were almost there.

Tony paused at the top of the gangplank, and Harry bumped into him, almost unbalancing Tony. Luckily, the two men had grasped Tony’s shoulders and stopped him from falling and then steadied him as he stepped onto the deck of the HMS Eden. They grasped Harry by his arms and helped him step down, too. The distance to the deck was deeper than he imagined and he stumbled forward before he found his footing.

“There you go!” The second man held firmly onto Harry’s arm as he regained his balance. There was a tremor in his arm that made Harry wonder if it had been as scary to watch them climb the gangplank as it had been to do it. He let go and thumped Harry heartily on the back, reminding him of Hagrid.

“Er, thanks,” Harry offered up. He felt really relieved and a little elated to have arrived safely on board.
He was still clinging to Tony’s shirt, and he imagined that he had nearly pulled it off Tony just then, but Tony didn’t seem to mind. He didn’t let go.

“Welcome aboard the HMS Eden!” A man greeted them from a level up. Harry imagined that the man was on the Quarterdeck of the ship. He remembered a favorite book at his primary’s library that detailed all the parts of a galleon; how he had poured over that book - dreaming about sailing far away from the Dursleys.

The boat creaked and groaned as it moved slightly in the water.

The second man was talking to Tony - he was the man who had grabbed Harry by his left arm. “Hey, why didn’t Healer Jordan help you with your cuts and bruises?” he was asking.

“Whoa, are you wearing an invisibility cloak?” Tony asked incredulously.

“Um, no. I had vanishing sickness,” the man explained a bit wearily as if he were tired of explaining it.

“Wicked. Harry said there were two people on the path trying to help me get up, but I didn’t believe him,” Tony sounded awed.

“No worries. It happens all the time,” the man responded.

“You must be Harry, then,” the man turned to Harry.

“Yes, I’m Harry,” he said, deliberately leaving off his last name.

“I’m Adam Ceesay,” he said as he grasped Harry’s hand firmly and shook it.

He was still trembling. Harry winced; his fingertips were tender. Now that he was this close to Adam, he noticed how tall he must be - maybe as tall as Dumbledore, even. Harry had a visual image of a very tall, dark-skinned black man. He had a very slight accent that made Harry think he wasn’t born in the United Kingdom, but that he had immigrated when he was pretty young.

“Oh, sorry, I’m probably bleeding on you. I cut my fingers on some thorns,” Harry explained.

“Oh, let me take a look,” Adam said concerned.

“It’s really nothing… ” Harry protested mildly as Adam turned his hand palm up to look closely at his fingertips. Harry was beginning to think that the quivering in Adam’s hand wasn’t from nerves. His voice was calm and reassuring.

“Sure, but it has to be at least annoying to have cuts on your fingertips… when you use them as much as you do… I think the ship’s captain’s quarters would have some essence of dittany,” Adam went on as he turned Harry’s hand gently.

“Tony, you should come, too,” Adam had turned to talk to Tony who was standing nearby talking to the first man.

“Oh, okay, sure,” Tony agreed.

“Fitz, I’m going to take these young men to the captain’s quarters to see if we can get their injuries attended to. Do you want to join us?” Adam addressed the first man and Harry was glad to have a name for him.
“No, I’ll stay here,” Fitz replied.

Adam had guided Harry’s hand to his elbow as he spoke and then turned slowly to lead Harry to the captain’s quarters. He was really tall. Adam’s whole body kind of pulsed - now that Harry was holding onto his arm he realized it wasn’t really trembling at all. It was an intense energy. Adam was mindful about guiding Harry around the obstacles on the ship - piles of ropes and rigging. Harry was fascinated by the noises of the wooden ship creaking - it was such an eerie sound. The other people who were aboard the ship also seemed to be mesmerized by it because they were talking in hushed tones.

They entered through a door into a narrow corridor that meant that Adam had lengthened his arm behind him and Harry was holding onto his forearm and following in single file. Harry felt like the ceiling was really low, too, he was tempted to reach up and see if he could touch it with his hand. Adam hunched over as he led Harry through to the captain’s quarters.

Out of the sunlight for a bit, Harry had opened his eyes, but when they walked into the Captain’s quarters he closed them again. It was surrounded on all sides by big windows that were facing the afternoon sun and the room was ablaze with light.

Adam led Harry over to a chair and placed his hand on the back of it, “Would you like to sit here?”

“Oh, wow, I didn’t think it would be so bright inside the ship,” Harry remarked as he sat down and then regretted it. He’d have to explain again that he could see light. He kind of understood it. Before this happened to him he thought that blindness meant total absence of light. He probably would have asked the same questions.

Adam didn’t say anything, but Tony, of course, asked the same questions he’d already been asked over and over again and it had only been a month.

Harry answered them wearily.

He wondered where the captain was as there didn’t seem to be anyone in the captain’s quarters. Adam had opened a cupboard and was moving around little glass jars and then came back over to where Harry was. Tony had settled in a nearby chair.

Adam pulled up a chair between them and set some items on a table. He uncorked a bottle. Harry cocked his head trying to hear exactly what Adam was doing.

“Here, Harry, will you put your hand on the table? I’ll dab some dittany on your fingertips,” Adam explained, as he gently pressed a wet handkerchief to Harry’s fingertips.

A tingling sensation accompanied the pressure and Harry could smell a bitter, pungent odor. His fingertips stopped throbbing and when Adam released his hand he felt them with his other hand and couldn’t detect even traces of the cuts.

“Wow! That’s great. Where do you get that stuff? I wonder if I could buy some to keep with me?” Harry asked.

“Planning on having more run-ins with thorny bushes, are you?” chuckled Adam.

“Well…” Harry paused, “just seems that lately, I’ve been running into things…”

“Yeah, I understand,” Adam commiserated.

“Okay, Tony, let’s take a look at you,” Adam said, turning away from Harry.
“Where are you?” Tony asked; he seemed unnerved.

“I’m right here next to you,” Adam said reassuringly.

“You’re wearing clothes, right?” Tony kind of half laughed, but Harry could tell that he was really worried about it.

“Yes, if you look at me from the corner of your eye, you can kind of see me, I’m told. The vanishing sickness is kind of a misnomer. I’m here, I’m just moving too quickly for you to see - it creates an illusion of invisibility. And it isn’t really an illness, it is more of a condition.” Adam explained patiently.

“Oh, yeah. Just barely, though. Is that why I can still see the chair you’re sitting in, but not the handkerchief in your hand? And why when you were leading Harry, I couldn’t really see his hand on your arm - it was blurring, but I could see the rest of his arm?” Tony asked.

“Yes, it affects things that are being moved by my momentum,” Adam explained.

“That sounds exhausting,” Harry commented.

“It does sap a lot of my magical energy,” Adam agreed, his rich voice expressed a fortitude that Harry couldn’t help but admire.

“Okay, Tony. Can I attend to your cuts now? That one on your forehead is pretty bloody, but I think it is actually just a graze, but with a nice goose egg under it.”

“Yeah, okay,” Tony agreed.

“I’m going to daub some dittany on it, okay?” Adam explained as gently to Tony as he had to Harry.

Harry realized that Adam probably had to explain to everyone what he was about to do. Harry never really realized before how much forewarning he’d received of people’s actions and intentions when he could see them coming; even if it was just a millisecond, it made a difference.

The chair that Harry was sitting was really comfortable. He leaned back in it and rested his arms on the armrests, thinking he could stay there for a while and be content.

“Okay, Tony - I think you’re set,” Adam said, satisfied.

“Harry, your trainers look soaked and muddy. Did you step in the lake?” Adam asked?

“No, it’s a long story,” Harry said sheepishly.

“Can I dry them for you?” Adam asked.

“That would be great,” Harry responded, sitting up.

He used the same spell that Mr. Montague had used earlier, “*Calidum siccum*” and Harry’s feet felt warm and dry almost instantly.

“Oh, I have to remember that one… especially if I’m living right next to the ocean…” Harry sighed. “That feels so good.”

“You live near the ocean?” Adam asked.

“Kind of,” but Harry didn’t elaborate.
Harry could hear some people talking in the corridor and then the door opened. Harry wondered if Gemma, Mei, and Aminah had made it to the ship.

“Perfect, I’m so glad you’re in here,” Healer Jordan declared as she entered the Captain’s Quarters. “Okay, everyone gather around. I know it is a bit cramped, but we should all fit once I vanish the chairs and table,” she explained in her efficient manner. Harry didn’t think that the corridor was wide enough for Mei’s wheelchair and wondered if she was here, too.

“Adam, you’re in here, right?” Healer Jordan inquired.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m sitting between Harry and Tony,” Adam replied.

“Can you help Harry find a spot away from the table so that I can vanish it?” Healer Jordan asked courteously.

“Sure,” he responded as he stood up and grabbed the glass bottles that he had put on the table. It sounded like Tony stood up and moved toward the group of people. Harry stood up, too, and Adam tapped the back of his right hand with his. Harry found the tall man’s upper arm and followed him to a spot on the perimeter of the room. He wasn’t sure who he was standing near. He heard Healer Jordan mutter a spell and the pop of the furniture disappearing. Other people came into the room from the corridor.

“Okay, we’re going to travel through this painting to meet our special guest,” Healer Jordan explained. Harry wondered what the painting depicted.

“When it is your turn, step up to the painting and reach forward to grasp the hand of the person in front of you,” Healer Jordan directed. “Once you’re through, turn and offer your hand to the person behind you.”

Harry thought immediately of Tony, but apparently so did Healer Jordan as she turned and said quietly, “Tony, I’ll assist you.”
Harry turned to Adam as people were moving toward the painting to begin their journey through it, “Thank you for healing my cuts and drying my shoes, Adam.”

“It was no problem, Harry, I was glad to help,” Adam assured, “Now here is your young friend who is always guiding you. I don’t think she knows I’m here. I’m going to go help Fitz, but maybe another time you can introduce me to her when we have more time?”

“Oh, yes, Gemma. Um, yes, I will. Thank you!” Harry dropped his hand from Adam’s arm and listened as he walked away. He felt Gemma’s hand lightly touching the back of his hand and he lifted it up so that she could write on it.

“Hi Gemma, How did everything go? Did Mei get down the mountain okay? And Aminah?” Maybe he should have waited with Tony for all of them and they could have helped each get down the mountain. He felt a little disappointed in himself that he hadn’t considered that until just now. Maybe that’s why Healer Jordan sent them down the path in the first place… well, we didn’t fail completely, he rallied.

Gemma tapped his palm twice for each question, then wrote: “W-H-O” space “T-A-L-K” space “T-O” space “N-O-W-?”

“I was talking to Adam, he healed our cuts - Tony’s and mine” Harry explained as they moved closer to the painting (Harry trusted that that was the direction they were headed).

She wrote “I-N-V-I-S-I-B-L-E-?” on his palm and Harry nodded before she was done writing the word, she continued “C-U-T-S-?” and he felt a little shudder go through her hand to his.

“We both fell on the path, and I got caught in a thorn bush,” he explained and he ran his thumb over his fingertips, relishing the feeling of the healed skin.

She opened his palm again and wrote, “T-O-N-Y” space “O-K?”

He nodded in response.

They moved forward and Harry took out his staff and shook it out carefully - mindful that there were a lot of people close by.

He thought he heard someone else’s staff tap near him and asked, “Aminah, is that you?”

He realized that he recognized her by scent, too, a pleasing flowery scent that wasn’t too sweet or overpowering.

“Yes. Hi, Harry,” she answered.

“How was your trip down the mountain?” he asked.
“It was challenging. Healer Jordan came and helped us. Mei was having a hard time and so Healer Jordan took her directly down to the water, so it was easier when it was just me and Gemma. Gemma’s really brilliant, you know?”

“Yes, she is,” Harry agreed.

“Oh, I was wondering how Mei was going to get up the gangplank,” Harry confessed.

“Have you heard what the painting is a picture of?” Aminah asked.

“No, have you?” Harry responded.

“No,” was Aminah’s quiet reply.


“Gemma says that it’s a picture of an old naval officer,” Harry relayed to Aminah.

“Oh,” Aminah seemed confused, “I guess I thought it would be a wizard or something.”

“Yeah, me, too,” Harry agreed.

Gemma let go of Harry’s hand and shifted away from him. He felt the air moving near him and could hear hands moving, occasionally hitting their clothes or chest or clapping together and it sounded like someone was making noises with their mouth like they were mouthing words. He guessed that she was signing with someone. He wondered who else here knew BSL.

Gemma touched his hand and nudged him forward in the line a little absentmindedly, so he used his staff navigate a step forward while he reached out for Aminah.

“Aminah, I think we’re moving forward,” he said as he found her elbow and added, “I think Gemma’s signing with someone, too.”

Gemma’s hand found his and raised it up and wrote, “M-E-E-T” space “S-H-A-N-N-O” and then moved his hand and he felt someone else holding his hand, shaking it.

“Hi, Shannon. Nice to meet you,” he said and he leaned toward Aminah, “Gemma is introducing us to Shannon.”

“Shannon, are you also deaf?” Harry asked, wondering if it was rude to ask, but also figured it was just handy information. Gemma tapped his hand twice, “yes,” and Shannon answered, “Yes. Nice to meet you, Harry.” Her voice had a slightly toneless quality to it; he imagined that it was hard to speak when you couldn’t hear yourself. He smiled in her direction.

“This is Aminah,” Harry offered, turning toward Aminah. He could feel Shannon pressing against him as she greeted Aminah.

“Nice to meet you, Am-i-nah,” Shannon said, having difficulty pronouncing Aminah’s name.

“It’s nice to meet you, too, Shannon,” Aminah greeted warmly.

Harry could sense that Gemma was talking to Shannon in sign language and waited patiently.

“Gemma wants me to tell you that we’re next in line to go through the portrait. She’s going to go first so that she can help you and Aminah go through, okay? I’ll go last.” Shannon explained.
“Thank you, Shannon,” Harry was grateful to have someone who could help them communicate more efficiently.

He felt Gemma’s hand on his as she moved in front of him and then was pulled into the portrait. He held out his hand, thinking that she’d grab it, then he imagined it was Shannon’s hand that guided his arm to the left and up a bit until he found Gemma’s fingertips and then her hand. She grasped it firmly and he felt himself being tugged forward. He had thought that he’d have to step over a frame, but he was just sucked forward as if he were in a vacuum - it made his naval ache in an odd way as if he had been pulled through by his umbilical cord - he could feel it in his core.

_Ugh, I don’t like that._

It was nearly as bad as trying to dig lint out of his belly button - which usually made him pretty queasy.

Immediately he was struck by the change in atmosphere. He was glad for a distraction from the weird belly-button feeling. The air had been crisp and cool and light when they were in the French Alps, and now it was heavy, thick, and wet - they were definitely in a different climate.

He remembered that he was supposed to offer his hand to the next person - Aminah - and he stuck his hand out in the direction he had come before his feet landed on firm ground again. Gemma helped guide his hand to the right spot and he could feel a tingling as it passed through a magical barrier and then felt Aminah’s warm hand grasp his. He held on tight as she moved forward and then helped her gain her footing as she landed.

He could feel Gemma next to him helping Aminah pull Shannon through the portrait of the naval officer.

“Ew. I don’t like that feeling,” Aminah groaned.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed.

Harry was trying to figure out where he was - he was definitely in a ship that wasn’t too different from the one they just left; it was possible that it was even an identical room. The same people he had just been with were around him and talking in the same tones as they had been conversing in the Captain’s Quarters of the HMS Eden. He could hear Fitz and Adam talking of the view from the Captain’s quarters. Adam was pretty animated as he described a tropical scene that was very different from the mountains they had just been in. He sounded like a child in a candy store, so palpable was his glee. _I wonder if this is close to his homeland._

Pretty soon everyone had come through the portrait and Healer Jordan addressed them.

“In a moment, we’re going to move out onto the deck of the HMS Eden, and then deboard to the shore of Fernando Po, which is an island off the western coast of Africa (in our times it is called Bioko). This painting that we’ve stepped through is a little different from the enchanted portraits that you may be familiar with. This one was painted by the controversial witch, Beryl Comstock, who lived and traveled extensively in the 19th century and experimented with painting portraits of well-known wixen and muggles of her time. She was shunned in England for her work with muggles, and left England to continue her experimentations abroad - where she painted this portrait. She combined wixen painting techniques with memories of the same event witnessed by several wixen to make portraits of wixen and muggles that are more realistic and true to life. Many of Beryl Comstock’s works were destroyed, but her daughter Magenta Comstock was able to save this portrait and left it to our center upon her death a couple years ago.
This painting takes us back to 1827 to meet our honored guest, Lieutenant James Holman, who will greet us on shore. We are very fortunate to have this chance to talk to Lieutenant Holman who lived from 1786 to 1857 and who was memorialized in this portrait on the HMS Eden. Lieutenant Holman was a remarkable muggle who was blinded at the age of 25 by an unknown illness. He also suffered from rheumatism that at times made it difficult for him to walk. He found that the cure the rheumatism that threatened his life was to travel by himself into areas of the world that were unknown to most westerners at the time. I hope you’ll find him a very fascinating guest.”

Harry wondered where Mei was - it seemed like this was when she’d chime in with a groan at the very least. He was also surprised that Tony wasn’t expressing his disdain for muggles.

Healer Jordan went on, “Please keep in mind that the world has changed a lot since 1827 and some of the cultural views that Lieutenant Holman is likely to express have changed radically. I think that you’ll find that he’s rather open minded if you make allowances for the differences between his time and ours. At the point that we’re meeting him, he had just begun the leg of his journey where he would confront slave traders and attempt to bring them to justice as well as assist freed slaves as they tried to return home. Later he would go on to advocate for the rights of the Aboriginal people in Australia who were viewed by the English invaders as subhuman. He was also fairly accepting of the hidden wixen community existing around him - that other muggles had not noticed. While the painting depicts a specific time and place, this portrait version of Lieutenant Holman has access to nearly all his memories, except maybe those from the very beginning and end of his life.”

This guy sounded a bit intimidating to say the least. And just getting here to talk to him was exhausting. Harry wasn’t sure he was up to meeting him. He was afraid he’d be rather disappointing to someone who had done so much with their life. *Maybe I won’t have to talk - I can listen.*

Why had they gone to the French Alps to get on a ship then to go through a portrait to travel back in time to Africa to visit him? It all seemed very elaborate and convoluted and Harry was feeling pretty tired. Especially now that his feet were dry and warm and it was hot and muggy. *I sure wouldn’t mind a hammock and a cool drink down by the beach right about now…*

But that didn’t seem to be on the docket.

Healer Jordan led the group out of the Captain’s Quarters. Harry took Gemma’s arm and Aminah took Shannon’s. They had to go single file through the corridor. Out on the deck, the sun was even more brilliant than it had been at Mont Blanc and Harry squeezed his eyes tight against it.

He wondered if they’d have to go down the gangplank. He stopped, his feet rooted to the spot. *I don’t want to do it.*
Harry meets Lieutenant James Holman.

Harry’s sudden stop had jolted Gemma and she stumbled a bit. Harry steadied her. Shannon and Aminah jostled into them from behind.

Gemma drew a question mark on the back of his hand. Harry could hear the people behind them, who were stuck in the corridor behind them, asking what was going on. He heard Tony say, “What’s the hold up?”

Gemma tugged on his hand, and he stepped forward letting her lead him out onto the deck more. He felt a little shaky in his knees, and he muttered, “I don’t want to go down the gangplank.”

He could hear the paper fluttering in the humid breeze, but was pretty sure that Gemma hadn’t seen it because she didn’t acknowledge it at all. They stopped and Harry could feel the railing at his back. He reached out for it - his fingertips gliding over the well-worn wood. He was a little surprised that it felt so real after Healer Jordan’s explanation of where they were - inside a painting that was also the memories of several wixen.

How does it feel so solid and timeworn?

He’d felt a little nauseous ever since they came through the portrait and was glad to be out on the deck with air moving around, but the rocking of the ship wasn’t helping settle his stomach. He did want to be on land, but he just didn’t want to go down that gangplank. Going up it was hard enough, but he had been leaning into it. Going down, he felt certain he’d just step off the edge… into nothingness as far as he was concerned.

Gemma drew the question mark on his hand again. Harry was embarrassed, he could feel the heat seeping into his neck and snaking up to his ears.

“The gangplank,” he stopped. “I don’t want to go down the gangplank,” he explained, hanging his head, trying to hide his discomfort. Gemma stroked his hand in a soothing way.

He heard Aminah’s staff and guessed that Shannon had followed them over.

“What’s going on?” Shannon and Aminah asked almost in unison.

Harry groaned. He really didn’t want an audience. They waited patiently, though, and the silence was almost as hard to bear, “I just don’t want to go down that gangplank again,” Harry confessed, shuffling his feet.

“Oh, yeah,” Aminah sighed, sounding relieved. “Maybe there’s another way down?” she wondered.

Harry could hear Shannon and Gemma signing to each other and wondered what they were saying. They are probably talking about me, he felt the warmth of shame spread across his chest and neck. His legs were trembling and he was afraid they weren’t going to support him. He slid down the deck wall to the weathered floor boards. He traced the spiraling grain of a knot beneath his fingers. His
heart was beating in his chest, threatening to leap out. He listened to the sounds of Gemma and Shannon’s conversation. He wondered why Shannon didn’t speak out loud when she was signing to Gemma. He felt rankled and unsettled; inexplicably annoyed with Gemma for talking to Shannon.

“Harry?” Aminah said from above him.

“I’m down here,” he told her, unable to hide his irritation.

Aminah’s staff poked his foot gently.

“Oh, sorry. There you are. I thought maybe you’d left,” Aminah said as she used her staff to make sure the spot next to him was open and tapped her staff three times on the deck to collapse it.

She seemed determined to ignore his prickliness. He could hear her hands on the wood railing and then she lowered herself down carefully next to him, surprising him when she fell against him momentarily as the boat rolled, then righting herself.

They sat quietly for a bit. It was really hot. Harry was sweating and he wasn’t even moving. He pulled off his hoodie and stuffed it in his staff.

Harry could feel people’s footsteps through the floorboards beneath him and turned his head in the direction of someone approaching their little group.

“What are you doing here?” Tony asked as he approached. “Why aren’t you queuing up to go down the gangplank with everyone else?”

Harry shook his head glumly.

“What?” Tony questioned, “You’re not going now? After everything we did to get here?”

“I dunno,” Harry mumbled.

“Harry doesn’t want to go down the gangplank,” Aminah explained.

Harry was annoyed that she told Tony. It made him sound like a little, whiny kid and he felt the back of his neck get hot. He pressed his hands to the deck.

Maybe it isn’t too far off the mark.

“Come on, Harry. You can lean on me. We can help each other again,” Tony cajoled.

Harry gave a half hearted smile.

More footsteps approached them.

“Are you kids okay?” Adam asked, “It looks like it’s our turn to go down to the shore. Do you need some help?”

“Whoa!” Tony said in surprise.

“It’s just me, Tony,” Adam said with a hint of exasperation.

“Yeah, right. Sorry, mate,” Tony said chagrined. “You just snuck up on me.”

Aminah’s voice was close to Harry’s ear.
“Harry, we could ask them to get Healer Jordan’s attention. Maybe there’s another way down?” she asked quietly.

“Ugh,” Harry hated all the attention. He tried to steel himself. It would be easier to just go down the gangplank than have all these people fussing over him. He pushed against the deck wall, wanting to squeeze his body into the wood and disappear.

“Harry?” Aminah gently pressed.

Someone walked away. Harry wasn’t sure who it was, but he couldn’t hear Gemma and Shannon signing anymore, so guessed it was one of them. *Maybe Shannon? Her footsteps are heavier than Gemma’s.*

He let out a ragged breath.

“Yeah. I guess so.”

He could feel Aminah moving next to him, her legs brushing against his as she stood up.

“Hi?” she said shyly to someone, probably Adam or Fitz.

“Hi, I’m Adam and this is Fitz,” Adam introduced himself to Aminah.

“I’m Aminah,” Aminah offered, “Harry doesn’t want to go down the gangplank again. Do you know if Healer Jordan is nearby? Can you get her? Maybe there’s another way down?”

“Oh, yes. I see her just over there. I’ll go get her. Fitz, you’re okay to stay here, right?” Adam replied.

“Yes, that’s fine,” Fitz responded, stepping closer to the group. “So, Aminah… have you heard of Lieutenant Holman before today?” Fitz addressed Aminah.

“Oh, no, sir. I haven’t,” Aminah responded.

Harry tuned out of their conversation; he was starting to feel hemmed in and decided that he’d rather stand up. His legs didn’t feel quite so unsteady anymore. He took in a deep breath and used the side of the ship to pull himself up. Gemma put her hand on his, tucking her fingers under his palm and pulling up a little. He offered his palm to her.

Fitz was telling Aminah about some research he’d done before he came to the center, but Harry couldn’t focus on it.

“FEELING” space “BETTER?” she asked him.

He nodded slightly in response, but frowned a bit.

“SHANNON” space “GET” space “H. J.” she told him.

“FIND” space “OTHER” space “DOWN” she reassured.

“Oh, that’s what Adam is doing, too,” Harry told Gemma. He could feel her turning, probably looking for Healer Jordan.

Harry’s stomach lurched - the nauseous feeling he had earlier was coming back. He felt really unsettled and trapped. He tried to still the tremor in his hand as it rested in Gemma’s hand. He had an urge to runaway. *I can’t even run away… to where - an island in the African tropics in 1827? I’d*
Gemma walked her fingers across Harry’s palm. At first, he wasn’t sure what she was doing, and then he heard footsteps approaching them.

_Healer Jordan is coming over._

“Hi, Harry,” Healer Jordan greeted from a few paces away as she approached.

“Hi, Healer Jordan,” Harry responded.

“I understand that you’re feeling nervous about going down the gangplank,” Healer Jordan said.

Harry nodded tightly. His eyes pricked as if they were threatening to tear up.

_No!_ He told himself firmly. _No crying. Gah!_  

He swallowed down the tears. It was bad enough that everyone was milling around him like a fragile child.

“What is it about the gangplank that’s causing you pause?” Healer Jordan asked.

Harry balked at this question - his eyes widening.

_Isn’t it obvious?!_ His insides were shouting, but he couldn’t bring himself to be disrespectful to Healer Jordan.

“He’s just saying he doesn’t want to go down it,” he mumbled.

“What was that?” Healer Jordan questioned, leaning in close.

He couldn’t believe she was being so obtuse.

“I just don’t want to go down it,” Harry replied.

“I’ve talked to… ah, here he is now…” Healer Jordan had turned away from Harry and Harry heard a cane with a metal tip sounding on the wooden deck as it approached. It didn’t sound like it was being used for support though, even though the person walking toward them had uneven footsteps as if they were limping.

“Lieutenant, thank you so much for boarding the ship to talk to Harry,” Healer Jordan greeted Lieutenant Holman warmly.

Harry was mortified. Not only was he causing a fuss, now everyone who had already deboarded the ship was robbed of their time with the special guest.

“Not at all, it is my pleasure,” he responded equally warmly.

His voice had an unusual quality - theatrical and his accent was ancient - like something out of a really old movie.

He moved to Harry’s side in an uncanny way. Harry wondered if Healer Jordan had pulled him over or if she found Harry on his own.

“Harry, I would like to introduce you to Lieutenant James Holman,” Healer Jordan said rather formally.
She turned to the Lieutenant, “Lieutenant Holman, I would like to introduce you to Mr. Harry Potter.”

Harry had a brief flash of thankfulness that there was no way that Lieutenant Holman would know his history - he was spared that at least.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Lieutenant,” Harry said as he held out his hand.

Then he remembered that Lieutenant Holman was in the same boat he was (literally and figuratively! ha!) and started to lower it when he heard a slight rustling noise, like fingers being rubbed together. He moved his hand toward the sound and found Lieutenant Holman’s outstretched hand with the back of his. They grasped each other’s hands. Harry let out a breath of air that could have been mistaken for a slight laugh.

“I am very pleased to meet you, as well, Mr. Potter,” Lieutenant Holman’s grasp of his hand was firm, but not painful. He didn’t let go, however.

“Healer Jordan, if it pleases you, I would very much like to speak to Harry alone,” Lieutenant Holman requested.

“Yes, by all means,” Healer Jordan replied.

Lieutenant Holman guided Harry’s hand to his elbow and started walking away from the group - the metal tip of his cane tapping resonantly as they walked. He was limping as if it was painful to put pressure on his left foot. He was wearing a stiff wool coat that seemed like it would be very uncomfortable in this heat.

“Let us find a place where we can speak with ease away from others,” the Lieutenant offered. He guided Harry around the obstacles in their path easily and Harry guessed that he’d spent a lot of time on this ship.

“Here, I think this will do,” Lieutenant Holman stated as he stopped and dropped his arm, stepping away from Harry slightly to face him.

They were sheltered from the hot breeze that carried a pungent odor of fermentation mingled with smoke from wood-burning fires.

“Healer Jordan was very kind as to share a bit of your recent history with me,” Lieutenant Holman began.

“Oh,” was all Harry could think to reply.

“She said that you were blinded just over a month ago by an encounter with a very large and venomous serpent - one of mythical proportions.”

“Um, yeah, I guess so,” Harry mumbled.

“You guess?” Lieutenant Holman seemed surprised by this response.

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied, “that’s what happened.”

“And now you are balking at the prospect of deboarding the ship by means of the gangplank,” Lieutenant Holman continued.

“Yes, sir,” Harry said.
“It seems to me that you’ve learned quite a lot in a month… perhaps about your own mortality and the fragility of life… and limb.”

Lieutenant Holman’s thoughtful response had an unexpected effect on Harry. An oppressive weight that he didn’t know he’d been struggling under lessened slightly and he took in a deep breath.

“Yes, sir, I guess that… ,” he stopped himself and started again, “Yes, sir. That’s it.”

“It’s a perfectly reasonable response, given everything that you’ve been through,” Lieutenant Holman agreed. “Now, you’ve got to decide how you’re going to move forward.”
Moving forward

Chapter Summary

Moving forward.

Harry stood with Lieutenant Holman on the deck of the HMS Eden as it rocked gently in its mooring. The air hung heavily about them and Harry felt like he had been dipped in sweat and then coated with dust. He thought about what Lieutenant Holman said… about deciding how he was going to move forward. He felt like he’d been doing a lot of that already… moving, moving, moving. What he really wanted to do was rest a bit. Even though he’d been able to nap a little yesterday and then slept a long time last night, he still felt so bone tired. Was resting moving forward? He didn’t think it was what other people wanted him to do. Resting was definitely not what the Dursleys wanted him to do, except when they wanted him out of sight, pretending he didn’t exist. That’s different from resting.

The Dursleys aren’t here, Harry told himself sternly, trying to banish them from his mind. Pretend they don’t exist!

“What did you do, Lieutenant, when… you first lost your sight?” Harry asked hesitantly.

“Ah, well. I was very ill and was attempting to find balm for my ailments in the healing waters at Bath so that I could return to active duty. I was staying with dear friends who were so kind as to let me trespass on their hospitality while I attempted to find a cure for my flighty gout. Instead of improving, alas, I suffered from a terrible pain in my eyes from which even cold compresses, dark rooms, and a seemingly endless supply of leeches could not release me. Finally, the pain left, but it took my vision with it and after several weeks, I felt I couldn’t burden my friends any longer and I returned home. Those first few weeks were very challenging and I don’t have much to offer you in terms of inspiration or even guidance. In fact, I was not up and about traveling independently for many months. I am loathe to speak of those first few months as they do not reflect well on my character. You, Mr. Potter, seem to be made of sterner stuff than I. I was twice your age and still, it took me a very long time to rally and seek adventure. You are already scaling mountains and plunging into the jungles… and you’ve only had a month to accustom yourself to your lost sight,” Lieutenant James Holman’s speech was archaic in style, but it felt sincere.

“Well, I didn’t have much choice… ” muttered Harry darkly.

“And yet, here you are… aboard the HMS Eden and contemplating a journey to the shore,” Lieutenant Holman added brightly. “So, what’s it going to be? Are you going to stay aboard or venture down the plank?”

“How do you go down the plank?” Harry asked, a bit warily.

“Well, I prefer to follow some stout, surefooted fellow and place my hands on his shoulders as he descends,” the Lieutenant offered.

“I’m not sure if there are many of those around right now,” Harry stalled.

“Come on, then, let’s see who we can find!” the Lieutenant grasped Harry’s arm firmly, placed his
hand on his elbow, and started moving toward the group of people who were still waiting their turn to deboard. He had a peculiar scent - damp wool, but also an overlay of sweat mixed with unusual spices - it was different, but not unpleasant.

“I’m in search of a hearty soul upon whom this lad can lean upon while going down the gangplank!” Lieutenant Holman said in a booming voice that surprised Harry. “Who is willing to lend their shoulders?”

Harry felt the heat spreading across his chest and up his neck. At the rate he was going, he was going to be permanently flushed with embarrassment.

“I can do it, Sir,” Tony answered. Harry was surprised.

“Well, there you go, Mr. Potter! You have a volunteer!”

“Hi, Tony,” Harry muttered.

“Well, you know each other! That’s grand!” Lieutenant Holman seemed genuinely pleased.

“Lieutenant Holman, this is Tony Montague,” Harry remembered to introduce them a little belatedly.

“It is my pleasure to meet you, Mr. Montague,” Lieutenant Holman said formally.

“Er. Yes. Nice to meet you, too,” Tony replied, though his response was steeped in embarrassment. Harry blinked as he tried to figure out why and then it clicked.

“Lieutenant, Tony is unable to shake your hand,” Harry said softly to the Lieutenant.

“Oh, quite right,” Lieutenant Holman responded courteously.

“So, you’re going to go down now?” Tony poked, obviously wanted to draw attention away from himself.

Harry bristled at the poke and scowled.

“Hey, I was only joking,” Tony said teasing, stepping close enough to Harry to brush up against him. Harry put his hand on his back.

“Let’s get this over with before I change my mind again,” Harry muttered darkly wishing he had chosen the “whisk me back to my bed” option instead. He had an instant flash of his room on Privet Drive and shook his head. Not that bed.

“Healer Jordan said that there are charms on either side of the gangplank that will keep us from falling in,” Tony offered.

“Geez. Why didn’t anyone say that before?” Harry breathed in exasperation.

“She was too busy with Mei,” Tony said.

“Is she the only one working at the Center?” Harry asked in disbelief.

“There’s the Burbage fellow… the son of Professor Burbage at Hogwarts… he’s around here somewhere, too,” Tony said. “And the petite blond in the levitating chair.”

“Oh, yes, an excellent chap! Mr. Burbage!” Lieutenant Holman exclaimed.
“Whose shoulders are you going to lean on, Lieutenant?” Harry asked politely.

“Well, if you don’t mind, I think yours would do,” he replied lightly.

“Oh, I guess so,” Harry replied.

“You guess? Is there a lot of uncertainty in your time?” Lieutenant Holman questioned.

“Yes?” Harry wasn’t sure.

“Very good! Well, shall we proceed?” Lieutenant said heartily.

“Um, sure?” Harry was feeling less sure, but he followed as Tony moved toward the gangplank.

_We must be among the last people on board_, Harry guessed - most of the noises were now coming from the shore.

“Did Gemma and Aminah and everybody go down already, Tony?” Harry asked.

“Not everyone, but mostly. I think Aminah and that one big woman with the short black hair went down - the deaf one who can talk,” Tony said.

“Shannon,” Harry supplied as it finally occurred to him who Tony must be talking about.

“Right. Her,” replied Tony.

“Is Gemma still up here?” Harry asked.

“Yes, she’s helping that Fitz guy,” Tony supplied, “they are going down now.”

“What about Adam?” Harry asked.

“Don’t see him anywhere,” Tony snorted.

“Very funny,” Harry said.

“I’m right here,” Adam’s deep voice came from nearby.

Tony squeaked in surprise.

“I wanted to make sure you were okay,” Adam continued, ignoring Tony’s discomfort.

“Adam, have you met Lieutenant James Holman?” Harry asked. He heard Adam’s footsteps approaching them.

“I have not yet had the pleasure. Lieutenant Holman, I’m very pleased to meet you,” Adam said.

“Adam…” Lieutenant Holman paused.

“Adam Ceesay,” Adam completed.

“Adam Ceesay,” Adam completed.

“I’m very pleased to meet you. Your accent puts me in mind of the people of The Gambia, but you speak the Queen’s tongue very well,” Lieutenant Holman said with interest.

“That is correct, Lieutenant Holman! Very few people are able to place my accent. I was born in The Gambia, but have lived most of my life in the United Kingdom.”
“Oh, what is the United Kingdom?” Lieutenant Holman inquired.

“Harry, let’s go down,” Tony interrupted.

“Oh my, you must pardon me, Harry. You go on down, and I will ask Mr. Ceesay if he would lend me his shoulders for the journey down the gangplank while he tells me of this United Kingdom,” Lieutenant Holman said amiably.

“Okay,” Harry agreed as he followed Tony who was moving away from Adam and Lieutenant Holman.

Harry was trying to remember what it was like to gain the deck of the HMS Eden so that he could anticipate what it would be like to descend the gangplank. Down at the shore, there were squeals of delight. It sounded like a bunch of children. For a moment, Harry wondered if there was a school group… but then remembered where they were. Maybe village children from Fernando Po? They were definitely happy.

“Tony, is anyone there to help you get on the gangplank?” Harry asked wondering how Tony was going to manage what had to be an awkward move without arms to hold onto anything or provide balance.

“No, I think we’re it now,” Tony said with a thread of nervousness running through his voice.

“I’ll help steady you, okay?” Harry said, remembering the long step up.

Behind him, he could hear Lieutenant Holman and Adam excitedly talking about the history of England, or in Lieutenant Holman’s case, the future of the country.

“Okay, I’m stepping up now,” Tony warned as he leaned to the side as his right leg stepped up. Harry put his hands on either side of Tony’s waist to steady him as he pulled his left leg up to join his right, crouching down, rather than standing up all the way. Tony teetered a bit and Harry helped steady him. Then, still crouching, Tony moved forward a step down the gangplank, the ship rolling gently in its mooring and the gangplank settling under the weight of Tony.

Harry took his hands off of Tony’s waist for a second while he felt the railing and found the sides to pull himself up. He heard Tony move down another step and pulled himself up onto the gangplank behind Tony, then reached forward to find Tony’s back.

“Are you going to go down like that all the way?” Harry asked.

“I’m thinking about it. I feel a bit safer like this,” Tony said.

“Okay. I guess I’ll crouch, too?” Harry said.

“Yeah, I think this is going to work,” Tony said sounding a bit more confident.

“I bet we look silly,” Harry moaned.

“Yep. I’m pretty sure we do,” agreed Tony, “Luckily, only Gemma’s watching us. Everyone else is watching Mei. She’s showing her fin to a bunch of children and nearly everyone is gathered around them.”

“Oh, yeah. I was wondering what the kids were shouting about,” Harry mused.

They slowly made their way down. When they were about halfway down, they felt the gangplank
move with the weight of people getting on it at the top and stilled themselves as they waited for
Adam and Lieutenant Holman to find their rhythm. They slowly added their movement back in and
continued carefully on their way down.

“Okay, Harry, we’re nearly there,” Tony assured.

Harry drew in a shaky breath - filling his lungs with the briny air. His legs were cramping up in this
crouched position, but he had to admit that he felt safer, too. He could put a hand down and grab the
side of the gangplank when it wobbled to steady himself as well as Tony.

“Good,” Harry was relieved.

Tony rose up to a standing position and Harry followed and found that his next step was on solid,
though uneven ground. He felt like he had stopped suddenly. No longer was he rolling along with
the gentle waves of the lake… No, wait, we’re on the ocean now. Weird.

There was a slight putrid odor on land underlying the salty sea air - as if something were fermenting.
The children’s noises were even more joyful now that they were closer.

Tony started walking away and Harry tripped trying to keep up with him.

“Hey, wait,” Harry said.

“Oh, sorry. I forgot,” Tony said, abashed.

“No worries. I can get my staff out,” Harry said, fishing around in his pocket for it and shaking it out.

“It’s pretty cool how small that gets,” Tony commented.

“Yeah, it’s handy… ” Harry said and then wondered if he should have said that.

“Don’t worry,” Tony said as if he’d read Harry’s mind, “it’s weirder when people stop using words
like hands and arms around me. And I noticed you haven’t stopped saying stuff like “see” and
“watch.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Harry agreed.

“Still guessing? Are you, Mr. Potter?” Lieutenant Holman and Adam had just come off the
gangplank behind them.

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied, chuckling a little.

“Well, we’d better join the group and see what they’re up to,” Lieutenant Holman said bracingly.

Harry smiled and heard Tony make a breathy sound like he was quietly laughing.
Mami Wata

Chapter Summary

A walk on the beach.

As Harry followed the sounds of Adam and Lieutenant Holman as they walked toward the group that was gathered on the beach, he wondered how he had been talked into going down the gangplank so easily when moments before he was panicking at the idea.

*Lieutenant Holman made it seem easy.*

Tony, following the two men, occasionally turned to make comments about the terrain that (mostly) helped Harry navigate it. It wasn’t as tricky as the trail down the mountainside to the HMS Eden had been - *or maybe I’m getting better at this*… Harry allowed. The ground was different under his feet - in the mountains it had been hard and sandy with lots of loose rocks and then small clumps of spiky plants that made squishy mounds. Here the earth was soft and spongy - each step released fragrant cut grass aromas.

Every once in a while, when the wind shifted direction from the ocean to the land, he was overwhelmed by the scents of dense vegetation. He’d never smelled anything like it before. It was so hot and humid, Harry was certain he was going to melt. His clothes were sticking to him and he felt as though he was way overdressed in his baggy T-shirt, trousers, socks, and shoes. And the wind carried the sound of birds and other animals (*monkeys maybe?*). Harry remembered the trip to the zoo where, before everything went to hell in a handbasket, he had listened to an interactive display that had recorded the sounds of the jungle - and here it was… even more cacophonous in real life…

*Is this real life or just someone’s memory of real life?*

Soon, they were walking in sand. At first, it was hard and compacted, then it was loose and Harry was sinking deep into it with each step. He felt he had slowed to a sloth’s pace and that he was losing ground.

“Harry,” Tony said close by.

Harry jumped. He had been so intent on navigating the sand that he hadn’t noticed that Tony had stopped.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you,” Tony apologized. “It seems like you’re struggling in the sand. I just thought you could use a… some help,” Tony offered.

“Yeah, that’d be great. The sand is hard to walk in,” Harry conceded.

It sounded like they were getting close to the group of people on the beach and the squealing children. He could hear them splashing in the water now. He reached out and found Tony’s back and they started walking again.

“This place is so amazing. I’ve never been to a jungle before and I guess this is a jungle - there are gigantic trees and vines and leaves and they are all so deeply green. I don’t think I’ve ever seen green like this. I mean, wow. And the ocean is so blue. I’ve been to the ocean before, but it was grey and
misty and cold. And there are parrots and other colorful birds flying everywhere,” Harry could feel Tony twisting around as he was taking it all in, then he started. “Wait! Did you see that? I think that was a monkey!” Tony shouted and Harry heard a chattering noise that pretty much confirmed it. “It just ran out onto the beach and grabbed something and then darted right back!” Tony exclaimed. “Wicked! Wait until I tell Graham! He’s not going to believe it!”


“My brother. He loves the monkeys at the zoo.” Tony confided. “The people here are covered in mud… like, not like they are dirty, but they are wearing it like we wear clothes. And they have these strange little straw hats that are decorated with shells and stuff,” Tony described as they approached the group of people.

Harry could hear Adam and Lieutenant Holman’s conversation coming to a standstill. He wished was close enough to hear more of what they were saying because, from the snatches he did hear, it sounded pretty fascinating.

*It’s kind of like talking to a ghost…*

And then an image rose before his head, that of Tom Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets and how he had started to become more solid as Ginny faded. Harry shivered though the sun was beating down on him relentlessly and the air was heavy with humidity and heat despite the cooling breeze brought in over the water. He wondered what kind of magic had to be used to make a painting this realistic.

*Was it dark magic? What makes something dark magic? Is that why most of the other paintings by this artist had been destroyed? Why she had to flee England? What would make a memory solid enough that you can hold it and feel the texture of their clothing beneath your fingers?*

When he had been in the memories of Tom Riddle’s diary, he didn’t think about reaching out and touching anything… he had just watched it like a movie… one that he could see and hear as if it were surrounding him, but he remembered feeling the floor under his feet. He tried to remember what it felt like. *Did it change depending on where he was… in Professor Dippet’s office or down in the dungeons?* He couldn’t remember. He had been so focused on what he was seeing and hearing, he hadn’t thought to touch anything else.

Tony stopped, jarring Harry out of his memories. Harry could tell that they were on the outside edge of a group of people who were watching something that was going on in the water. The children were running back and forth excitedly - *shaking maracas?* - splashing water and throwing up wet sand with their feet as they raced around. Along with their shrieeks, they were talking excitedly and one repeated phrase kept popping out among the other words that were incomprehensible to Harry, “Mami Wata! Mami Wata!”

“Man, they are going to drown Mei with all those beads. She’s not going to be able to swim with them on,” Tony exclaimed, though he didn’t seem that concerned, more amazed.

“Oh, I was wondering what that sound was,” Harry said.

“The children are giving offerings to the water spirit, Mami Wata,” Lieutenant Holman supplied, just to the right of Harry.

“They think that Mei is a water spirit?” Harry wondered.

“Mr. Ceesay has described the young pupil who arrived with your group as appearing to be a mermaid. Is her name Mei?” Lieutenant Holman inquired.
“Yes, Mei Lee. I don’t think she likes to be called a mermaid, but that’s probably an accurate description,” Harry explained. “She is part Jiāorén.”

“Oh, from the Canton Empire?” Lieutenant Holman asked.

“Er, I don’t know, sir,” Harry responded.

“Perhaps you’ll have an opportunity to introduce me to this intriguing friend of yours?” Lieutenant Holman requested.

“Sure? When she comes out of the water?” Harry responded tentatively. He wasn’t so keen about getting pulled into the ocean again. Though given how hot he was, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. Especially if it was his decision this time. *I could take my shoes off first so I don’t have to spend half a day walking around in wet shoes.*

“Oh, is she going to come out of the water? What form does she take out of water?” asked Lieutenant Holman curiously.

Harry thought that he was taking the news of one of their group sporting a fishtail very generously for a muggle. A nineteenth-century muggle at that.

*Shoot, it was a huge surprise for me and I’ve encountered a lot of magical creatures in my two years in the wixen world. Ah. He cringed. Mei would hate being called a “magical creature.”*

“She stays the same, I’m pretty sure,” Harry responded.

“Oh, it must be hard to get around on land with a fishtail,” replied Lieutenant Holman.

“Yes, she uses a wheelchair,” replied Harry, wondering if Healer Jordan had brought it down to the beach.

*Maybe Mei was just going to stay in the water for this part of the… what is this?*

Healer Jordan had come over at that moment.

“Harry, Lieutenant Holman - I’m so glad you both have made it down to the beach. Thank you so much!” she greeted them. “Tony and Adam, thank you so much for your help with the descent down the gangplank!”

She clapped her hands together, “Lieutenant Holman, are we ready to proceed?”

“Yes, yes, of course! I’m ready when you are,” he agreed.

“Greetings fellow travelers,” Healer Jordan greeted the group with her amplified voice.

“If you could please turn your attention this way, our special guest, Lieutenant James Holman, is ready to address you.”

A hushed silence descended on the group. The children, though, didn’t seem to notice… likely because they didn’t understand the language. They continued to carry on their running, shrieking, and exclamations about Mami Wata.

Someone touched Harry on his arm and he realized it must be Gemma. He put his hand on hers in response, smiling in her direction.

She took his hand in hers and began writing, “Y-O-U” space “O-K-?”
He nodded in response, and inclined his head toward Lieutenant Holman, hoping that she understood that he was looking forward to hearing what the Lieutenant was going to say. Then it occurred to him - how was Gemma going to understand what Lieutenant Holman was saying? He wasn’t wixen… he couldn’t cast the *Scribunt loqui* spell. His brow knitted with concern.

Gemma drew a question mark in his palm.

Harry whispered so as not to interrupt Lieutenant Holman who was beginning to address them, “Can you understand him?” he asked.

She tapped twice on his hand. Healer Jordan must have done something so that Gemma wouldn’t be left out. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Good,” he whispered.

“My esteemed friends. You must allow me to bestow upon you my eternal gratitude for your endurance in traveling such a great distance to meet with me. I am so honored to have this opportunity to speak with you about my experiences and travels and to share some of them with you. I am greatly indebted to Healer Jordan for brokering this exchange across centuries and continents. While I know that the understanding is that you are here to learn from me, the complex truth is that I’m here to learn from you…”

Lieutenant Holman’s voice had also been magically amplified.

Harry was momentarily distracted by a swarm of mosquitos that had descended upon the group when the breeze had stopped. He slapped at his arms hoping to squash the ones that were feeding upon him.

*Little vampires!*

Harry heard Healer Jordan who wasn’t too far from them muttering something that sounded like an incantation and the breeze picked up again and the swarm was pushed away.

Lieutenant Holman was recounting his journey to Siberia… it seemed so far away and so different from where they were now. Gemma had placed his hand again on his arm and he felt grounded and reassured. It was hard to believe that yesterday morning he had felt so utterly alone on Privet Drive, and now here he was half a world away surrounded by friends he’d just met.
Tropical storm

Chapter Summary

A sudden storm descends.

Sitting in the sand on the beach of Fernando Po Island off the coast of Western Africa, Harry listened to the nineteenth-century muggle world traveler, Lieutenant James Holman, as he spoke about traveling through desolate Siberia on a horse-drawn cart.

Healer Jordan and Mr. Burbage had quietly provided chairs that didn't sink into the sand. Harry wasn't sure how they did it, though he was grateful for the chance to sit down and he could tell that his peers were, too. They were in a generous semicircle that opened at the sea to include Mei.

He thought she must be sitting on the beach not far from the group. She was uncharacteristically quiet, at least for what he knew of her. The hordes of children who had been running back and forth to laden her with shell necklaces had been encouraged (magically?) to leave and now it was just their group on the beach. They were close enough to the ship that Harry could hear the waves moving against it and the noises of a crew onboard.

Waves occasionally lapped at their feet. Harry had taken off his shoes and socks (before they got wet) and stored them in his staff and rolled up his trouser legs. A shade had been erected over them as well so that the sun was no longer beating on them. Gemma's hand rested lightly on his arm, Tony sat on his other side and next to him, Aminah. Harry was glad he made it down here.

Lieutenant Holman was seated, too, as he shared his observations. He seemed to have an insatiable curiosity coupled with an openness. He was recounting an especially amusing episode of when he was traveling with his dear friend, Mr. Colebrook, who happened to be deaf and they were visiting a museum.

*Like me and Gemma. How do they communicate?*

They had special permission to touch the sculptures and his friend was guiding him to each sculpture so that Lieutenant Holman could feel them. Apparently, his friend played a joke on him and placed him at the foot of one of the guards at the museum and then stood back to watch in amusement as Lieutenant Holman figured out that he was examining the form of a live person and not a sculpture. Harry was amazed that Lieutenant Holman could tell this story with so much mirth. The way he told it, Lieutenant Holman thought the joke his friend had played on him was hilarious. Harry wasn't sure he'd feel the same way.

*Gemma would never do that to me.*

He remembered how just yesterday morning the thought of feeling the map of the center while everyone else was watching was so mortifying.

*Maybe you get used to it… whatever it is.*

What he was finding really remarkable about Lieutenant Holman's story was how when he was confined to one place he would get really sick and that getting out and about was what he needed to
get well again. And he had to sneak away to get what he needed because everyone around him thought that it was too dangerous for him to travel.

What was dangerous to his health was being confined, but it was the opposite of what doctors and family were telling him to do. Just hearing about it made a bile of anger rise in Harry's throat. Fresh in his memory was being sent to the Dursleys to rest and recuperate when really what it meant was that he was put to work.

*If someone had just asked me what I needed…*

Waves lapped over his feet swirling the sand between his toes and distracting him momentarily from his thoughts and anger. The wave had come in higher than previous waves and the rolled cuffs of his trousers had gotten soaked. Mei seemed to be moving through the sand closer to the gap that opened up in their semicircle on the other side of Gemma. He could hear her tail slapping the shallow water and the shell necklaces around her neck tinkling together as she moved with each wave. If he hadn't known she was on the beach, he would have had a really hard time figuring out what was making the noise.

He wondered if Lieutenant Holman knew because he had paused in his story about his perilous journey back through Siberia in the custody of the Russian Czar's secret guard (they thought he was a spy, apparently).

The group grew hushed. Harry wondered if there was something about Mei's expression or aspect that made everyone worry… some visual warning that he couldn't pick up on. He noticed that the temperature had dropped a few degrees and that the wind was picking up. A big wave came in and nearly toppled his chair. Had the sun gone behind the clouds? He could taste moisture in the air.

*Maybe a storm is coming in?*

Mei's gruff voice pierced the relative silence, "Get to shelter everyone, there's a big storm coming!"

Then it sounded like she had turned and was moving quickly back to the ocean. He wondered where she'd go to be safe. *Maybe swam out to the deep sea?*

*Surely, in a painting that is made of memories, the storm can't hurt us?*

But it felt real. He scratched at a mosquito bite.

*It felt real.*

The wind had picked up and now sand was pelting the side of his face. Gemma had gripped his arm.

"Aminah, Tony?" Harry called. They answered him - they were close by. He felt Gemma reaching out for them and they stumbled together across the sand. Harry's bare feet slid in the sand and he cried out when he stepped on something sharp, but there was no time to stop to examine it.

They had moved around each other and now Aminah and Harry had their arms around Tony's waist and Harry's other arm was around Gemma's shoulders.

Harry could hear Healer Jordan calling out to them, though the wind kept taking her words and tossing them away so that he couldn't catch her meaning.

They bent over as rain started to drill into their back, harder than the sand. Wind howled and Harry couldn't hear any voices anymore. He couldn't hear his staff's directions over the wind, either though it was shouting at him about the hazards that were being thrown in his path from his pocket. All he
could feel were the bodies pressed against his, Gemma's vice-like grip on his hand on her shoulder, and a sharp pain on the sole of his foot. He was pretty sure he had a deep cut.

Suddenly, they were squeezing through a small doorway, stumbling forward, and the wind-whipping noise was cut off abruptly as the door was slammed behind them.

"Here, come over here." Healer Jordan's voice rang out in the small space that felt crowded with bodies. It was eerie how they couldn't hear or feel the storm anymore. *Have we gone through a portal? Are we back in the French Alps or back in London?* Harry wondered.

"Where's here?" Harry asked, irritated; his foot throbbing as he limped over, walking only on the toes of his left foot.

People were speaking in low voices around them. He could hear their shuffling feet as they moved to make room for the group of teens to pass through. Harry had let go of Tony's waist and moved his arm from around Gemma's shoulder to her arm and she moved forward. He could feel Tony (literally) on his heels.

"Oh, good. Now we're all here. Here's a spot for you four," Healer Jordan said as they grew closer. "Nice job sticking together and keeping each other safe."

"Do you think Mei will be okay, Healer Jordan?" Aminah asked, voicing Harry's thoughts as they settled into the chairs that had been on the beach.

"Yes, she's the best equipped for this sort of thing. I'm sure she went deep into the sea," Healer Jordan responded.

"She's all alone out there," Aminah whispered.

"She'll be okay, Aminah," Tony assured. "She's tough."

Gemma shivered next to Harry, now soaked and cold after the dramatic drop in temperature.

"The natives think that she's Mami Wata," Lieutenant Holman contributed from the other side of the small space. "A powerful water spirit who has healing powers, though she can be destructive. They may think that she brought this storm. They may feel that she is not pleased with her reception."

Harry brought his foot to his knee and started gently brushing the sand away from the tender area.

"What will they do to appease her?" asked Fitz, closer to Lieutenant Holman.

There were a couple of sharp intakes of breath.

"They will bring..." Adam paused, distracted... "her more offerings."

"Can we do anything to help assure them that she is not Mami Wata and that she didn't bring this storm?" asked a woman.

Harry thought it might be the mother who had sat behind them when the bench fell.

"I don't think you'll be able to dissuade them of the notion that she's Mami Wata," Lieutenant Holman chuckled.

A couple people gasped.

"After the storm passes, she can just come back and let them know that everything's okay, right?"
Fitz asked.

"Somehow I doubt she'll be willing to come back… " said Tony in a low voice.

Harry laughed warily in agreement.

Harry was very curious about this room… it was absolutely blank to him. It had no aroma apart from the people who populated it; there were no sounds of the storms; when he opened his eyes the light was very diffused, neither light nor dark. He had no idea where they were and he found it very disconcerting.

"Where are we?" he leaned over to ask Tony.

Tony seemed distracted, though, and didn't answer, though he made gasping noises as if he was watching something.


"It must be pretty spectacular," Harry guessed.


As much as he was glad that he didn't have to endure the sand piercing his skin, Harry wished that he could at least smell the storm.

Healer Jordan was making her way through them casting a drying and warming spell. She had finally reached Harry and as he felt the warmth snake through his clothes, she exclaimed, "Oh, Harry. You've got a nasty cut there. Can I heal it for you?"

"That would be great, thanks," Harry said. And before he was done uttering the words, his foot was dry and smooth again.

"I love magic," he said, relieved.
Harry sat quietly for a bit while the sighted people around him oohed and ahhed as the storm raged around them. He'd put his socks and shoes back on after Healer Jordan had healed his foot.

After a bit, he got up and asked to sit next to Aminah. It was too hard to try to engage Tony or Gemma in a conversation when they were constantly being distracted by the destruction caused by the storm. She had also told them that they were a common occurrence on Fernando Po.

*Why didn't she warn us that this might happen, then?*

Their magical hut was so secure against the storm that they couldn't feel or hear the wind as it rampaged outside.

"I guess it is quite the storm," he said to Aminah as he settled in next to her.

"Yeah," she said.

"Do you think the ship will be okay? What if the painting gets damaged? Then what? Are we stuck here? Or does *here* go away? And then if it goes away, where do we go?" Harry pondered, his heart racing a bit at the prospect.

"The painting is protected," explained Mr. Burbage.

"Oh, hi. I didn't realize you were there," Harry said, a bit embarrassed.

"Yep. Maybe Fitz and Lieutenant Holman would want to join us, too, since everyone else is so captivated by the visuals. It's like being at a movie that's all action and no dialog," Mr. Burbage complained.

"What's a movie?" asked Aminah.

"Oh, I guess you've not been around many muggles, then," chuckled Harry.

"It's a… " he turned to Mr. Burbage, "how do you explain movies to wixen?"

He was frustrated that he wasn't finding the words.

"I always tell them that they are like plays that have been captured so that they can be seen over and over again. They are like memories, but you only view them from one perspective … the one that the director chose to show," explained Mr. Burbage, turning to Aminah.

"Have you seen a lot of movies?" Harry asked.

"I used to go to movies all the time with my pa when I was a kid, but I haven't seen a lot since my pa died… I lost my sight," Mr. Burbage got quiet for a little bit.

"Some of them are okay, but most are so visual that you spend the whole time trying to figure out what is happening. My ma does a good job of describing the visuals, but she's pretty busy and we don't go very often… "

He stood up.

"I'll check in with Fitz and Lieutenant Holman - see if they want to come sit with us while we wait
this out," Mr. Burbage said heavily as he moved away.

"Are there enough chairs here for them?" wondered Aminah.

"I dunno," mumbled Harry.

He was wondering why talking about movies made Mr. Burbage so sad.

_How long we were going to be waiting the storm out? I wish we could just go back to our rooms. It must be nearly time for lunch._

"If this is a memory, can't we just skip this part and move on to a nicer day?" Harry theorized.

"I don't know how memories like this work, actually," Aminah commiserated.

"Maybe it is like a movie, except its one where you can be bitten by the mosquitos, drenched by tropical storms, and feel the sand beneath your feet," Harry mused.

"That sounds like real life," said Aminah.

"Yeah. It does," replied Harry.

He looked up toward the noise of Mr. Burbage coming back with Fitz and Lieutenant Holman.

"Hi, we're not sure if there are extra chairs around here," Harry supplied. He nudged Tony to get his attention.

"Tony, are there extra chairs over here for Fitz and Lieutenant Holman?" he asked.

"What? Oh, yes. To the right of Aminah, there are two extra. You'll need to get one more. I can lead you to it, if you want, but you'll have to carry it," Tony said.

The last part he said more quietly to Harry. Harry heard him stand up and stood up, too, as Lieutenant Holman and Fitz found the chairs by Aminah.

"Okay, that works," Harry agreed, putting his hand on Tony's back. Harry's stomach rumbled.

"You hungry again?" Tony teased.

"I guess so. Say, is there a loo in here?" Harry asked Tony as they moved past their little group.

"No, I was wondering the same thing." Tony responded as they moved across the crowded hut to the other side of the room. Harry stumbled over people's feet a couple of times as they moved through the space, steadying himself against Tony's back.

"Here's the chair, Harry. It's directly in front of me," Tony said. "Is it alright if we take this chair?"

"Sure, you go right ahead, um, er. How are you going to do that?" asked a flustered older person that Harry didn't recognize.

"Harry's going to carry it, and I'll lead him back," Tony explained.

"I don't know how you two are going to manage that without hitting someone with the chair," the person replied skeptically.

"We'll manage," Tony said gruffly.
"If we accio'd the chair," Harry pondered, "would it hit people as it moved through the room?"

"Well, I suppose you could do it that way, but usually the summoning charm needs a bit more space than we have in here," the person replied.

"I could just push it in front of me," said Harry, "then it'll just hit people's feet, right?"

"I suppose you could do that, too," said the person, glumly.

"Just pick up the chair, Harry, and let's go," Tony said.

"Okay," Harry said.

He moved in front of Tony and found the chair first with his knee, and then reached forward to locate the back. It was a wooden folding chair, he realized as he ran his hands over the back and then the seat. He folded it up and held it against his body to turn, mindful that the grumpy old man (as he silently dubbed him) was watching them.

"Hey, watch it!" the grumpy old man shouted. "You about dislodged my weight. Do you want me to float away, blown out to sea by this storm?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir," Harry apologized.

Resisting the urge to move quickly to get away from the old grouch, he shuffled around Tony in the tight space, trying not to knock up against anyone else. Tony was giving him directions - "Move to the right, now step forward," - from behind him and they started walking back. Harry put the legs of the chair on the ground and started using it like his staff to feel the ground in front of him. It was a lot more cumbersome. They hadn't made it very far from the grumpy old man (Harry could hear him behind them commenting on their progress) when Tony said, "Here comes Gemma. I bet she's going to want to help us."

"Hi, Gemma," Harry said as her steps neared.

"She asked if she can carry the chair," Tony interpreted.

"Sure, that's fine," Harry said, as she took it from his hands and walked away.

Tony moved in front of Harry and gave him a chance to place his hand on his back so they could go back to their seats.

"What did that old man mean that I had almost dislodged his weight?" Harry murmured to Tony, hoping others wouldn't overhear him.

"He's tied down to a weight. I guess he floats away if he's not tied down. Someone said that he had an allergic reaction to a Billywig bite," Tony explained.

"What's a Billywig?" Harry asked.

"It's some sort of Australian insect. Pretty harmless, except if you're allergic to them," Tony said.

"I wonder why he's here," Harry pondered.

"I guess he has to adapt to floating?" Tony said.

"That doesn't seem like it would be that hard," Harry observed.
"Yeah. I dunno. It seems like he's having a hard time from the way Healer Jordan is always working with him. Maybe it's harder than it seems." Tony said.

"Being tied down to a weight seems like it would be hard. How does he move around? Wouldn't it be easier just to put on a weighted vest, or something? It seems like the wixen world could come up with some way to make it easier for him to manage."

"It was like he couldn't keep his arms or legs from floating…" Tony whispered, but then stopped as they had reached the group.

"Here's your chair, Harry, just two steps to your right," Tony explained.

"Thanks, Tony," Harry replied as he moved around Tony to find his chair. He sat down on it.

"Hey, Tony and Harry," Mr. Burbage addressed them from his seated position - they had just passed him. "Remember that you need to respect the privacy of the participants. Speculating about why someone is at the center while you're walking through a room of people is… well, it's rude." Mr. Burbage admonished. "Think about if someone was talking about your disability like that... how would it make you feel?"

"You know they are, though," Tony grumbled.

"Well, that's why we have this policy. You know how painful it is to be the subject of someone's idle speculation... please consider that before you participate in it." Mr. Burbage finished in a sympathetic tone.

"Sorry, sir." Harry was embarrassed to be dressed down so publicly.

"Yeah, sorry," Tony mumbled and he went back to where he had been sitting earlier.

Harry just sat quietly for a while, tuning out the conversation that Lieutenant Holman, Fitz, Mr. Burbage, and Aminah were having that had been momentarily paused when Tony and Harry came back from getting the chair with Gemma.

His embarrassment was still burning in his chest. He also felt a resentment toward the grumpy old man, even though he knew it wasn't fair.

The sighted people in the room were starting to talk among themselves and Harry wondered if the storm was starting to abate. Maybe they'd be able to go back to the center soon. He hoped so. He was feeling hungry and sad and angry and he really wanted to be alone... away from the press of all the people in that small space, away from his embarrassment, and away from all the hassle of not being able to see. He hunched his shoulders and thought about getting his invisibility cloak out of his staff.
Harry learns that he missed some critical information . . .

Harry’s need to use the toilet was getting more urgent and it interrupted his brooding. He didn’t want to talk to Mr. Burbage again. He wanted to ignore him for the rest of the training if he could.

He heard Tony stand up and leave the area and he wondered if he was in the same predicament. He thought for a moment, then stood up and shook out his staff. He’d follow Tony. At the very least, he could ask Tony to lead him to Healer Jordan.

Gah! This is so embarrassing!

Someone stood up near him and touched him gently on his arm. Gemma. He turned a smile toward her and she squeezed his arm.

He put his palm out so that she could write in it if she wanted and she drew a question mark across his palm.

He said softly, “Do you know where the toilet is?”

She tapped once, “No.”

“Can you lead me to Healer Jordan so I can ask?” Harry asked.

She tapped twice, “Yes,” and he took her arm. “Thank you, Gemma,” he said.

“Yes, dear. It’s nearly over. I think we’ll be headed back soon.” It was the voice of the mother.

“Thanks,” Harry said as they passed; Gemma didn’t pause, unaware of the side conversation.

As they walked through the crowded room, Harry was trying to guess how many people were in there - sixteen residents and how many people were nonresidents? Plus Healer Jordan, Mr. Burbage, and Lieutenant Holman - twenty or so? It was a pretty small space for so many people. Probably smaller than the living room at Privet Drive.

Ugh. Why did I think of that? Why not the Gryffindor tower?

And the stone walls and four-poster beds with their velvet red and gold drapes rose in his memory, colored by how happy and safe he’d felt there.

Gemma had stopped and Harry could hear Tony talking to Healer Jordan nearby. Harry could feel Gemma signing and let go of her arm so that she’d have full use of her arms for talking.

“Harry, Gemma says you’re looking for the toilet,” Healer Jordan addressed him.
“Yes, is there one?” Harry asked.

“Yes, I was just telling Tony - it isn’t very obvious in this room - I must have announced the location of it before your group reached the shelter. It is just past me, three yards straight ahead and then turn left and you’ll find the door. Tony’s using it now and it serves one person at a time. The storm is nearly over, and we’ll go back to the ship as soon as I have set up the portal. Everyone is really tired and there is too much debris from the storm to walk back safely. I’ll have it set up so that we travel directly to the deck of the ship. I was just about to tell the group,” Healer Jordan explained.

“What?! Why did we have to hike down the mountain and then climb up the gangplank if there was an easy way to get to the deck of the ship?”

The question burst out of Harry before he could stop it. He flinched and took a step back, expecting to be hit for his impudence.

“Oh, Harry,” Healer Jordan’s response was calming, though he could tell she was surprised. “You sound really angry.”

He gulped in a breath and hung his head, embarrassed that he hadn’t been able to control the outburst.

“I’m sorry, Healer Jordan, I…” he started to say, but she interrupted him.

“There’s no need to apologize. Can you tell me what’s going on?” she asked kindly.

“It’s just that it was so hard to go down that mountainside and the gangplank was even worse… why would you do that when there was an easier way… I mean, Mei couldn’t even do it and both Tony and I fell and got hurt.”

Harry’s anger was simmering as he remembered the injuries, both physical and to his pride. It was so humiliating to have to admit that he didn’t want to go down the gangplank. Angry tears were pricking at his eyes and he blinked furiously in an attempt to get rid of them.

“It’s true, you and Tony chose the scenic and more challenging path. I thought you did that because you wanted the challenge. I didn’t realize that you thought it was the only way to get to the deck. Didn’t your staff give you the options?”

“There were other ways down? No, my staff didn’t give me any options,” Harry said angrily.

“Listen, Harry. I apologize. I think there are some big gaps in the information you’ve received from the center. I had hoped that your guardians had gone over it with you… it’s clear that wasn’t the case. I’ll schedule some time tomorrow for us to go over it in more detail and also give you a lesson on how to use your staff to its fullest,” she touched his shoulder and he jumped in surprise.

“Sorry, I should have told you I was about to touch you,” she said as she removed her hand quickly. She did sound sorry.

“It’s okay,” Harry mumbled.

“I think I owe an apology to Tony as well. It seems he missed some key information, too. I’ll talk to him when he’s back.”

“Thank you,” Harry sighed.

“Yes, lunch will be ready for us when we get back,” Healer Jordan said.
“Thanks, Healer Jordan,” Harry said.

Harry and Gemma were waiting for their turns to travel through the portal back to the deck of the HMS Eden that was anchored in Fernando Po. Healer Jordan had explained to the whole group that they had a similar portal on the deck of the sister ship anchored in Lac Blanc that would return them to the hallway outside the dining hall. Harry was really glad he didn’t have to climb up or down the gangplank again or hike through the French Alps to get to dinner - though he was still peeved that he didn’t have to go through that in the first place. He’d spent so much energy just getting to the beach to listen to Lieutenant Holman, that when he was actually there, he was almost too tired to really take in what he had to offer. He wondered if they’d get another chance to talk to the Lieutenant after they left the island.

He could hear Lieutenant Holman at the head of the line speaking to each person as they left the shelter.

Gemma took a step forward and Harry moved with her. He tapped her hand to get her attention.

“Did you know that there was more than one way to get to the ship when we started this afternoon?” he asked.

She tapped his hand twice, “Yes.”

“Oh,” he said, feeling irritated that he hadn’t known.

She picked up his hand and drew a question mark on his palm.

“I didn’t know that we had choices. It wasn’t clear from the message that Healer Jordan had at the beginning of the trail,” he said.

He could hear the refrain looping in his head - maybe there was a visual cue, but Tony missed it, too. What about Adam and Fitz? Did they think they had choices? Harry realized that most of the people got to the deck faster than they did. They must have chosen the alternate route. Why didn’t he question it?

I did question it. On the deck - when I didn’t want to go down the gangplank... why didn’t Healer Jordan explain that I could get to shore without having to go down the gangplank?

His anger simmering, Harry stamped his foot.

Maybe the rest of the day would be quiet and uneventful where he could learn how to use his staff properly and maybe get started on learning braille.

Harry could tell that they were nearly to the portal as Tony and Aminah were talking to Lieutenant Holman, and there was just the mother (as he called her now) between them and he and Gemma. He wondered how Lieutenant Holman was speaking so personally to each person as if he knew them each and actually cared about them. He was impressed.

He was speaking to the mother now. Lieutenant Holman was asking her about one of her children and the mother was quite emotional as she spoke. Harry felt uncomfortable overhearing it and tried not to pay attention. It seemed very private.

Gemma stepped forward and now it was their turn to talk to Lieutenant Holman. Now, in the moment, Harry wished he had spent more of his time in line thinking about what he’d say to the
“Miss Boot and Mr. Potter!” Lieutenant Holman exclaimed as they approached. Harry could feel Gemma reaching out to the Lieutenant and let go of her arm so that she could write more freely.

“Thank you, Miss Boot. I assure you that the pleasure was all mine. My, but if you and Mr. Potter don’t put me in mind of my dear friend Mr. Colebrook! If there are folks who are tempted to ridicule you because of your curious friendship, please do not give them one ounce of attention. You know best what you need from friendship - who cares what the world thinks!” Lieutenant Holman clapped Harry on the shoulder. Harry was surprised that he knew where his shoulder was to clap it and exclaimed.

“Oh, so sorry, my man. I didn’t mean to startle you. I could hear you shuffling your feet as you stood there,” Lieutenant Holman said.

“Will we get to come study with you again, do you think?” Harry asked a bit more plaintively than he intended.

“I expect so, Mr. Potter! Let us not let time, distance, or even tropical storms keep us apart. I feel that I have a great deal to learn from you, young man,” Lieutenant Holman said.

Gemma touched the back of his hand with hers and Harry found the crook of her elbow. She stepped away from the Lieutenant and Harry followed.

“Good-bye, sir. Thank you!” Harry said as they moved away.

As they strode through the portal this time, he did feel the small tug on his navel that Tony had described. A shiver went down his spine as he stepped onto the deck of the HMS Eden.
Gemma's ire

Chapter Summary

Gemma gets really mad at Mei.

Stepping back into the hallway outside the dining hall, Harry was pleasantly surprised by the aroma of steak and kidney pudding. His stomach rumbled in response.

“Potter!” Mei’s gravely voice greeted him and he heard the wheels of her wheelchair moving across the floor.

“Hi, Mei. Were you okay in that storm?” Harry asked as she neared.

“Oh, yeah. I had to dump all those stupid necklaces - they were so heavy! And then I just swam back here and I’ve been waiting for you all for at least an hour. Why’d it take you so long to come back? I thought you’d come back right away,” Mei whinged.

“We stayed in a shelter until the storm died down - then Healer Jordan created a portal so we could come back here… I guess she couldn’t do it while the storm was going… she said it was too risky with all the electricity in the air,” Harry explained.

“Yeah, I dumped them. And no, I don’t care that they thought I was some sort of deity,” Mei said.

“What?” Harry asked.

“Oh, Gemma’s just going off about how I was disrespecting the natives by dumping the ‘offerings’,” Mei groused.

Gemma stomped her foot in frustration and Harry reached out for her. Her hands were in motion and she whacked him with her wrist.

“Oh, ow,” Harry said stepping back.

“Gemma, they aren’t even real! They are some old muggle’s memory from 1827, for Merlin’s sake! Get over it!” Mei shouted.

Gemma’s feet stomped again and Harry could hear Gemma’s hands slapping against her body as she signed.

“I AM NOT MAMI WATA!” Mei shrieked as she sped away leaving Harry standing by Gemma.

The conversations in the hallway had all stopped. Harry felt his cheeks get hot at the thought of everyone staring at him, Gemma, and Mei.

Maybe they are watching Mei storm out of here and don’t even notice me and Gemma.

He could almost feel the heat coming off of Gemma. He waited a second before reaching out tentatively again. Gemma was still signing - to herself, apparently, and her whole body was trembling. She pushed Harry’s hand away, shutting him out.
“What did I do?” he hissed.

She took his hand and he resisted the urge to pull it out of her grasp - to shut her out in turn.

She was still shaking violently as she wrote in his palm, “ITMAKESMESOMAD!”

He had to really focus to figure out what she was saying, even though he knew that she was really mad.

“What was it? Was it more than the necklaces?” Harry asked.

He felt like he was missing something.


He didn’t really understand why Gemma was so upset, but he didn’t like her crying. He awkwardly grasped her hand in an attempt to comfort her. He was holding his staff in his other hand, and tried to lean it against his shoulder while he reached for her shoulder to pat it, but started to fall, so he caught it instead.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Aminah had come over.

“Gemma’s really upset by something that Mei did on the island,” Harry explained.

“What did she do?” Aminah asked.

“She dumped the necklaces from the children,” Harry said.

“Oh,” and Harry could hear her cringing in her short response.

Aminah brushed his arm as she moved to Gemma, and drew her into a hug. Gemma let go of Harry’s hand to hug Aminah and he could hear Gemma sniffling.

Harry stood by, twisting his staff in his hands.

It sounded like they had stepped back, so he asked, “Do you want to go to lunch now? It sounds like folks are going into the dining hall.”

“Sure, let’s go in,” Aminah said, then turning toward Gemma asked, “Are you ready, Gemma?”

She must have said yes because Harry heard her start walking toward the dining hall, Aminah’s staff tapping rhythmically beside her. Harry followed them with his staff.

Gemma guided them to a table that was on the other side of the dining hall from where they had sat for the other meals.

“Yes, please join us,” said Adam to Gemma’s signed request.

“Thanks,” Aminah responded. Harry stood behind them for a second, wondering which seat was open, then he remembered he could navigate to an empty seat if he asked his staff and he found one to the left of Gemma. He paused for a second remembering how he had been so frustrated about not knowing if there was a toilet or not in the shelter…

_I could have asked my staff to navigate to the toilet. How did I forget that?_
“Hi, I’m Harry,” Harry said to the person sitting next to him as he sat down.

“Hi, Harry, I’m Martha,” the mother responded.

“Do you know Gemma and Aminah?” Harry asked.

“Well, I’ve seen them around today, but I haven’t met them yet,” Martha explained.

“Gemma, this is Martha,” Harry turned toward Gemma and ran his hand along the table’s edge seeking out her hand, but didn’t find it.

“She’s writing on Amy’s hand,” Martha said.

“Aminah. Her name is Aminah,” Harry corrected.

“Oh, yes, that’s right. Aminah. Sorry, I’m horrible with names,” Martha apologized.

“Harry, What did you think of Lieutenant Holman? Quite the character, wasn’t he?!?” exclaimed Fitz from the other side of Martha.


“Did you hear him talking about hiking Mount Vesuvius while it was erupting? How the lava burnt his walking stick?” Fitz asked.

“No, I missed that. Wow. Lava, really?” Harry asked.

“It’s just amazing that he did that when he couldn’t see. I can’t believe his companions didn’t stop him,” Martha said, in disbelief.

“They did stop him,” Fitz said, “They made him stop when it got dark. He could have kept going, but they wanted to turn back because they couldn’t see. So he went along with them.”

“Well, it wasn’t very responsible of them to let him do it at all,” responded Martha.

“Why? He was a grown man. And he was fine, wasn’t he?” Fitz sounded put out.

Harry could see his point, but he really wasn’t in the mood for another argument. He really just wanted to eat lunch and go back to his room. He tuned out the rest of the conversation as Adam joined in.

Harry wondered where Mei was sitting and if she had recovered from the encounter. He wasn’t sure he could make it through lunch, he was so tired from the day.

“Harry, can Gemma and I borrow that pencil thing of yours that reads aloud?” Aminah asked.

“Sure,” Harry said as he fished his staff out of his pocket and accio’d the anagnóstis and the pad of paper and pencil. “Here you go,” he said as he slid them on the table toward Gemma. She took them and squeezed his arm.

That made him feel better - like a bit of forgiveness for whatever transgression he had committed. He heard Gemma writing furiously on the pad and hoped that she was able to get what she needed from Aminah.

“How do they call the tables?” Harry wondered.
“The lilies turn colors on the table, vibrate, and whistle,” Aminah explained.

“Oh. How have I missed that?” Harry wondered.

“Maybe you weren’t touching the table when they were vibrating? It is kind of subtle. And I don’t always hear the whistle when a lot of people are talking. You kind of have to know what to listen for. It was in the literature,” Aminah said.

“They should vibrate Gemma’s bed in the morning,” Harry said.

“Yeah. Who do we ask to set that up?” Aminah asked.

“Probably Godric or Healer Jordan,” Harry said.

He laughed at himself for not hearing it before. Even the vibration made noise - with all the rattling cutlery and china. The whistling was also hard to miss. He realized that before when he’d heard it, he thought someone was shaking the table and it just happened when there was a tea kettle going off in the kitchen. “I guess it is time for lunch!”

As he walked back to the dormitory after lunch, Harry realized that he really hadn’t tasted anything. He could barely remember it, except that his belly felt uncomfortably distended from all the steak and kidney pudding that he’d consumed. It must have been good, he mused.

He felt a bit apprehensive about the day ahead - what with Gemma (of all people) mad at Mei. He hoped that it wouldn’t be too awkward. They had some time before they’d meet their instructors that afternoon.

He entered the room and felt the tension as soon as he crossed the threshold. *Great.* He asked his staff to guide him to his bed, and it started giving him directions to leave the room. *Merlin’s beard! Am I in the right room?* He froze in a bit of a panic.

“You alright, mate?” Tony asked, emerging from the toilet, the sound of flushing following him.

“Oh, yeah. I just thought I was in the wrong room for a sec,” Harry said, relieved.

“You’re in the right place,” Tony said.

“Okay, thanks,” Harry said as he went toward his side of the room, trying to remember the layout. He wondered where his staff was going to lead him, if he was in the right room. Back to Privet Drive?

He held the staff off the ground and squeezed it twice rapidly to get a description of the room and figured out where his area was and starting walking toward it. The staff told him that there were three other people in the room and he figured it was Tony, Gemma, and Aminah by their locations. In Mei’s space, it described the tank and her wheelchair beside it.

He figured she was out in the South Seas getting hydrated.

He sat down at his desk to try reading the leaflets - figuring that maybe some of the information that he missed was in some of them - he summoned the leaflets and *anagnóstis* out of his staff. He tried reading, but found he was too exhausted to pay attention to what was being said. He put everything back in his staff and toed off his shoes to lie in bed for a bit.
Harry gets to sleep, finally.

Harry pulled back the covers on his bed and climbed in for a little nap. Even though it was only the afternoon, it felt like it had been a really long day already and Gemma getting mad at Mei almost put him over the edge, especially because it seemed that she was mad at him, too. He still didn't get what was going on there.

He slid off his glasses and put them and the collapsed staff on the desk by his bed, plumped up his pillow, and then sank gratefully into it. His neck tingled in a relief that traveled all the way down to his toes. He wriggled them, delighting in the soft sheets that released a hint of lavender as he moved. Last night he’d been too exhausted to notice.

He was just drifting off to sleep when he heard Mei surface in her tank with a splash. A couple droplets landed on his forehead, startling him awake. He heard quiet footsteps on the tile floor of their room pad quietly by the foot of his bed. He tensed, wondering what was going to happen.

"What do you want, Gemma?" Mei said warily. "Come to berate me some more for my thoughtlessness?" It was quiet in the room, the rustling noises of his roommates putting around in their areas had stopped. Harry imagined that Tony and Aminah were also listening in to the conversation.

"Okay. Thanks, I guess. I get it. We're all tired and overwhelmed." Mei conceded, apparently to Gemma's apology.

Harry heard a strange sound, like gravel swirling in a tin bucket.

"Here are the necklaces, Gemma. I went back and got them from the ocean floor so that no memory of a person would know that I had rejected their offering," Mei explained.

There was a clapping sound… Gemma, Harry thought.

The necklaces rattled loudly as they were dragged over the edge of the tank, and then water was splashing on the ground. It sounded like a whole bucket had been spilled. Gemma's feet were slapping in water as she jumped around.

"Stop hugging me! Gesh!" Mei said though she sounded happier than she had since he’d met her.

"Where are you going to put those?" Mei asked.

The necklaces tinkled and rattled as Gemma's hands moved while she responded.

"Okay, whatever," Mei said.

The jangling of the shells and Gemma's wet footsteps started to move past Harry's bed, but then paused. Harry opened his eyes and lifted his head so that Gemma would know he was still awake. He leaned over on his elbow, propped up as she came over and pulled the chair out from his desk to
sit next to him. He heard her put the pile of necklaces on the ground by his desk and then she wrote in his offered palm, "W-R-I-T-E?"

"Sure," he said as he sat up and felt for his staff. He opened up the extendable storage and accio’d the writing tools and anagnóstis and placed them on the desk in front of Gemma.

He realized that he was thirsty and wondered if there were drinking glasses somewhere in the room, but was too tired to investigate, so he accio’d his bottle of water from his staff and drank from it. It was getting low. As he listened to the pencil scratching across the surface of the pad of paper, he accio’d his wand and stuck it in the neck of his water bottle, then performed the water charm to fill it up. He listened as the sound of the water changed as it neared the top of the bottle and then said "Finite," when he thought it was close enough to the top. He dipped his finger in to check how close it was to the top. It wasn’t as close to overflowing as he thought it might be. He replaced the lid and set the water bottle on the desk next to his glasses.

Gemma tapped his hand and he felt the pad of paper being pushed against his fingertips. He read her note with the anagnóstis.

"Harry, I'm so sorry that I got so mad at Mei when we got back from the ship. I really don't know if I can explain why it made me so mad that she would just throw away the offerings from the people there. I mean, I know that they are a memory and not even 'real', but they seemed real. I know it isn't really fair to say this, but if you could have seen the expressions on their faces… they were so in love with Mei or maybe with who they thought she was. They were bringing her sick little babies and asking her to lay her hands on them to heal them. It was so sad and so beautiful. They really believed in her. And the thought of their beliefs and hopes and dreams being tossed aside like they were nothing, like they were trash, well, it really hurt me. I don't know why. I was just so angry."

Harry had reached the end of the note and set down the anagnóstis. He turned his face toward Gemma. "Thanks for explaining why it made you mad. I felt like I was missing something," Harry said softly. "I'm glad you talked to Mei and that you feel better about it now," he continued.

Gemma took the pad and started writing again. Harry stifled a yawn and rubbed his eyes.

"This is hard to say, but I'm going to try. I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry because I was mad at you, too. Which totally wasn't fair. I know that. I guess because from the expression on your face when I was yelling at Mei, it seemed like you didn't believe me. I thought about it a lot at lunch. You couldn't see everything that was going on and even if you could hear what the people where saying, I bet they weren't speaking English, so you wouldn't have known what they were saying. It was really unfair of me to get mad at you. I'm really sorry about that. I'm sorry, Harry."

Harry turned to her again when he was done.

"I didn't understand and I was confused. It makes more sense now. Thank you and it is okay."

She wrote a short bit more, "I'm really tired and I'm going to go take a nap before we have to go back."

"Me, too," Harry said. She squeezed his hand and then he heard her picking up the clattering shell necklaces.

"Could I see the necklaces?" Harry asked, holding out his hands.

There was a pause and then Gemma was draping one across his outstretched hands. He took it and
felt the delicate shells, little lightweight round beads that almost felt like seeds, and the rough, hairy cord that held them all together. He handed it back to Gemma.

"Thanks, I was wondering what they looked like," he said. "What are you going to do with them?"

The necklaces clanged against the desk chair as Gemma leaned over it to write on the pad again.

"I'm going to save them. Mei might need them again," Gemma wrote.

"Sure. I guess that's possible," Harry agreed, nodding.

She squeezed his hand again and then trailed two fingers down his palm, which he took to mean that she was leaving.

"See ya, Gemma," Harry said as he gathered up the writing tools to put them back in his staff. He climbed back into bed and nestled down into the sheets and listened to her progress back to her area of the room through the jingling of the shell necklaces. He had fallen asleep before he heard her set them down.
In the courtyard

Harry woke to a gentle bell sounding in the room. For a moment, he wasn't sure where he was. He had been dreaming of riding on a train and the bell he was hearing now had been the bell on the food trolley announcing it's progress down the corridor. He stretched and pulled at the covers and feeling their texture under his fingertips remembered that he was at the Center. He woke up a little more. The bell chimed again and he heard someone from across the room groan.

Did we all take a nap after the trip down the mountain and out to Africa and through a storm?

He opened his eyes and was surprised to find that the light in the room was flashing - from comfortable light to a blinding bright light. He shut his eyes against it. It was disconcerting and painful.

"It is 1:30 pm; please meet us for Instructor Introductions in the Mont Blanc room at 2 pm,” a pleasant voice instructed from an area near where the bells were sounding by the door.

Harry stretched and threw off the blankets. He’d had a good nap. He heard Tony's bed creaking as he moved in it and gathered that he was waking up, too.

A splash from Mei's tank delivered some droplets on his face. He wondered if she slept in the water. It seemed like it would be cold, even though the water was pretty warm when he'd been in it yesterday. Not really warm enough for sleeping, though.

"Someone wake up Gemma so that they turn off that gorgon-infested light!" Mei's gravely voice rang out.

The bell chimed again and the message repeated.

Harry waited a moment, hoping Tony or Aminah would do it, but he didn't hear either of them moving that way.

"I'll do it," he said reluctantly to the room. He shook out his staff and said, "Navigant third bed on the right," when he was standing at the foot of his bed. He hoped it would work.

He went past Tony's bed and then his staff announced that he was at the third bed on the right. He tapped the end of it with his staff and then trailed his hand along the mattress until he got closer to the head of the bed. He shook the bed a little to give Gemma a warning that he was there.

"Gemma, time to wake up," he said.

"She can't hear you," Mei reminded from the far end of the room.

Again the bell chimed and the same clear voice read out the message.

Aminah groaned in response and he heard her toss noisily in her bed. Harry heard Tony shuffle to the bathroom and the door close behind him.

"I know," Harry retorted, shaking the bed a little more. He thought about how surprising it was to have people touch him when he couldn't see it coming. He imagined it would be the same for Gemma, if not more so when her eyes were closed.

She turned in the bed toward him, her breath still heavy.
"Hurry up, Potter, would you? That blasted light is giving me a headache," Mei shouted from her tank.

"Close your eyes," Harry offered over his shoulder.

Mei groaned in response.

He shook the bed again, then tentatively reached out a hand, feeling along the blankets until he found her form under them. He grasped her shoulder and shook very gently.

"Gemma, time to wake up," he said more softly this time, hoping that she had opened her eyes and saw the note that he could hear fluttering by his lips.

She started and he was pretty sure that she had opened her eyes.

"Good afternoon, Gemma," Harry said.

She pulled her arm out from under her pillow and tapped twice on his hand that was resting on the mattress.

"The center has been ringing a bell and flashing the lights to wake us up - it is 1:30 and we have to be at the Mont Blanc room by 2 pm."

She tapped twice again on his hand, and then made a swirling motion on his hand. He furrowed his brows, not understanding what that meant. She sat up and took his hand, writing, "**T-H-A-N-K-S**

**I-M**

**A-W-A-K-E**

**S-E-E**

**N-O-T-E**

"Okay," Harry said and he turned to go back to his area.

"Harry, turn off the alarm," Mei said.

He hunched his shoulders, not liking to be ordered around.

"For Merlin's sake, Mei," Aminah moaned, "stop shouting."

He walked back to his area, feeling put out.

"Um, Harry, could you please turn off the alarm?" Mei tried a more conciliatory tone as she leaned over the side of her tank near him. Harry relaxed a little, recognizing that she was trying.

"I don't know how to turn it off, Mei," he confessed.

"It looks like there is a button by the door that we can press to turn it off, on the panel that operates the lights and doors and other stuff in the room," she explained.

Harry walked toward the door, then remembered he could use the staff to find the panel. "**Navigant** panel by the door," he said.

He found it.

He tried "**Navigant alarm on/off button**" next. His staff described a round red button (that's helpful!) in the center of the panel. He felt around and determined that there was only one round button, so tried it and the alarm shut off. He opened his eyes and found that the lights weren't flashing anymore - it was comfortable enough that he could keep his eyes open now.

Tony emerged from the bathroom.
"Oh, thanks for turning that off, mate," Tony said as he walked back to his area, "That was really annoying."

"Yeah, no problem," Harry responded, wondering how Tony operated the panel.

Harry sat down on his bed to put his shoes and socks on. He heard quiet feet padding toward him and guessed that it was Gemma. He turned his face toward her and smiled. She squeezed his shoulder in response.

"How's it going, Gemma? Did you have a good nap?" he asked.

She tapped his shoulder twice.

"Are you ready to go down to the Mont Blanc room" he asked.

She tapped twice again.

They walked in companionable silence to the Mont Blanc room. Harry listened to the other residents traveling through the corridors, but didn’t recognize anyone’s voices.

The Mont Blanc room was set up as it had been on Monday with rows of wooden benches. Harry and Gemma settled on the end of the same one that they had sat one before.

Surely, Tony and Mei won’t upset the bench again.

They didn’t. They came in and joined the group with as much grace and courtesy as each could muster. Aminah was the late one this time, but finally she arrived (Harry could hear her staff tapping as she approached) and settled next to Gemma on the bench without any disturbance.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

The introductions went off without a hitch this time. Harry hoped that classes with these instructors wouldn’t be a deadly dull as their introductions were. He thought that Ms. Midgeon seemed kind of stern - she’d be teaching self defense and some core exercises for balance, Mr. Burbage would be the Mobility and Orientation instructor (basically teaching the blind students how to use their staves), there was the BSL teacher whose name he couldn’t remember, a soft spoken woman (Bea? That wasn’t right) was a mind healer and would be teaching practical life lessons, Madam Flamel (the Center’s name sake) was teaching braille and a class with a really long and complicated title about fighting for one’s rights. Healer Jordan would be teaching some exercise classes that were focused on rehabilitation as well as making your own healing potions. There was an instructor with a really gruff voice that taught what sounded like wood shop or art classes or maybe both. And a few others that Harry couldn’t remember at all - mostly because he figured that he wouldn’t be in their classes and so didn’t even try to remember.

Healer Jordan’s footsteps crunched on the gravelly path as she handed out the schedules to the students. She informed them that they could expect some changes daily depending on needs - both of the students and the instructors. The parchment would be magically updated - so they should check them often for changes.

Harry accio’d his anagnóstis out of his staff while Healer Jordan was handing out schedules in the row in front of him. He was remembering Professor McGonagall passing out schedules to first years just after the sorting. It seemed like a life-time ago.

Interspersed with the sounds of breeze through trees and the chittering of birds and the occasional squirrel, the noise of people reading their schedules and consulting with their neighbors grew as more
and more of the residents received them.

Harry waited with nervous anticipation. Finally the parchment was placed in Harry’s outstretched hand. As he put the parchment on his knees to read the schedule, his fingers brushed over the surface. He was surprised that it was in braille and then when he ran his fingers over the it, he could hear Mr. Burbage's voice in his afrí. He frowned at the sound of Mr. Burbage's voice remembering the dressing down he and Tony had received for talking about the grumpy old man during the storm.

He tucked his anagnóstis into his pocket and ran his fingers over the bumps and listened to the schedule:

"Harry Potter's schedule

Tuesday 29 June, 1993

7 am Breakfast

8 am Special Guest in Mont Blanc room

12 pm Lunch

2 pm Instructor introductions in Mont Blanc room

3 pm Meeting with Healer Jordan in her office

4 pm Navigating with your staff with Mr. Burbage in the O&M room

5 pm Braille with Madam Flamel in the Library

6 pm Dinner

8 pm Council with Healer Jordan in the Mont Blanc room"

He was trying to figure out a pattern as he ran his fingers over the braille words and listened to them, but was having a really hard time finding the pattern, except in the numbers, because they were preceded by the same combination of dots each time - it felt like a truncated backward letter L.

It was a really packed afternoon - well, all the way to night. He imagined they were trying to make up for the time lost after yesterday’s incident with the overturned bench.

Harry turned to Gemma and touched her knee to get her attention.

He held up his schedule and asked, "Do we have any time together today?"

She said, "yes," again and then touched his arm and he held up his palm so she could write, " C-O-U-N-C-I-L ".

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Are you taking BSL classes?"

She replied yes.

Harry leaned around Gemma and confirmed that Aminah’s schedule was almost identical to his, except that while he was meeting with Healer Jordan, she was going to be attending a self-defense class with Ms. Midgeon.

Harry felt a tap on his shoulder from behind him.
"Greetings, Harry," said Adam's rich voice.

"Oh hello, Adam," Harry said, twisting around on the bench. “How are you doing?”

"Just fine. And how are you?”

“Good.”

“Harry, have you met Gordon Hoolahan yet?”

"No, I don't think I have," Harry responded.

"Well, yes, we have. We met yesterday during the storm. You and that armless boy borrowed the chair from next to me?" Gordon gruffly reminded Harry.

"Oh, right. Hi, Mr. Hoolahan, nice to meet you," Harry stuck out his hand in the direction of Gordon’s voice as heat crept up his cheeks as he remembered the conversation that he and Tony had been having after they left Gordon. Gordon gripped his hand and pumped it up and down and then released it. Harry could feel his weightlessness in his handshake.

He wondered if Gordon had overheard them talking.

"And his name is Tony, Tony Montague," Harry provided quietly, thankful that Tony had gotten up and wasn’t seated right next to him at the moment. He didn’t know where he was.

"Just call me Gordon. No need to be so formal here, right? Tony, eh? The armless bloke?" Mr. Hoolahan confirmed.

"Um, yes," Harry said uncomfortably.

"So, Harry, what does your schedule look like?" Adam asked.

"Yes, I'm meeting with Healer Jordan, then I'm going to learn how to get around with my staff better with Mr. Burbage, then I'm learning braille with Madam Flamel" Harry was cut off by Adam exclaiming, "Oh, you get to work with Madam Flamel, that's great. What a treasure. We are really so lucky to have her here."

"Yes, and well, after that it is dinner and then council," Harry continued, "Are you in council, too?"

"Yes, I imagine we all are in council at the end of the day," Adam responded. He turned to Mr. Hoolahan, "How about you, Gordon? What does your day look like?"

"Oh, well, I'm working in the orientation and mobility room with a Ms. Agatha Midgeon. There’s some time for learning my rights, too, and that's with Madam Flamel, and then the Council thingy," Mr. Hoolahan replied.

"What's on your schedule today, Adam?" Harry asked after a bit of a silence, punctuated by the noises that Gordon was making - he couldn’t tell what the noise was. At any rate, it was a distinctive sound that would make him easier to recognize.

"I'm also learning about my rights and about how to navigate certain social situations. I'm going to assist Mr. Burbage in the O&M room while he's working with you, Harry, and Fitz and others, and then, of course, Council," Adam explained.

Harry could feel that Gemma had twisted around next to him. He wondered how she was following the conversation. He couldn’t hear papers fluttering when Adam or Gordon talked so assumed they
hadn’t cast the *Scribunt loqui* charm.

“Hey, Gemma. Have you met Adam or Gordon yet?” Harry asked.

She tapped “no” on his wrist.

“Adam and Gordon, this is Gemma. Gemma, Adam is here, in front of me,” Harry explained.

*How is this going to work? He’s more invisible to her than he is to me … she can’t see him or hear him.*

“Harry, could you please tell Gemma that I’m pleased to meet her and that I’m holding out my hand if she’d like to shake,” Adam asked.

Harry repeated his words to Gemma and then helped her find Adam’s outstretched hand. Gordon was busy talking with someone next to him.

“Thank you, Harry. I’m afraid that the charm you use to write out your words for Gemma doesn’t work for me - my vibrations make them impossible to read,” Adam explained. Harry told Gemma what Adam had said and she wrote that she understood on Harry’s palm.

Harry *Tempus’d* his staff to see how much time he had before his meeting with Healer Jordan. He stood up and shook out his staff. His back was stiff from twisting around to talk to Adam.

“I’ll see you in the O&M room, Adam,” Harry said.

“Yes, see you then. Please tell Gemma that it was a pleasure to meet her,” Adam said.

Harry heard Tony come back to the spot next to him on the bench. He was talking to Mei about schedules.

Suddenly Mei exclaimed, "Hey! There's a poltergeist in here!"

"Mei, it's just Adam. Chill," Tony said in a tight even voice.

Harry wondered what Adam had been moving to make Mei think there was a poltergeist.

"Hello, Mei, I don't believe we've met yet," Adam said smoothly, "I'm Adam Ceesay."

"So, what? You're invisible?" Mei said, disbelieving.

"Yes, I had vanishing sickness," Adam explained quickly, and then went on to introduce Gordon who was no longer talking to the person next to him.

"So, you're the mermaid girl," Gordon stated.

Mei harrumphed and pushed her wheelchair along the gravel strewn path, muttering to herself.

"She'd better get used to it," Gordon said grumpily to no one in particular as he moved away from Harry.

There was an awkward silence.

"Hey, Harry. Did I tell you?" Tony said, breaking the silence. "Later today I'm getting my arms!"

"Cheers! That's brilliant, Tony," Harry said. “I bet they’ll be bloody handy.”
“Hey!” Harry stumbled into the bench when Tony nudged him with his shoulder in response and then they doubled over with laughter.
Of interviews with Dursleys and mind healers

Chapter Summary

Harry has his 9 am meeting with Healer Jordan.

Nervous about his meeting with Healer Jordan, Harry excused himself from his roommates and found the bench in the courtyard to try reading through the leaflets again. There was a little bit of information that would have been useful for him to know before he arrived at the Center, but nothing earth-shattering.

Maybe I didn’t get everything out of the bin? Or more likely, the information was in with the forms they got in the muggle mail that I didn’t know about.

He cringed at the thought of having to ask for copies.

He thought the leaflet titled “Adjusting to your magical malady” was terrible - it made him feel so boxed in and he wasn’t able to finish it. Who wrote this? He thought as he tossed it aside in disgust.

He was running his hands over a fragrant plant - Rosemary - he was pretty sure - when he heard steps on the cobblestone and turned his face toward the noise.

“Hi?” he said to the approaching footsteps that were more muffled on the grass by the bench, under the tree.

He heard them snap their fingers, then pick up the leaflet that he’d just tossed aside and the scratch of their clothing on the stone as they sat down on the bench next to him.

“Gemma?” he asked.

She reached over and tapped, “yes” on his arm.

He relaxed. “How did you find me here?”

He heard the scratching of pencil on paper and figured that she’d brought a pad of paper with her. He picked up the anagnóstis in anticipation of reading her note, and when she tapped hand with the pad, he read it.

“I saw you through the windows in the courtyard.”

“Oh, where is the courtyard in the Center?” He said, handing the pad back to her. He remembered that the courtyard had a covered walkway that went all the way around it with windows from the staff’s description.

“I saw you from the library,” she wrote back quickly.

“You can get to the courtyard from the owlery - there are stairs, but not very many,” Harry pointed in the direction of the stairs he’d come from and Gemma moved his arm a bit, he guessed to align it more to where the stairs actually were.
“Hey, I wasn’t that far off,” he said smiling.

She squeezed his arm.

“What do you have this morning?” he asked.

“BSL with Shannon,” she wrote on the pad.

“Is she teaching you?” he asked.

“No, she’s also a student. She just recently lost her hearing, like me,” Gemma wrote.

“Oh, did she also have spattergoit?” Harry asked.

“No, she happened to come across a Jobberknoll as it died, unfortunately, it had lived near a mine and had heard a number of explosions throughout its life and result was deafening, literally.” Gemma wrote.

“What’s a Jobberknoll?” Harry asked.

“It’s a little blue bird, but I guess it doesn’t make a sound until it dies, but when it dies it screams out all the sounds it heard in its life. I never heard of it before either. Neither had Shannon until she was out hiking near the old mine, and this bird drops right in front of her, dying and screaming. I guess it was pretty awful, but it destroyed her eardrums and there’s nothing that they can do right now, so she’s deaf like me, except that she can talk - it didn’t damage her vocal cords. She said it was okay for me to tell you and our other roommates her story - she gets tired of telling it,” Gemma wrote.

“Thanks. Did you know that Mr. Burbage got mad at me and Tony for talking about someone yesterday?”

She tapped his arm once, “no.”

“Well, it was embarrassing,” Harry admitted, cringing at the memory and the upcoming lessons with Mr. Burbage.

Gemma tugged on his arm and tapped his hand with the leaflet he had cast aside.

“What? Oh, should we get going?” Harry asked as he took the leaflet.

She tapped his arm twice, “yes.”

“Okay, I’ll go up the stairs to the Owlery because that will put me right across the hall from Healer Jordan’s office. Where are your lessons?”

“In the Braidwood room - across the corridor from Mont Blanc,” she wrote on her pad.

“Then I guess you better go back through the library,” Harry responded.

She tapped his arm twice, “yes.”

“I hope it goes well. See you later,” he said.

“Yes,” she tapped on his arm and then a little swish of her fingertips on his arm felt like a wave, so he waved back as he walked away.

When he reached Healer Jordan’s office he deliberated about if he should knock on the door or just
wait out in the hallway until she came looking for him. Finally, he sucked in a nervous breath, and then stuck out his hand to find the door and softly rapped twice on it.

It opened and Harry stood there for a second, thinking that Healer Jordan would greet him. When she didn’t, he said, “Hello?” to the void before him.

“Come on in, Harry!” her voice came from a distance, as if she was across the room, so he walked in hesitantly.

“I’m just finishing up with another resident, so go ahead and sit in a chair and I’ll be with you in a moment,” she said.

Harry stood there for a moment, and then said, “Navigant empty chair” to his staff and found one of the chairs in the waiting area to sit in.

He minimized his staff, but didn’t put it in his pocket. He sat twirling it between his fingers as he tried to calm his beating heart - he felt he’d been called to the Headmaster’s office. He wished he had something to do while to take his mind off the waiting. He was pretty sure he wouldn’t be able to concentrate on reading at this point and anyway, all he had to read were his textbooks and the leaflets.

He thought about what he had in his staff - after all, he had emptied his trunk into the staff. He opened the compartment and uttered, “Accio exploding snap cards” and held out his hand. The pack of cards that Ron had given him landed neatly in his palm and he closed the compartment on the staff and put the staff in his pocket. He could smell their distinctive faintly burnt odor and felt the well-worn deck remembering the cover image that had Egyptian stylized-eye that seemed to shimmer through a patina of tarnished gold. He could feel the raised image on the cards and ran his finger over the eye a few times. He untied the string that held the pack together and started feeling the cards to see if he could discern the images on the other side, but they didn’t seem to be embossed in the same way that the cover image was. They were essentially blank now.

Harry heard Healer Jordan again and realized that she must have cast some kind of silencing charm so that he couldn’t overhear the conversation. It sounded like they were coming this way, so Harry tied up the cards again and stowed them in his staff. He shook it out to extend it, but didn’t stand up, instead placed it in front of him and leaned against it.

“Thank you very much, Healer Jordan, I really appreciate your time,” Martha was saying as she walked toward the door.

“It’s no problem, Martha, that’s why I’m here,” Healer Jordan reassured.

“Oh, well thanks! Oh, and… Hi, Harry,” Martha greeted.

“Hi, Martha,” Harry responded and then he heard the door open and close behind her.

“Harry, I need to step out a moment before I meet with you. I’ll be right back,” Healer Jordan said.

“Oh, okay,” Harry said.

“You can help yourself to tea while you wait. Ask your staff to show you the way to the tea service,” she said as she walked away, to the back of her office area.

“Oh, thanks,” Harry said to her receding footsteps. He stood up and said, “Navigant tea service” and then went over to what turned out to be a tea cart. It had similar charms on it as the buffet in the dining hall, and by passing his hand over the cart, he was able to locate the cups and saucers, the
teapot, sugar, and milk. He poured himself a cup of tea, though he got a fair amount in the saucer. He found the napkins and mopped up the mess before adding sugar and milk and located the bin to throw away the paper napkins. He stood by the tea cart sipping his tea because he wasn’t sure he could walk back to his chair with the delicate teacup teetering in the saucer without dumping the whole thing while he used the staff to find his way.

He heard a door opening at the back of the office and footsteps and the distinctive noise of a staff tapping. Mr. Burbage, Harry guessed.

He turned toward him, his teacup rattling a little in his hand.

“Hi, Harry,” Mr. Burbage greeted before Harry had a chance to say anything.

“Hi, Mr. Burbage, uh - how did you know it was me?” Harry said surprised.

“I’ve set up my staff to recognize people I know and alert me to their presence when I enter a room. Also, I knew you’d be meeting with Healer Jordan this afternoon. I’ll show you how to cast that charm this afternoon. It’s really handy,” Mr. Burbage said.

“Okay, that’s cool,” Harry said, still feeling a little wary after their last exchange during the storm.

“Yeah. Hey, I’ll see you at the training later this afternoon. I’m going down there now to set up,” Mr. Burbage said as he walked away.

“Okay, see you then,” Harry said and took another sip of his tea.

Healer Jordan came back a few minutes later and carried Harry’s teacup to her desk while guiding him to the same seat he had sat in the last time he met with her in this office. Yesterday - that was only yesterday, he realized with a bit of a shock. It seemed like a long time ago.

“Okay, Harry, as we talked about yesterday, it seems like there is a gap in your understanding of the Center and how things work here. I had sent the material to your guardians with explicit instructions that they should share it with you and it seems like that did not happen. Is there anything you’d like to tell me?” Healer Jordan asked with a concerned tone.

“No,” Harry answered quickly, thinking about similar questions in Primary that had led to questions that brought the wrath of Vernon down on his head. He felt the blood drain from his face and pool in his innards.

Healer Jordan didn’t say anything and Harry felt the silence stretching uncomfortably as if she were simply sitting there staring at him, waiting for him to say more.

He twisted his hands in his lap and tried to come up with an exit strategy.

“My aunt and uncle… ” he started talking to his hands, faltered and then turned his face toward her again, “my aunt and uncle are muggles and they really don’t understand the magical world at all. I’m sure it was just a misunderstanding…” Harry tried.

“Well, that could very well be, Harry,” Healer Jordan’s voice was kind, but thoughtful… as if she stepping carefully through a bog, trying to walk only on the firm bits of land.

“I am going to visit them and interview them. I have some concerns about your condition when you arrived yesterday,” she stated carefully.

“Interview them?!?” Harry sat up suddenly. “What do you mean, concerns about my condition?” He
realized he was shouting and tried to bring his voice back down to a more moderate level.

“Harry, you had a number of bruises on your body that frankly make me wonder about your treatment at home,” Healer Jordan said in a steely voice.

“I just ran into a lot of things. I mean for Merlin’s sake, I can’t see and I keep bloody running into things like door jambs and tables,” Harry said, his voice breaking.

“You had bruises that look like fingers on your arm,” Healer Jordan said quietly.

“Well,” Harry drew in a deep breath, “Sometimes my uncle doesn’t know how hard his grip is, that’s all, and he’s not used to having to guide me - so he was a little rough. He’ll get better at it,” he finished quietly.

“That may be the case, but I’m still going to go talk to them,” Healer Jordan continued.

“Please don’t do that,” Harry said as evenly as he could manage.

“Why, Harry?” Healer Jordan prompted.

“They are scared of wixen - it’ll just make it worse,” Harry quietly breathed.

“It’ll make what worse?” Healer Jordan pushed.

“I can’t…” Harry said, feeling suddenly exhausted, and slumping back into the chair. It was deeper than he imagined and he fell back with a bit of a yelp. He struggled to sit up again.

“I promise you that I will do everything within my power to not make the situation worse for you. I will consult with Mr. Burbage whose father was a muggle and perhaps he can come along with me to help with their fear of the magical world.”

There was something in Healer Jordan’s voice that made him believe her conviction that she would not make it worse for him. He clung to that thought and nodded though the tightness in his throat made it uncomfortable.

“Okay, once I’m able to arrange the meeting and talk to them, I will inform you. And then I will meet with you afterward to let you know how it went,” Healer Jordan explained.

Harry’s response, a quiet “okay,” was barely audible.

“In the meantime, here is the information that I shared with them that you haven’t had a chance to go over yet. A lot of it, you learned on the tour, I think. When you read through it, though, I think you’ll find some of the missing information, such as how to find different pathways in the various settings according to your needs. You’ll also learn a lot of useful tips today about how to use your staff to its fullest effect.” She explained as she pushed a scroll into his hands. It felt heavy - as if it were really long. He sighed.

“And Harry, I’m going to set up some meeting times in your schedule with our mind healer,” Healer Jordan paused at an exasperated moan from Harry. “This is standard procedure for anyone who has undergone a trauma such as you have. Many of the Center’s participants find great value in working with a mind healer. I hope you’ll approach it with an open mind,” Healer Jordan finished.

“I know this has been a lot for you to take in. I’ll recommend that you find a quiet spot in the library or the courtyard to read over the material about the center before you meet with Mr. Burbage for your lessons on how to navigate with your staff,” she said with a finality that made Harry realize that
the meeting was over.

“Okay, thank you,” he said quietly as he stood up. He heard her clearing away his half-drunk cup of tea as he navigated toward the door with the heavy scroll in his hand.
A walk in the park

Chapter Summary

Harry gets a lesson on how to use his staff.

As Harry walked away from Healer Jordan's desk, he stopped and turned, "Healer Jordan?" he asked.

"Yes, Harry?" she said as approached him.

"What does a mind healer do?" he asked.

"Oh, that's a good question. They support people who are working through trauma of one sort or another," she responded.

"What do you mean by support?" he asked.

"Well, they guide you through the process of finding healing from the trauma. Really, they help you figure out how to heal from your trauma on your own - they give you the tools you need to process what has happened to you and then help you figure out how you're going to move forward," she explained.

"At my Primary, there was a counselor - is it like that?" Harry asked.

"Well, I'm not as familiar with the muggle side of things, but, yes, I think that they do similar things. Of course, in the wixen world, we have the advantage of magic to help us along," Healer Jordan explained.

"What kind of magic do they use?" Harry asked.

"Well, often they ask you to extract a memory that might be troubling and you share it with the mind healer and work through it," Healer Jordan said.

"Oh, how do you extract a memory?" Harry asked.

"It's a pretty simple charm that allows you to share it in a pensieve or another similar magical object and then you can both view it," Healer Jordan described.

"How does it work when someone is blind?" Harry asked.

"It depends on if your memory is visual or not. If you had the memory when you could see, then you share the visuals with the mind healer," Healer Jordan explained.

"Would I see the memory again?" Harry asked, curious.

"If it is your memory, then you see the visuals, but if you're inside someone else's memory and you're blind, then you'd experience it as you experience everything now," Healer Jordan clarified.

"Oh, so I wouldn't see it?" Harry asked.
"No, it doesn't bypass your optic nerve and go directly to your brain. It would be great if it did. Same with someone who has lost their hearing. They still wouldn't be able to hear what someone is saying in a memory. If we had that kind of magic, then we could figure out a way to restore your vision completely, even with the magical injury to your optical nerve that you've sustained," Healer Jordan said. "But wixen are working on this kind of magic as we speak - so it could be that within your lifetime, someone figures out a way that would allow you to see again."

"Oh, well, I guess that's good," Harry said.

There was a banging at the door as if someone kicked it.

"Oh, that's my next appointment," Healer Jordan said as she moved past Harry to open the door.

"Hi, Tony. How are you doing?" Healer Jordan greeted Tony at the door.

"I'm great. I can't wait to get my arms!" Tony exclaimed.

Harry felt a tinge of envy. He wished he was getting a pair of eyes for a moment, and then the thought made his skin crawl. New eyes would mean losing his eyes and that kind of freaked him out. Sure he couldn't see out of them (well, except light and dark), but they were still his eyes, and he liked having them in his head.

"Hi, Tony," Harry said as he heard Tony entering the room. "Good luck with your arms. I hope it goes well."

"Thanks, Harry! I'm going to be able to eat dinner on my own today!" Tony exclaimed.

"Oh, well, it might take a while for you to manage that, Tony. I'll explain it all. Let's go back to the clinic, okay?" Healer Jordan said.

"Oh, okay." Tony sounded a little deflated. "Bye, Harry."

"See ya' Tony," Harry responded.

Harry went out the door that Healer Jordan was holding open for him and asked his staff to guide him to the library.

oO0OooO0OooO0OooOo

At the entrance to the library, Harry held his staff up and squeezed it to get a description of the area as he closed his eyes against the bright light by the big windows on the far side of the room. The room it described was large and filled with books and seating areas. He also learned that there was a person seated at a desk not far from him near the entrance.

The librarian?

"Hello, welcome to the Perenelle Adaptation Center Library," the person greeted. A young woman, from her voice, Harry surmised - the voice seemed a little familiar, but he couldn’t place it.

"Hi," said Harry. "Is it alright if I read in here while I'm waiting for my next class?" Harry asked, holding up the scroll Healer Jordan had given him.

"Certainly. Would you like me to guide you to a table?" she offered.

"No, thanks, I can do it with my staff," Harry said, holding it up.
"That's fine. If you need anything, I'm here to help. My name is Besel Geller. I'm holding my hand out to you, if you'd like to shake it," she said.

Harry took a step closer to her desk and reached out, but didn't find her hand. "Thank you, Besel, I'm Harry," he waited a second, hoping she'd grab his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Harry. I can't quite reach your hand, could you step a little closer?" Besel said.

"Sure," he took another step and his staff came in contact with the desk. He felt Besel's fingertips graze his fingers, and leaned forward more until they were able to grasp hands and shake and let go. He laughed nervously. He liked the feeling of her hand.

"It's always an adventure here!" she said warmly.

"Yeah, that's for sure!" Harry agreed.

He asked his staff to direct him toward an empty table that it had described by the windows that overlooked the courtyard he had been sitting in with Gemma earlier. He sat down and rolled the scroll out on the table and extracted his *anagnóstis* from his staff and started reading the information about the center that Healer Jordan had sent to the Dursleys, but which they hadn't shared with him. 

*I bet they burned it*.

A lot of the things he learned as he read through the extensive document were things that he'd already picked up on during the tour or through conversations with Healer Jordan or Mr. Burbage. There was some history about why and how Perenelle Flamel had founded the Center and the people it served. There was a map of the Center that was really useful and he studied it for a while.

He finally found the section about the choices he had yesterday when he'd gone down the mountain path instead of finding the portal at the entrance that would have taken him directly to the deck of the ship as many people had chosen. He groused a little while reading it because it seemed like Healer Jordan could have mentioned it again when she was giving directions to the group.

*I wasn't the only one who missed it*.

He realized that he was feeling the same kind of betrayal that he'd felt when the Dursleys dropped him off at King's Cross Station his first year with his trunk and Hedwig and laughed as they left him trying to find Platform nine and three quarters.

Attempting to tamp down those feelings, he cast the *Tempus* charm and decided to pack up the scroll and head to the O&M room.

As he was leaving, he paused at Besel's desk.

"I guess we'll be in here for our braille lessons a little later. Do you know where in the library those lessons occur?" he asked.

"Yes, that's right. There is a study room in the northeast corner of the library that Madam Flamel likes to hold the braille lessons. It has all her materials. Would you like me to guide you there now so that you know where you're going?" Besel offered.

"Sure, I have a little bit of extra time," Harry agreed.

There was a noise that Harry couldn't quite understand as Besel moved away from her desk - it sounded sort of like a small breeze or wind going through a confined space, like a short tunnel. He
cocked his head as he listened, trying to understand it.

"Harry, I'm using a levitating chair. I'm guessing you haven't heard one before by your expression," Besel explained.

"Oh. No. I couldn't figure out what that sound was," Harry felt relieved. "Thanks for telling me."

"Sure, no problem," Besel said lightly. "The easiest way for me to guide you to the room is for you to touch the back of my chair. Here, I'll show you where you can hold on," she said as she touched his hand that wasn't holding his staff. He let her guide his hand to the back of her chair and he held onto it as she moved toward the study room. He realized that he was turned around as he thought the northeast corner was in the opposite direction. He was glad that he accepted her offer to show him the room. And he also liked her voice - it reminded him of a warm summer day.

He had expected that the study room would be small and confined, but it was more spacious (by the echoey sound of it) than he expected. The light was also less intense than it was in the main part of the library and he opened his eyes.

Besel led him back to the entrance and he thanked her for the tour and told her that he'd see her later and then set his staff to navigate to the O&M room with about five minutes to spare before Mr. Burbage's class started.

Harry remembered that he needed to check the layout of the O&M room when he reached it. He asked his staff to guide him to the layout when he was nearing the room and found himself in front of a picture frame just to the right of the door.

He reached out to touch it and Mr. Burbage's voice said in his afí, "Today, the O&M room is set up as a small village with footpaths and a park. You'll enter at the park. Ask your staff to direct you to the picnic area and wait for the class to gather at the picnic tables. There is a cooler of water on the center picnic table with glasses on the right of the cooler. I suggest that you hydrate while you wait as we'll be doing a fair amount of walking today. If you have a sun hat, I recommend you fetch it so that you don't get sunburned. While Old Ellerby is a real village, we've placed muggle repelling charms on it while we're using it, so the only people you'll be interacting with today are from the Center."

Harry sighed, he didn't have a sunhat. *I could use my Hogwarts uniform hat, I suppose.* He *accio'd* it out of his staff and stuck it on his head. He hadn't worn it much, but it still fit.

As he was getting his hat, he heard someone using a staff approaching the room.

"Hi," Harry greeted the person, guessing it was either Aminah or Fitz.

"Hi, is that you Harry?" Aminah questioned.

"Yes, I'm here by the layout of the room, if you want to come see it… well, you know what I mean," Harry said, faltering.

"Yeah, I know. Don't change your language on my account!" Aminah said graciously.

"It's funny… I hate it when other people do it to me, why did I do it to you?" Harry said, laughing.

"We're all working on it. No worries," Aminah agreed.
"How's your afternoon been?" Harry asked.

"It's been good. I worked with Agatha Midgeon on self-defense," Aminah explained.

"Oh, how was that?" Harry asked, wondering if it was like a Defense Against the Dark Arts Class.

"It was good - it was just the intro. I guess you'll be in there with us tomorrow. I heard Healer Jordan and Ms. Midgeon talking about it before class," Aminah sounded apologetic as she explained the last bit.

"Yeah, I was meeting with Healer Jordan this morning," Harry offered.

"Oh?" Aminah asked.

"She was just filling me in on some stuff I missed…" Harry deflected.

"Here, I'm going to check out the layout," Aminah said, stepping forward toward the layout of the room.

"Oh, that's cool," Aminah said.

"What?" asked Harry.

"Did you feel it? It's like a topographical map," Aminah said, with a bit of awe in her voice.

"Oh, no, I didn't do that," Harry said, stepping next to her and bumping into her a bit.

"Sorry about that; didn't see you," Harry joked.

"Ha ha, very funny" Aminah said laughing.

As he lightly touched the map, he could feel ridges and his afti told him that it was the path to the picnic area to the park. He traced his hands out to the edges of the map and got a sense for the layout of the little town that they were going to walk around - a bird's eye view.

"That is neat," Harry agreed.

"Ready to head in?" Aminah asked.

"Yep, let's go," Harry said.

Harry cast the Navigation spell to take him to the picnic area and heard Aminah doing the same. He found the door and held it open for Aminah.

"Thank you, Harry," she said as he followed her in.

He heard her feet crunching on a gravel footpath before he felt it beneath his feet. He followed a few paces behind Aminah, not wanting to crowd her. They could hear a couple people talking ahead of them. Harry remembered that Gordon was also working in this room today and wondered how many different groups of people would be sharing the same space and how that would work exactly. He could pick out Adam's voice and Fitz's, and then he heard Martha's voice.

"Oh, I thought Martha was sighted," Harry said before he could stop himself.

"Martha Makinen?" Aminah asked.
"Um, I don’t know her last name, actually, but I guess so,” Harry said.

"Yeah, she can see. She's here because of her daughter. Milla was born blind, dragon pox, I think. Anyway, Martha's here taking the training so that she can work with her daughter more effectively,” Aminah explained quietly as they approached.

"Oh," Harry responded, wondering what it would be like to be born blind.

They walked the rest of the way without talking, just the crunching of their feet on the gravel path, the tapping of their respective staffs, and the conversation of the people at the picnic table getting louder as they approached. Harry could also hear birds, dogs barking, the sound of an airplane overhead, and the breeze moving the leaves on trees. It was a lot hotter in the park, too, than it had been in the corridor of the center.

"Nice hat, Harry!" Adam's voice rang out as they approached.

"Uh, thanks? It's all I had," Harry explained, blushing.

"Well, most of your companions today won't even notice, am I right?" Adam joked.

"Absolutely right," agreed Fitz. "Harry, it's a very nice lampshade if I do say so myself," Fitz continued the joke.

"You blokes are hilarious!" Martha laughed.

"Amy, my name is Martha," Martha had approached Aminah.

"Oh, it's nice to meet you, Martha!" Aminah said shyly. "Um, but my name is Aminah. A lot of people call me Amy, though," she laughed nervously.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Aminah! Harry corrected me yesterday as well. I'm just terrible with names. And here, I thought I had remembered correctly. I'm probably going to call you Amy for the rest of training. I'm horrible!" Martha blustered on.

"It's alright, really!" Aminah consoled, sounding more at ease than Harry had heard her.

"Would you like a glass of water, Aminah, Harry?" Adam offered.

"Actually, that sounds great," Harry said, glad to have an excuse to do something while they waited for Mr. Burbage. Harry followed the sound of Adam's footsteps and used his staff to navigate around the picnic tables.

"Here you go, Harry," Adam pressed a cold glass into his hand. "And here you go, Aminah," Adam said, turning away from Harry. "Thanks!"

They didn't have long to wait, pretty soon they heard the sound of another person coming along the path. Harry was pretty sure it was Mr. Burbage, he couldn't hear his staff and wondered if he was using it collapsed.

"Hello!" Mr. Burbage greeted the group. "Thanks, everyone, for arriving on time."

"Martha and Adam, before we get started I have blindfolds and staves for you to use," Mr. Burbage announced. Harry noted that both Adam and Martha seemed surprised by this development. He heard them crunch on the gravel and approach Mr. Burbage to receive them.

"Once you've got your blindfolds in place, go ahead and shake your staff three times. Make sure that
you allow space around you so that you don't accidentally hit someone as it is restored to its normal size. Also, here are your aftís. Place them on the helix of your ear," Mr. Burbage directed.

Mr. Burbage worked with Adam and Martha for a bit while they got their aftí placed and also showed them the correct way to hold their staff. He went around and made sure everyone was holding their staffs correctly as well. "Okay, we're going to take a walk around the park on the path at first and I'll be working with each you on your form with the staff."
Disillusionment

Chapter Summary

Masking and unmasking charms.

Harry sank onto the picnic bench and pulled his t-shirt away from his sweating back to allow some of the breeze to help cool him down. The others in the group were also finding spots to rest and hydrate. He pulled off his hat and wiped his brow. He was tempted to dump the glass of water over his head, but sucked it down instead. He was thirsty. They had just spent a good half hour, probably more, walking around the park in the blazing hot sun at a pretty fast pace. He was feeling pretty good. Tired, but good. He had learned some handy tips with his staff in the process as well as really stretching his legs.

Godric, as he insisted that they call him, had taught them how to use the charms on their staves to recognize people and say their names as they approached. It even worked when they were at a distance, so you could go into a crowded restaurant or classroom and navigate right to the person you wanted to meet as long as you had added them into your staff’s memory already. Harry really liked that feature. He didn’t like not knowing who was in a room with him and spent a fair amount of time trying to figure out who was around him.

He also liked that could do the same thing with a favorite area or table, too, or any object for that matter. They spent most of the time walking and learning how to interpret the descriptions and directions of the staff and how to modify the settings for the situation. If you were in a familiar setting, you could set your staff to just give basic descriptions, but if you were in a new setting, you might want to get more information until you really understood the lay of the land.

Godric had them work with all levels of settings, even the setting that just vibrated in their hands, rather than giving verbal instructions. He said that setting was really handy if you had to listen to someone talking while you were walking so that you weren’t distracted by the descriptions from your staff while you were trying to carry on a conversation.

Godric thought that Harry was getting along pretty well with his staff, though he had some minor corrections to his style. Harry grudgingly conceded that they did make it easier - so that his hand and wrist weren’t so worn out by the end of the day.

Adam and Martha had the hardest time, but Harry allowed them that - they hadn’t had to navigate by staff before that moment when Godric handed them the blindfolds, so it was all new to them. Harry at least had a week or so under his belt (counting from when he’d been able to read the directions for how to use it). He wasn’t sure how long Aminah and Fitz had been working with their staves, but they seemed pretty comfortable with everything they were learning so far, so he guessed they had had a bit more time to figure things out than he had.

They had passed the other group working in the O&M room while they were out and about in Old Ellerby village. Harry had heard Mei’s voice and Gordon’s, but didn’t recognize the other voices. He quietly had added Mei and Gordon to his staff’s memory as they passed them, “Memento Mei Lee and Memento Gordon Hoolahan.” He felt a little sneaky, but justified it - they after all, always knew when he was in a room with them.
Harry thought his staff might struggle with making a *Memento* of Adam, but it seemed that the charm wasn’t just recording the visual aspects of the person, but something more, maybe their essence?

He was curious about the range of the staff, “Mr… er, Godric, how far away, um, can the staff recognize someone?” He had squeezed the staff in the air three times in rapid succession to get a reading on the people around him and it had identified them all by name and described where they were in relation to him. It gave all this information really quickly and Harry found that the hardest part was understanding the staff, but he was starting to make sense of it. Godric had explained that it was possible to slow it down, but that most wixen preferred to learn how to hear the fast setting because in the slow version by the time it was done describing everyone, they had moved on and the information wasn’t as relevant anymore.

Harry knew that Godric was sitting on the bench to his left, three feet away from him.

“That’s a good question, Harry,” Godric responded. “It kind of depends on what is between you and the person you’re seeking. I’ve used it to locate lost students in crowded city streets and it was able to navigate me toward them from over five streets away - and they were moving as well. When we’re in a big open space like this park and there is a huge distance between us, but not many obstacles, it is able to identify and navigate toward people who are even farther away than five city streets.”

“Wow, it seems like it could be abused. Like someone could use it to target someone,” Fitz said thoughtfully.

“Sure, it’s true. Actually, Aurors use similar technology to track the movements of known or suspected Death Eaters, but there are also charms as well as curses that prevent people from *Memento*’ing you. It’s really similar to the trace that the Ministry puts on all underage wixen, right?” Godric explained.

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“Oh, it’s how the Ministry of Magic knows when underage wixen are performing magic outside of school, though it only works if they are not in a magic area, right?”

Harry remembered how the Ministry had sent the owl right after Dobby had performed magic in his Aunt’s kitchen. Harry shook off a chill.

*That seems really creepy. Kind of Big Brother-ish.*

“Why can’t they pinpoint who’s doing the magic?” Harry asked - it still irked him that he was the one blamed for that incident.

“Oh, I’m pretty sure they can, they just tell us that it is too much bother to monitor all those wixen - they don’t have the personnel to do it,” Godric explained airily.

“What if you don’t want someone to know where you are or what you’re doing? Say you’re shopping for their birthday present or something,” Martha asked.

“You can cast a number of charms that cloak you from other people’s charms, just like you can cast disillusioning charms or hide under an invisibility cloak, right?” Godric responded.

“So, would the Memento charm not work on someone who was under an invisibility cloak?”

“I think it depends on the type of cloak. Some are more concealing than others,” Godric explained.

*I’ll have to try that out with Ron.*
“What’s the best one to use?” Fitz asked quietly.

“Probably the masking spell, *Abscondere,*” Godric offered. “It can be a bit tricky. You have to be intentional about who you are hiding from and why. You can also use it to hide objects, such as that birthday present, right Martha?”

“That’s right!” Martha agreed, laughing.

“Does it just hide things visually or does it hide them from complete detection?” Harry asked, thinking about how Adam was invisible to sighted people, but not really to him. He was as visible to Harry as anyone else in the group, Harry thought as he listened to and felt Adam shifting on the other end of the bench. He was pretty quiet during this discussion of things unseen.

“Pretty completely, I believe,” Godric answered.

“Doesn’t the revealing charm override the masking spell?” Fitz asked.

“It can, that’s for sure, nothing is permanent and it all depends on the power of the wixen who casts the spell, right?” Godric said, standing up and shaking out his staff. “Okay, we’ve got more to do today and not much time, so let’s get going.”

Harry stood up and walked over to Fitz, “What’s the incantation for the revealing charm?” Harry asked.

“Oh, it’s *Aparecium,*” Fitz answered and Harry tried to commit it to memory. He’d have to look all these charms up in his Charms book. He wished he had an easier way to write things down. He had heard Martha writing down notes while Godric was talking (*she must have taken off her blindfold*).

“Okay, you’ve done good work navigating with your magically enhanced staves, now we’re going to work without the magical part of the staff. There are going to be times when you aren’t going to have your staff for whatever reason and you’ll feel better knowing that you can manage without it, even though it is a different experience. We’ll spend a little bit of every day we work together building your skills so that you can get around no matter what tools you have access to (or not). We could always turn the talking feature of the staves off, but today I’m going to take your staves and give you muggle white canes for the visually impaired. We are going to start out small and just walk together as a group on the path that we came in on. I’m going to ask you to spread yourselves out so that there are about five yards between each of you so that you don’t run into each other. The same principles apply with the canes as with the staff - you hold it the same way and move it in the same motion. You’ll be listening for the cues it gives and the sounds it makes as the metal tip hits different surfaces.”

Godric was walking around the path and he tapped the metal tip on different surfaces so that they could hear how they sounded.

It was more obvious than the wooden staff, the metal tip created more of a sound landscape of the area because it was louder. Harry could tell when Godric was near the wall around the picnic area. He stopped at a picnic table and picked up the canes that they were going to use and started handing them out.

“Go ahead and collapse your staff and put it in your pocket. The emergency mode will still function. I’ll lead the way and then when we reach the entrance to the park we’ll turn around and go back to the picnic area. Okay. Any questions?” Godric sounded animated - he was really enjoying this.
No one had any questions, so they lined up and waited for their turn, listening to the person ahead of them get ahead of them before setting out. Harry was reminded of his first excursions out into the yard at Privet Drive and smiled to himself remembering Nio hus cherio kisa’s gentle guidance and companionship. He almost missed his cue to go, but Aminah behind him whispered to him, “Harry, I think it’s your turn to go.”

“Oh, right! Sorry!”

He stumbled a bit in his haste, then found a rhythm. He found it a little harder to walk in a straight line on the path, he kept meandering from side to side until he decided to use the grass on the edge as a marker and just stayed on the left of the path. He actually kind of liked the simplicity of having just the tapping noise without the constant chatter in his ear.

It was like a puzzle - each new sound was something to figure out. Except when he was pretty sure that he had stuck the tip of his cane in to a fairly fresh pile of dog do. He wondered when there had been a dog running through the park. He hadn’t heard it. He could definitely smell it now and since the smell seemed to be preceding him he figured it was on the tip of the cane. He stopped to rub the tip of the cane in the grass and Aminah came up behind him.

“Oh, sorry, Aminah, I got dog . . uh… stuff on my cane. I’m cleaning it off,” he apologized for holding up her progress.

“Ew,” she said. “I can smell it.”

“Yeah, it’s bad,” Harry agreed. “Okay, I think that’s better. I’ll keep going.”

Now Harry had lost track of Fitz who was ahead of him. He wondered if he had stopped or if he was walking on the grass because he couldn’t hear anyone ahead of him on the path. He could hear Aminah, but she was the last person to go.

“Harry, is that you?” Godric asked. His voice was off the path a bit.

“Yeah, and Aminah’s right behind me,” Harry said. “I had a bit of a run in with a pile of dog… ”

“Crap?” Fitz supplied, laughing.

“Yeah,” laughed Harry, “I tried to clean it off the cane. Sorry, Godric.”

“Here, I’ll scourgify it,” Godric came over to Harry and found his arm that was holding the cane and tapped it with his wand, “scourgify!” and the lingering smell disappeared.

“That’s better - thanks,” Harry said.

“No problem. It’s one of the hazards of being in the park,” Godric conceded.

“Okay, here’s Aminah! Well done, everyone!” he congratulated. “We’ll head back to the picnic table. Keep your nose tuned for that pile of dog do and try to avoid it! Aminah, do you want to lead the way this time?” Godric asked.

“Sure,” she said as she headed back to the picnic area.

“Godric, I noticed that Lieutenant Holman had a metal tip on his cane, too. Can our staves be fitted with a metal tip? I kind of like it,” Harry said.

“Sure, that’s not too hard to do. We have a workshop at the center where you can make
modifications to your tools. You can find it on the center’s map. It is just outside of the dining hall and is called the “Giovanni Gonneli workshop,” in honor of the famous blind sculptor from Tuscany - another one of Madam Perenelle’s friends,” Godric explained.

“Harry, you’re up,” nudged Fitz who was waiting behind Harry.

“Oh, right. Sorry,” he stumbled forward again, heat rising in his cheeks. He seemed to be the only one who was not paying attention.

As Harry walked toward the library with Aminah, they debated the merits of learning how to navigate with the muggle cane.

“I kind of liked it,” confessed Harry. “I mean, I like all the magical features of the staff, but the cane is really simple, too. It’s nice not to have someone jabbering in your ear all the time.”

“Yeah, I guess. I just feel safer knowing what’s around me,” Aminah said quietly.

“I like that, too,” Harry admitted thinking about all the times Dudley tried to trip him at Privet Drive… and that was before he knew that Harry was blind. He wasn’t looking forward to returning there in July. 31 suns, now.

“Hey, Aminah. I’ve been meaning to ask you. Do you go to Hogwarts?”

“Yeah. I’ve seen you there. I’ll be a fifth year, so we didn’t have any classes together, but I saw you a lot at the library with your friend who was here. I’m in Hufflepuff or I was. I don’t know if I’m going back…” Aminah offered.

“Oh, why wouldn’t you go back?” Harry asked.

“My mom is talking about moving to the states and sending me to Ilivermorny,” she said.

“That would be a big change,” Harry said.

“Yeah. I don’t want to. I want to stay here,” Aminah said. “It’s all I’ve ever known.”

Harry could relate. The trips they took in the Center so far were the farthest from the U.K. that he’d ever been - he wasn’t sure if counted if all he had to do to travel was cross a threshold (or be pulled out to sea by a mermaid - a Jiāorén, he corrected).

“Why does she want to move?” Harry asked.

Aminah was quiet for a while as if she were weighing something heavy.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to tell me,” Harry offered, realizing that he had maybe stepped over a line.

“It’s just that she’s worried… worried that my father will get to me again…” Aminah said with a bit of a hiccup.
Harry stopped in the corridor. There was something ominous about the way Aminah had said it. It kind of reminded him of how he sometimes talked about Uncle Vernon, but worse somehow.

“What do you mean, get to you?” Harry asked, his stomach clenching, sweat coating his palms and prickling the back of his neck.

Aminah hadn’t realized that he had stopped and had walked a few paces beyond him. She turned and came back, no doubt using her staff to find him.

She stood quietly in front of him. It was a heavy silence and Harry felt like he could hear her heart pounding, even though he knew it had to be his heart that was thumping. He wished someone would come along the corridor and break up the awkwardness and at the same time he hoped that no one would come. He felt a little trapped.

Finally, he heard her lick her lips. “I’ll tell you about it later,” she muttered.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked,” Harry said.

“No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. It’s really… it’s not something I can talk about here,” she moaned. “I’m sorry. I… I dunno,” she was quiet for so long that Harry thought she wasn’t going to say anything else, but he didn’t have anything to offer to fill up the space. “It’s weird. I… I feel like I can trust you… like maybe you understand…” Her voice was tight.

“Oh. Well. Yeah. I get it… and… it’s okay… to talk about it later,” Harry said and then softly added a weighty, “I’m sorry.” He reached out and clumsily found her arm and squeezed it… thinking of the comfort of Gemma’s squeezes and how it made him feel a little more connected… a little less isolated… when he could no longer look into someone’s eyes and feel that understanding and try to gauge what they were thinking. These long pauses were hard to interpret.

“Yeah, thanks,” was her despondent answer and she turned and started walking again, her arm easing out of his grasp and he let her go. They continued down the corridor in silence.

After a bit, Harry thought of something he could say… and hastily threw it out… like a little life raft… “Hey, how’s your shoulder doing? Did Healer Jordan heal it completely yesterday or is it still sore?”

Harry stumbled over the words in an effort to change the subject.

“Oh, yeah. It is still a little sore, but way better than it would have been, I’m sure, if Healer Jordan hadn’t looked at it right away… Thank you.” she answered.

And then a second later, in a completely different tone, she said “Oh, Harry, I forgot to give you back your school robes that you lent me yesterday when it was cold. It’s in the dorm. I put it in the laundry and it should be coming back soon.”

“Yeah, right. I forgot about those. Thanks. I’ll ask Gemma and Mei, too.” Harry said.

“How do you put your clothes in the school laundry?” Harry asked, remembering all his wet clothes from yesterday.

“There’s a laundry chute in the bathroom - just put them in there. I guess they are laundered and
returned within a day,” Aminah said.

“Wow. How do they do that?” Harry wondered.

“Probably magic - I’m pretty sure they know who put it in the chute,” answered Aminah.

As they approached the dining hall, Harry’s nose detected something spicy in the air. “It kind of smells like Toad in a Hole,” he said.

“Mmm. I hope so.” Aminah replied.

“Mmm,” said Harry, his mouth watering. “We still have braille before dinner!”

“Um, yeah. Your ana-thing that reads. It’s really cool how it reads in the voice of the person who wrote it… where did you get it?” Aminah asked.

“Um, yeah, it is cool. Dumbledore gave it to me. He said it was Homer’s,” Harry said.

“Oh wow. Like the poet, right? Not Homer Simpson! I guess that’s cool. I heard that you and him were close…” Harry made a surprised noise at this while Aminah kept speaking, “… that probably means that there aren’t more like it,” Aminah said dully.

“I wouldn’t say that we’re close,” Harry protested, remembering the last meeting in Dumbledore’s office. “I mean I respect him and everything, but it’s not like he’s taken me fishing or anything…” Harry wondered if Fawkes would swoop in now with a howler. In the Chamber, he had been so fiercely loyal to Dumbledore when Tom Riddle was threatening him, and now… now something had shifted.

“Oh, it’s just what people say,” Aminah said.

“Isn’t it possible to duplicate things magically? Maybe we can make copies?” Harry offered, wanting to get away from the subject of Dumbledore.

“Yeah, I think that’s kind of advanced magic, but maybe someone here knows how to do it. That would be super cool,” Aminah cheered a little.

“Did we get out early? It seems pretty quiet out here.” He observed, wondering where Adam, Fitz, and Martha went - and Godric for that matter - they had all been in the class together.

“I think I hear a group of people up ahead,” Aminah said.

“Oh, yeah. I think I hear them, too. Maybe we’re missing something,” Harry said.

“Navigant group of people,” Aminah said to her staff and Harry followed her.

Harry was trying to remember everything on his schedule today.

“Was there something on our schedule for this time of day?” he asked Aminah as they walked over.

“I don’t think so, but I haven’t checked it since we got the schedules. Maybe they updated it?” Aminah offered.

“Oh, yeah. I forgot about that…” Harry trailed off, realizing that someone was talking to the group. They were definitely missing something.

By the time they reached the edge of the group, it was apparent that this was an impromptu
gathering. He and Aminah edged around the group so that they were more at the back. Harry was really grateful for the lesson they had just had about how to use their staff to greater advantage. He realized that he would have been tapping people’s feet if this had happened before his lesson with Godric.

He wished he had been around Gemma this morning so that he could have added her to his staff’s memory of people, but he guessed that she’d find him soon.

It took Harry a while to figure out who was speaking at first. He finally placed the voice. It was Ms. Midgeon who was speaking about how she’d had lost a limb or two during the last wixen war… and it dawned on him that this was the war that ended when his parents died.

_She had to be about the same age as they would have been. I wonder if she knew them? Were they at Hogwarts together? She sounded really young… for an old person. My parents must have been teenagers when they started fighting Voldemort… when they had me…_ He had never really thought about it before and it made him want to go through the photo album that Hagrid had made him last year and really look at them again… his throat closed. There was a wetness on his cheeks… and a constriction in his chest and suddenly everything around him was being pushed away. And the world went black in a way that was more final than the darkness he’d experienced since he lost his sight… he thought about that for the mearest second and then… nothing.
Harry opened his eyes and sucked in a deep breath… like he was coming up for air, but he wasn't in
the ocean this time.

*I'm not wet. It's not salty.*

It wasn't dark, but it wasn't light either. It didn’t smell like the corridor outside the library.

*I don't know where I am!*

But then there was a calming weight of a small hand on his arm.

*Gemma's here.*

He breathing became more regulated.

*I'm laying down. I'm on a bed… no, a camp bed.*

His fingertips felt along the wooden supports of a camp bed, covered with a stiff canvas cloth. There
was an aroma of peppermint.

*Hospital wing… no… there are beds in the hospital wing.*

It felt like it took a really long time for the thought generated in his brain to reach his throat and then
his lips.

"Where am I?" he asked, his voice scratchy. He heard the paper fluttering by his lips.

Gemma squeezed his arm, then took up his hand and turned it over so she could write on his palm.

"**H.J.’s** space "**O-F-F-I-C-E**" she wrote.

She had to do it a few times before he understood. He felt really dense, like he was running in slow
motion, except that he was lying down.

He scrunched up his brow, "Why? What happened?" he asked.

"**D-O-N-'T** space "**K-N-O-W**" she said.

He could almost feel a shrug in her hands as she wrote.

"**Y-O-U** space "**F-A-I-N-E-D**" her finger was jumpy, as if she were trembling as she wrote.

He felt his throat close in mortification.

"In front of everyone?" he whispered.

She tapped twice, "yes."

He cringed and tried to roll over on his side, but the camp bed rocked and he stopped, afraid he'd
topple out.

Gemma stroked his arm. He found it comforting. He realized that if she had been anyone else, he
would have been annoyed. He would have felt pitied and pathetic. But Gemma felt like what he imagined having a little sister might be like. It reminded him of the way Ron acted around Ginny (when he wasn't annoyed with her) - she was someone he could confide in and someone he felt an innate urge to protect. He imagined a little sister as a person who would look up to him. Except that it seemed as though Gemma was doing a lot of looking out for him. Maybe she thinks of me as a little brother? Or maybe little sisters also look out for big brothers. He thought about what it could have been like with Dudley if he hadn't been… Dudley.

His memory of the photos of his parents at their wedding floated through his consciousness, how they smiled and hugged each other and their friends. I'd probably have a little sister or brother by now if…

A sob escaped his lips and this time he managed to roll to his side without dumping the camp bed so that he could hold his face in his hands so that Gemma wouldn't see.

Why does it hurt so much to realize that I can't look at those photos anymore? It was just paper. It wasn't like holding a person or even talking to them. Why is that so much more painful than not having parents at all. What kind of a freak am I?

He was embarrassed that Gemma had seen him cry (at least she didn't hear it - and he cringed at himself for even having the thought - that was mean) and worked really hard to keep the rest of the sobs tucked away. He kept his back to her until he was certain that he could control them. She rubbed his back. It felt like something a mom would do. Something he'd seen moms do at the park or at school when other kids had been sad or hurt that he had never experienced first hand. Maybe Gemma's mom rubbed her back that way?

He had to get up and do something. Laying there was just making him think of even worse things and he might disappear into that pit. He rolled over again carefully and sat up slowly, hanging his feet over the edge of the camp bed. He felt dizzy and disoriented. It was weird not knowing where he was.

"Harry," a voice came from across the room. He didn't realize anyone else was in the room.

Footsteps approached - Healer Jordan's.

She put a hand on his shoulder, sitting down on a chair (he presumed) next to the camp bed.

"Harry, you need to rest a while longer. You're exhausted," she said.

"I can't lay here anymore, Healer. I need to get up," Harry pleaded.

He wanted to run. He wanted to run as far and as fast as he could. Where could I just flat out run and not trip over things? Run until all these bad thoughts just fell away, too tired to keep up with him.

"I want to run, Healer Jordan. I need to run," Harry said, standing up suddenly, and swaying on his feet and bumping into Gemma.

"Sorry, Gemma," he said, trying to steady her, but then accidentally knocking her in the head.

"Oops. Sorry about that," he grimaced trying not to start crying again. He sank back onto the camp bed.

Gemma put her hand on his arm as she also stood up.

"Gemma, thank you for sitting with Harry. I'm sure he found your presence calming. You can go on
class now. I need to talk to him," Healer Jordan spoke to Gemma, but he could also hear her signing.

The speaking was for his benefit, he gathered. Gemma swished her fingers across the back of Harry's hand, waving goodbye.

"Bye, Gemma. Thank you. Thank you for being with me," he said.

She squeezed his hand and then he heard her footsteps as she went toward the door. He didn't think he was in the office where he'd met with Healer Jordan earlier in the morning. The sounds were all wrong.

"Harry, I'm sorry. You can't run right now. You just fainted and you're clearly still very unsteady on your feet. You need to rest. I have some nutrition potions for you and a calming draft that will help you sleep so that you can heal," Healer Jordan explained.

Harry put his head in his hands.

Healer Jordan clinked together some small glass containers and he realized that she must have been holding them out to him.

He reached out for them, resigned.

Where could I run anyway? he thought, feeling defeated as he drank them and wincing at their bitterness.

"Harry, I will take you running when you are well enough to run, okay?" Healer Jordan said in a soothing voice… almost as if she understood his despair.

"There are places you can run and ways you can do it without sight," Healer Jordan continued.

He nodded dully. He didn't really believe her. And he really just wanted to do it right then. Not later. But he was feeling pretty tired. Maybe he'd just lay down for a little bit.

oO0OooO0O0O0O0O0O0O0o

When he awoke later, he was pretty certain he was alone in the room. He tempus'd his staff - which he found after a panicked moment of searching his pockets for it - on a chair by his camp bed along with his glasses. He learned that it was hours later. He had missed his afternoon lessons, dinner, and council. He wasn't sure how he felt about that - a mixture of relief and anxiety, he finally decided. Relief that he didn't have to do anything at that moment and anxiety that he might have missed out on important things. He felt small and alone in this strange office and laid there for a while trying to decide what to do.

He finally sat up and he heard a little bell go at the far side of the room when he did. Not far from it he heard a whooshing noise - kind of like a fan or wind through a small crack. He'd heard it before he realized and wondered if Besel was coming toward him in her levitating chair. Is it powered by air or does it make that noise as air move under it?

He turned his face toward the noise expectantly.

"Hi, Harry," came Besel's pleasant voice.

"Hi, Besel," said Harry, almost at the same time.

"Oh, you recognized me. That's impressive," Besel said.
"Just the sound of your chair," Harry admitted.

"How are you feeling? Sounds like you had quite a day," Besel said.

"Yeah, I actually was having a pretty good day. I don't know what happened out there," he said.

"Sometimes stuff just catches up with us… " Besel commiserated.

"Yeah. I guess so," Harry agreed.

"So, Healer Jordan said that she had mentioned to you that you'd be working with a Mind Healer," Besel said.

"Yeah?" said Harry.

"Well, I'm the Mind Healer at the center," Besel informed him.

"Oh, I thought you were the librarian?" Harry questioned. He liked her as a librarian better.

"Well, yes, that, too. We all wear lots of hat here. It is a small institution," Besel said, laughing.

"Wait - does that mean I'm crazy?" Harry asked, his heart speeding up.

"No, not at all," she reassured. "And while I know what you mean by the term 'crazy,' and sometimes I am working with people who have experienced a dramatic change in their persona as a result of trauma, illness, or injury, and we find that 'crazy' is really not a helpful term, so we try to avoid it."

"Right," said Harry, abashed. "Healer Jordan said we'd examine memories."

"Sure, there are times that we'll do that," Besel said.

"What else will we do?" Harry asked.

"We'll mostly talk. Sometimes we'll do other things… take walks, plant herbs, visit places, meet animals," Besel offered.

"What kind of places?" Harry wondered. "And animals? What do you mean by that?"

"Some of the places that you've already visited such as the Mont Blanc room and the Samana Beach room, or even the park in Old Ellerby village. As for the animals we work with are specially trained to provide comfort for people experiencing trauma. Sometimes they can also assist with small tasks. You live with muggles, right? You've seen the guide dogs that some blind muggles use?" Besel asked.

"Yeah, I guess so. I… " Harry paused. "I don't really like dogs," he managed to confess.

"Oh?" Besel's question was an invitation to elaborate, but Harry didn't feel like talking about Aunt Marge and Ripper at that moment.

After a bit, Besel offered, "we have other animals in addition to dogs that can be very comforting and help wixen like us."

"Yeah, I guess so. My owl, Hedwig… I don't know what I would have done without her… and Nio hus cherio kisa … " Harry stopped when Besel gasped. He had just spoken Parseltongue. He covered his mouth as if to capture the words that had already escaped.
"You're a Parselmouth?" Besel recovered.

"Um, yes?" Harry confessed, removing his hand from his mouth.

"It's an unusual ability, is all," Besel said in her more clinical voice.

"Little Friend," Harry said, using the English deliberately, "is a garden snake. He helped me so much while I was at my Aunt and Uncle's house."

"Mmm." Besel made a non-committal sound that Harry took to mean, "keep going," but he was thinking about how afraid the wixen at Hogwarts has been when they learned that he was a Parselmouth.

*Even Ron.*

He realized that he had been dreaming about *Nio hus cherio kisa* being a constant companion who might be willing to help guide him with enough worms to sustain him and now he wondered if the wixen world would be too unnerved if he was always holding a snake.

"Are we doing the Mind Healer stuff right now?" Harry asked.

"We can, if you like," Besel replied.

"I dunno," Harry mumbled. "I, er, really need to use the toilet."

"Oh, of course!" Besel said. He heard her moving her chair back a bit as if to give him room to pass by her.

"I'll be back." Harry stood up and shook out his staff. "*Navigant* toilet."

He did need to go and he also needed a moment to think.
Mind healing

As Harry was navigating to the bathroom in his stocking feet, he stopped a moment in the middle of the room to get a description of the room - trying to figure out where he was. It was not the part of Healer Jordan’s office that he had visited before, he was certain. But Gemma had described it as Healer Jordan’s office. The staff’s description confirmed that he was in a different space than he’d been in before and he realized as he walked to the toilet that it was a small room off of the office he’d been in before. The way the staff described it, it was sparsely furnished - it sounded a bit clinical. It smelled like the hospital wing, but it was definitely smaller. The toilet was just outside the door.

He didn’t feel unsteady anymore.

Returning to the camp bed, he wondered if he should be calling Besel something else… like Mind Healer Geller, so he asked her as he approached.

“What are you comfortable with?” was her opaque response.

“Er - I dunno,” Harry muttered.

“I like Besel,” he confessed.

“I do, too, and while Healer Jordan might frown on the informality of it, I feel like it is more important for you to feel comfortable,” Besel explained.

“Okay,” Harry agreed. “Is there somewhere more comfortable where I can sit? The camp bed…” He trailed off, not wanting to sound rude.

“Sure, directly to your right and about a yard from you is a chair that you can sit on,” she informed him, as she adjusted her chair so that she was facing it. “Does this mean that you want to continue talking now?”

“Uh, I guess so? Maybe just a little?” Harry asked, as he found the chair and sat down.

“Yes, we could talk for about bit - however long you’d like,” Besel said. “Is there anything you’d like to discuss?”

“I dunno,” he said, then cringed - it seemed like he kept saying that. He hurried on to the only topic that was kind of really bugging him. “I was wondering if there was a way to keep my bed dry? My roommate keeps splashing my area.”

“Oh, well, sure,” Besel said. “There are a number of ways to handle that. A shield charm, a physical barrier, a drying spell. What do you think would work best?”

“Maybe a physical barrier? Mei seems to want some privacy, too… . She keeps thinking that I’m looking at her.”

He must have conveyed some emotion in that statement because Besel asked, “How do you feel about that?”

An anger flashed across Harry’s chest and rose in his voice, “Really mad.”

He surprised himself with that and clamped down his lips and sat on his hands, afraid that more would erupt.
Besel was quiet and Harry wasn’t sure what it meant.

_Is she upset with me for getting angry?_

He blinked. In these silences, he ached for sight to be able to read people’s emotions on their face. He had always been able to tell from the slightest twitch in Uncle Vernon’s mustache or the way Aunt Petunia’s lips were compressed into a tighter line or if there was a manic quality in the way Dudley’s eyes widened just how much trouble he was in. He was learning to listen to the noises people made, but he didn’t really know anyone here well enough to be able to read them as effectively by sound as he had read people by sight before.

_This silence is really long…_

Harry shifted uncomfortably.

“Do you want to elaborate on that?” Besel asked. She didn’t sound angry or upset, just curious.

“I mean it is bad enough not being able to see, but then when she accuses me of looking at her! It just feels so mean. Like she’s trying to poke me - get me where it already hurts really badly. And she knows what it is like. I mean, she told me that she misses her legs and being able to walk.” Harry gestured toward Besel and then realized what he was doing and dropped his hand.

“Sorry,” he said.

“It’s okay, Harry. I know what that feels like, too,” Besel said.

“It’s just that I guess that I don’t know why she wants to hurt me. Well, and it’s not just me. It’s our other roommates, too. She’s said some stuff that is really cruel,” he finished.

“That sounds really hard.”

“I mean, I know she’s angry, too. Like me, like Tony, even Gemma. Aminah’s the only one who doesn’t seem angry, just sad,” he paused for a moment. “Maybe Aminah’s angry, too, just it comes out sad.”

“It sounds like you all are experiencing a lot of big feelings,” Besel said.

“Well, who wouldn’t? Right? I mean, we’re all just broken and if magic can’t bloody well fix us, then what can?” Harry’s throat felt raw as the words exploded out of him, despite his attempt to keep them in.

“Harry, it is okay to be angry,” Besel said.

“It’s just…” he wasn’t able to finish the sentence.

Besel waited quietly.

He tried again. “It’s just…”

The word was there, just on the tip of his tongue. He didn’t want to say it.

“I dunno,” he sighed.

“It’s okay, Harry. We’ve got time. When you’re ready to say it, just let me know,” Besel said.

“Okay. Thanks.” He heard, distantly, a big clock tolling the hour. *Big Ben*. It was 9 o’clock.
“I’m really tired. Can I go to bed?” Harry asked.

“Yes, of course. We’ll get the barrier in place so that your area doesn’t get wet. Thank you for your hard work today.”

“Oh, I didn’t do anything.”

“You actually did some really big work. And you don’t seem broken to me. Maybe changed, but not broken.”

Harry let out a breath as he thought about that.

Besel’s chair made whooshing noises as she left the little room. He wiggled his stocking feet and wondered where his shoes were.

“Navigant my shoes,” he tried and was surprised when it worked. He put on his shoes and then asked his staff to direct him to his dormitory. When he reached the corridor, he got a whiff of the owlery and decided to nip inside to see if Hedwig had returned. It’s possible, right?

He realized that the reason he had smelled the owlery out in the corridor was because someone else was in there. He heard a low voice speaking in crooning tones as he entered the owlery. He didn’t recognize the voice.

“Oh, hi. Are you here for your owl, too?” The voice was female, Harry thought.

“Yes, have you seen a big snowy white owl?” Harry asked.

“Oh, yes, she’s beautiful! She’s yours?” she responded.

“Yes.” Harry smiled as he heard Hedwig’s hoot and her great wing as she flew down to him.

“Hi, girl!” He had asked his staff to take him to the owl perch and Hedwig alighted on it, cuffing him around the head with her wings as she settled on to the perch. He collapsed his staff and stuck it in his pocket so that he could run both his hands through her feathers. He could understand how an animal could provide comfort to people who had suffered trauma. He felt some of the anxiety he had been feeling talking to Besel slip away as he ran his hands over Hedwig’s silky form.

Scared.

The word that he hadn’t been able to say out loud to Besel. He allowed it to form in his head as he buried his hands in Hedwig’s feathers. He felt some of the rings of tension in his throat lessen as he let the word out, even without uttering it.

He nuzzled her beak with his face and she nipped at his earlobe. He pulled back afraid she’d eat his aftí.

The woman had turned her attention back to her owl and Harry was glad for the bit of privacy it afforded him with Hedwig. He found two scrolls and slipped them off Hedwig’s leg. He had thought she wouldn’t be able to deliver all of them in one day, let alone get answers. He wondered, nevertheless, what happened to the third one. He pulled out his staff and got his anagnóstis out.

I’m not going to put off reading my messages again.

After a bit of awkwardness trying to read the scrolls with his anagnóstis, he also accio’d a notebook out of his staff for a little bit of structure behind the scrolls so he could read them. He also realized
that because he had missed dinner, he didn’t have any food scraps in his pockets to feed Hedwig. He remembered he had part of a sandwich left from yesterday and accio’d it. It was not in great shape and Hedwig turned up her beak at it.

“Sorry, Hedwig. I’ll get you something at breakfast, okay?” Harry consoled.

He shook out his staff and asked it to take him to a bin so he could throw away the sandwich. As he was throwing it out, the woman left, saying goodbye to Harry cheerfully. He noticed that her footsteps were uneven - she limped heavily - and one footstep sounded wooden.

Amputee?

The first scroll was one of the ones he had written, so he reattached it to Hedwig’s leg. The third one was from Ron. It made him smile to hear Ron’s voice.

“Harry - How’d you manage to ‘accidentally destroy’ my note before you read it? And Ginny’s? Your cousin didn’t burn them, did he? The git. I just wrote to you inviting you to visit the burrow. Mum says you can stay with us as long as you like… the whole summer, if you want. Wouldn’t that be brilliant? Hermione wrote and told me all about your training at the Center (and I mean all about it) - so I guess you’ll have to come after you’re done there. Oh, and I was also telling you about this bloke that dad knows at the Ministry - Mad-eye Moody. He has a magical eye to replace the one that got cursed in a wicked battle during the last war. I guess he can see out of it better than a normal eye. That’s what dad says anyway. Maybe you can get one or two of those? I guess they have X-ray vision. That could be interesting. If you know what I mean.

Anyway, mum says that we might be able to come visit you this weekend. Like all of us. So be prepared. I hope you’re doing okay and that you’re learning lots of things. Hermione said the library is bigger than Hogwarts’. I think she was actually jealous.” Harry could almost hear Ron roll his eyes.

“So, maybe we’ll see you on Saturday. Ginny’s still working on re-writing her note, so I’m going to go ahead and send this as Hedwig is getting demanding. Ginny will send hers later.

Ron.”

Harry had a fleeting moment of worry for Ginny. He wondered how she was doing, but it was hard to imagine her not doing well with all those boisterous redheads clambering around her. He was sure she was fine. He thought about all of the Weasleys coming to visit on Saturday and felt warm at the thought.

Good warm, he concluded after thinking about it for a second.

He rolled up the scroll and put it and everything else back in his staff. He took a moment to stroke Hedwig again and thank her for her trips.

“Don’t worry about flying out tonight with that letter - okay, girl? It can wait until morning. It goes to the person who wrote me. I guess you know that. You’re a very smart owl.”

Hedwig nuzzled him and nipped him gently again and then burst away from the perch in a shower of feathers that deafened him for a second. Harry stood and listened until she found a perch high in the rafters and then he asked his staff to take him to the dormitory.

He was wiping his feet on the mat by the door when a droll voice spoke to him. He started until he remembered the portrait by the door.
“That snowy white owl sure is busy.”

“Yes, she is,” Harry replied and left.

oO0OooO0oO0ooO0oO0oOo

Harry entered the dormitory and smiled when his roommates called out to him before he was across the threshold. He smiled, ducking his head.

“Hey, Harry. You alright?” Mei called out.

He could hear Tony as well and Aminah. Gemma’s hand fluttered on his arm, gently guiding him to his area.

“Thanks, Gemma,” he said. “Yes, I’m alright, thanks.”

“Man, Harry, you did a total face plant! I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone just keel over like that. It was epic!” Tony sounded a little too excited about it as he approached Harry.

Harry didn’t know how to respond. “Er, thanks?”

“It looks like they did a good job of healing your face,” Mei observed.

“Um, actually, I wasn’t aware that I hurt my face,” Harry admitted, running his fingertips over his cheekbones. It didn’t even feel sore.

“Check this out! I have arms!” Tony exclaimed and he reached over and touched Harry on his hand. His touch was cool and smooth - more solid than flesh, but not metallic or plastic. He grasped Harry’s hand a little clumsily and Harry grabbed it back, trying to understand what he was feeling.

“Hey, that’s great, Tony! They feel cool.” Harry stopped himself before he said more, afraid that he’d step over the boundary of what Tony was ready to hear and glad he was able to repress the shudder that gathered in his belly.

“Check this out… I can pick up stuff!” There was a clunking noise followed by a splash and Harry felt water spray his face.

“Was that my water bottle?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, sorry about that. I’m still getting the hang of it,” Tony said as Mei guffawed.

Gemma was already back with a towel from the bathroom.

He dabbed at his shirt, too, as he felt the water soaking in.

“Sorry, I’m pretty excited,” Tony apologized.

“I can tell,” Harry replied. “And you should be. I’m really glad for you.”

Gemma’s hand was resting on his other arm and she tapped at his hand, indicating that she wanted to say something. He opened up his palm and waited.

“Y-O-U” space “R-E-S-T-?”

He nodded in response, giving her a weak smile.
She squeezed his arm.

“What were your classes this afternoon?” he asked her.


“Balance?” Harry questioned.

She made a motion in his hand that he realized was writing and he got out his anagnóstis, notebook, and pencil from his staff.

As she wrote, he sat on his bed.

“How was the Toad in a hole at dinner?” Harry asked Tony.

“Oh, well, it was a bit of a disaster,” he said. Mei snorted. Aminah giggled - she’d come over, too, apparently.

“Sounds like an entertaining dinner,” Harry said, a bit relieved that he had missed it. The nutrition potion must have worked because he wasn’t hungry.

“Hey, Mei. They are going to put up a barrier between our areas so that I don’t keep getting wet every time you come out of your tank,” Harry explained, thinking it would be better if she had a warning.

“Oh. Okay. I guess,” she replied.

Harry listened carefully. He still felt some of the anger he had felt when he was talking about how Mei was behaving toward him and his roommates. He wondered for a second if he had been trying to hurt her back with the whole barrier thing and he felt a little ashamed at the same time that he felt justified.

He was straining his ears, trying to tell if she was upset by the news when Gemma tapped his hand with the notebook.
“Oh, right!” he said, and accio’d the anagnóstis out of his staff.

“Hey, I’m going to head to bed. ‘Night Harry and Gemma,” Aminah said.

“Yeah, me, too,” said Tony.

Harry and Gemma said goodnight to their roommates and Harry started reading what Gemma had written about her afternoon classes of balance and nonverbal spellcasting.

“The balance class is like an exercise class to help me strengthen my core because my balance was affected by the damage to my inner ear. I can compensate with visual stability training (basically orienting myself by looking at things), working on my posture, and doing stretching exercises. I think you’ll be doing some of that, too, because balance is also connected to vision, so I imagine you’ll need to do some of the same exercises - not the visual stability ones, though. It was pretty fun, actually. It felt good.

The nonverbal spellcasting is going to take a lot of work. I barely made any progress with that one. I didn’t really know very many spells before I got sick. Shannon did better because she’s a fully trained witch and she was able to do some before she lost her hearing. She can also still speak, though now that she’s lost her hearing, she’s having a hard time getting the pronunciation correct and she’s worried about making mistakes that could be dangerous.”

Harry lifted up the anagnóstis and turned his head to Gemma, reaching out for her arm, not sure if she was looking his way. She tapped his arm twice to let him know that she was paying attention.

“What happens when you sign to cast a spell? Does that work?” Harry asked.

Gemma grabbed the notebook again and started writing. After a moment, she pushed the notebook back to him and helped guide the anagnóstis to the spot where she added her answer.

“I guess some deaf or mute wixen have had been able to cast some spells with signs, but they can take longer to cast because of fingerspelling so they might get cursed first in a duel, but if it is just household spells, then it can work. Some really creative deaf/mute wixen have created new spells with a combination of nonverbal and signs that I guess are handy. I’m going to be learning some of those. Also, I’m going to learn American Sign Language (ASL), too, because I guess they use just one hand to fingerspell and so you can use your wand and fingerspell at the same time.”

“Oh, that’s cool. That’s a lot to learn,” Harry said.

He was thinking about the braille class he missed that afternoon - though at least that didn’t seem as vitally connected to his ability to cast magic as Gemma’s class. It seemed like braille was going to be more useful for when he was in the muggle world since the magical world had things like his anagnóstis and staff and aftí that allowed him to read and get around and he could still cast spells.

Can I though? All the spells I’ve been using are through my staff. What about with my wand? Will I be able to use it again?

He didn’t think he could cast defensive spells with his staff, but he really didn’t know.

I’ll have to ask Godric tomorrow.
“Hey, Gemma, when do we learn about our schedule for tomorrow? Is it the same as for today?” he asked.

She took the notebook again and wrote, “I guess it changes a lot, so they do it day by day, though there are some things that stay the same like BSL and braille since they take a long time to learn. They’ll update the schedule in the morning.”

“Why was everyone gathered outside of the library this afternoon?” Harry had been wanting to ask for a while.

Harry heard the pencil scratching on the paper again and wondered if she needed the pencil sharpener. He accio’d it out of his staff while he waited, guessing that they’d need it soon.

He heard Gemma pick it up and sharpen the pencil after she pushed the notebook to him.

“I guess people were just curious about Ms. Midgeon’s history and wanted to hear her story and it started as a small group but got bigger when other people left their classes. I guess it pretty much stopped after you fainted and Healer Jordan transported you to her office,” Gemma explained.

“Thanks, Gemma. I was glad you were there when I came to.” Harry gave her a small smile.

He heard her writing and waited, but then he was surprised when someone laid a hand on his shoulder from behind him.

“Pardon me, but are you Harry Potter?” The voice that asked was fragile like crinkled paper - that of a very old woman, Harry guessed.

Harry was startled. He’d been so focused that he hadn’t heard someone enter their room or his area. He turned his head toward her and started to rise from his bed, “Yes, I’m Harry Potter.”

He had a suspicion of who it was - as there was a tinge of French in her words.

“Harry, I’m Madam Flamel.”

“Hi Madam Flamel, I’m sorry I missed your class today. I was really looking forward to it,” Harry said as he stuck out his hand for a handshake.

She grasped it and her hand felt as papery as her voice sounded and he was afraid it would crumble in his hand.

“It’s quite alright, Harry. I was there when you fell. It was alarming and I’m glad you’re feeling well enough to be back in your dormitory. Healer Jordan let me know that you needed to rest. We will meet tomorrow and I will make sure you have a chance to catch up. I was looking forward to meeting you because I’ve heard so much about you from my dear friend Albus. He’s been so very worried about you,” she confided.

Harry was a little surprised to hear this. He remembered, of course, that the Flamels were friends of the Headmaster, but never imagined that they would be talking about him.

What about these other Hogwarts students here?

He bit his tongue. It wasn’t this ancient woman’s fault that Dumbledore seemed to favor him. He wondered if Dumbledore had expressed his worry about Gemma, Tony, Mei, or Aminah, too.

Harry realized that he had been quiet for a long time and that he was still holding Madam Flamel’s
hand. He quickly let it go.

“Oh, thanks, Madam. I’m doing okay,” he assured.

He grimaced at the lie. Face planting in the middle of a gathering of wixen wasn’t really an indication that he was doing that well.

Madam Flamel patted his arm, “You’re going to be just fine. You and your friends. You’ve been through a lot. I’ll let Albus know. He’s been asking me for updates on all of you.”

A weight that Harry didn’t know he was shouldering fell off at that. He breathed deeper.

“Thank you, Madam,” Harry said.

“I’ll see you in the library tomorrow afternoon. If you come a half hour early, I can give you the basics of what you missed and it’ll be enough, I think - you seem like a bright young man - to get you caught up,” she assured.

“Thank you, yes. I can do that,” Harry said.

“I’m just sorry you missed my talk today about Louis Braille. He was such a smart lad. Just a boy like you when he created this system of reading with his fingers. He never knew how much he liberated his peers and generations of people from illiteracy and isolation. Braille didn’t really catch on until after his death. He died young - in 1853 - just 41-years-old. Such a loss. The stupidity of politics at that school - it held him back,” she lamented.

“I brought you a book to read about him, though.”

She pressed the book into his hand. He felt the bumps on the spine and wondered if his *anagnóstis* would read braille.

“Allbus gave you his *anagnóstis*, I know, so you should be able to read it,” she assured as if she’d read his mind.

“I was wondering about the *anagnóstis*. I was hoping that we could find someone who could copy it so that other students could have something similar,” Harry asked before he lost his nerve.

“Oh, what a great idea. It is so much more versatile than other readers that are available. I’ll look into that,” she said. “Now, it is past my bedtime. I just wanted to make sure that you were doing well.”

She squeezed his arm and walked away slowly - a faint lemony aroma lingered where she had been standing.

“Thank you for the book,” Harry said.

“Not at all,” she said.

Harry tried the *anagnóstis* on the cover of the book. “*Triumph Over Darkness* by Lennard Bickel.” He pressed his lips as he thought about that title.

*Why is everyone so afraid of the dark?*

Gemma pushed the notebook toward him - he could hear it on the desk. He was about to put it in his staff, when she tugged on his hand and he figured out that she wanted to look at it. So he handed it to her and found the notebook and drew it closer so he could read what she had written.
It took him a bit to find where they were on the page and he remembered that he hadn’t read the whole thing yet. He found her note about staying with him in Healer Jordan’s office after he fell.

“Do you always have this many accidents? I mean, I’ve only known you since yesterday and it seems like you are falling down and getting hurt a lot. Terry told me about some of the scrapes you got into at Hogwarts - didn’t you knock out a troll? And didn’t you have to regrow the bones in your arm?”

He turned his face to her and smiled weakly, but he wasn’t sure she was looking at him. He could hear her leafing through the pages of the book and wondered how she’d read it. Is there a reader that can translate braille to written text like his anagnóstis? Maybe there was a print copy of the book in the library. She handed it back to him and he put it in his staff.

He tapped the anagnóstis against the notebook where he was reading to show her what he was responding to. “Yeah. It seems like I’m a magnet for trouble sometimes,” he frowned. “I wish I could just be a normal kid.”

She tapped his arm three times.

“What does three times mean?” he asked.

She pulled the notebook from under his hands and he heard her writing, “I understand. It’s not really yes or no. Hey, when I draw a smiley face what does the anagnóstis do? Here’s one.”

“Oh, it makes a weird little whistle. I was wondering why it was doing that. Is it just today that you drew smiley faces? I hadn’t noticed before.” he asked.

She guided his hand over a spot on the page, and the anagnóstis whistled again.

“Yeah, it whistled again. What if you drew other things? It would be neat if it could describe images to me,” Harry said.

She took the notebook again and he listened to the pencil scratching.

“What are you two doing?” Aminah asked as she came back into Harry’s area after leaving the toilet.

“We’re seeing what the anagnóstis does when she draws things like smiley faces. It kinda whistles. Hey, I asked Madam Flamel about making copies of my anagnóstis - she said she’d look into it,” Harry said.

“Oh, that’s cool!” Aminah said.

Gemma tapped his hand and he held up the anagnóstis as she guided his hand to her drawings. The anagnóstis whistled as it read over the drawings - short whistles and long whistles.

“It’s just whistling.” Harry told Gemma.

She tapped his hand three times.

“Hey, Gemma? Do you have any food I could feed Hedwig? Want to go visit her real quick?” Harry asked Gemma.

“Yes,” Gemma tapped his hand and then ran to her area.

Harry followed her and Aminah followed him.
“Aminah, do you want to go visit Hedwig with us?” Harry asked.

“In the owlery?” Aminah asked.

“Yeah. It’s pretty stinky, but Gemma says the view is spectacular,” Harry laughed.

“Great,” Aminah sighed.
Meeting Arig

When Harry, Gemma, and Aminah entered Montmorency after visiting Hedwig in the owlery and delivering the bits of cookie Gemma had given Harry for Hedwig, Gemma stopped suddenly, causing both Harry and Aminah to stumble.

“What’s going on, Gemma?” Harry asked.

She didn’t answer, but stood still. Harry assumed that she couldn’t see his note. Harry strained his ears trying to figure out what was wrong. He tapped her arm to try to get her attention, but she held his hand still as if she wanted him to be quiet. He turned to Aminah, “Any idea what’s going on?”

“No idea,” responded Aminah.

Harry let go of Gemma’s arm and shook out his staff. “Mei, Tony? Are you in here?” Harry asked.

No answer.

“That’s weird,” Harry said.

He squeezed his staff to get a description of the room. And then he understood what was going on. “Aminah, use your staff to get a description of the room,” he whispered.

“Oh!”

Gemma seemed to reanimate and had reached for Harry’s hand.


Harry nodded. He was still listening to his staff and tapped his aftí to let Gemma know.

After a bit, Aminah said, “So our room has been rearranged? There’s an extra area, too, right? Like we have a new roommate?”

“Yeah, I think so. It’s bigger and there is more room for each of us. We have four poster beds now, like at Hogwarts, with curtains and there is a wall around Mei’s tank so that I don’t get splashed anymore if that’s my area next to hers. I’m not sure, actually.”

Gemma had left them and Harry could hear her moving the Mami Wata necklaces.

“Maybe we can Navigant to our area? See if the staff knows?” Aminah suggested.

“Seems like they could have warned us,” Harry grumbled.

“Yeah, what if we got into the wrong bed?” Aminah said.

“That’d be awkward!” Harry agreed.

As Harry stepped forward and swung his staff, Healer Jordan’s voice spoke in his aftí, “Harry, we have rearranged your room to accommodate a new student who is arriving tonight and starting tomorrow. We expanded the room as well as we heard feedback from students that it was a little cramped. The new student’s space was added to the left of Aminah’s space. We also added privacy curtains on all the beds and a wall between your space and Mei’s to prevent water splashing into your area from her tank. You can use your staff to describe the new layout and direct you to your
space. Please make our new resident welcome. His name is Arig Gurgisya.”

“Oh, did you get that message, too? Aminah?” Harry asked.

“What mess—Oh,” Aminah answered.

Gemma came back and took Harry’s hand to write on it, “M-E-S-S-A-G-E” space “H-J-?”

He nodded.

“L-E-A-D” space “T-O” space “S-P-A-C-E-?”

He shook his head, “No, it’s okay. I’ll use my staff.”

She tapped his hand twice and went to Aminah, he guessed, to ask the same thing.

As he Navigant’d to his new area, he wondered what Mei thought of the wall between their spaces. He gathered from the description that it was not something that could be seen through, so Mei had a bit more privacy than the other students now. He wondered how she’d handle the change.

At the foot of his bed, he felt for the four-poster frame of his bed and found that it was similar to the one in Gryffindor tower. The post was smooth and sculpted in a spiral pattern that undulated in a pattern that reminded him of pineapples for some reason. The curtains were heavy and velvety. He imagined that they were red and gold like in Gryffindor, but he really didn’t know. He touched his staff to them and muttered, “Indica color,” remembering a charm that he’d learned earlier in the day with Godric.

“Aquamarine” was the staff’s answer.

“What color is aquamarine?” he wondered aloud as he heard a splash on the other side of the wall. He was pleasantly surprised that he was not doused in water this time.

“I think that’s a blue-green color, Potter. What do you care what color your curtains are?” Mei said.

“Hi, Mei,” Harry greeted, stepping out to the walkway at the end of his bed. “I guess our room got rearranged while we were out.”

“Yeah,” was her short reply.

“Are you okay with the wall?” Harry asked.

“Sure. I get it. You don’t want to be splashed with water while you’re sleeping. And I like that you can’t stare at me anymore.”

“I wasn’t staring,” he said through his teeth.

“I know. It just seemed like it,” Mei said.

Harry took in a deep breath. “Have you met our new roommate yet?”

“Yeah. He was here. Tony took him on a tour of the Center,” Mei said.

“Oh, okay. Well, I’m going to check out my new space,” Harry said and walked back into his area.

It was larger. He followed the curtains along the top with his hand to get a sense of how high up the four-poster bed went, until he found the post at the head of his bed.
There was a little more space between the bed and his desk. As he followed the desk around, he discovered that there was a chair now by his wardrobe.

*That’s nice. Gemma could sit there while we’re writing…*

With the curtains and the wall, he felt like he had his own space and it felt good. His staff had described a window behind his desk and he leaned over the desk to try to feel it, but it was too far back. So he squeezed between the bed and the desk and found that it was a deep window sill - big enough for him to sit in and it had pillows. So he climbed up onto it and felt the window. It wasn’t just plain glass, but had leaded panels with embossed geometric designs. He ran his hands over it for a while discerning the pattern and realized that between the squares and triangles, there were also fleur de lis.

*Very French.*

He wondered what color they were, and held his collapsed staff to them and cast the *Indica color* charm and learned that they were very colorful: magenta, turquoise, black, cherry red, indigo blue, canary yellow, olive green, purple, orange. He wondered what it looked like when the sun came in the window with all those colors.

He should have been tired. It was late. But he’d slept for a good portion of the afternoon.

He leaned against the wall in his window seat and took the book Madam Flamel had given him out of his staff and his *anagnóstis* to read a bit about Louis Braille.

The beginning was bleak. It described Paris in the 18th century with the huge divide between haves and have-nots. The haves are prancing around in carriages decked out in silks and jewels and the have nots are wallowing in the literal sewer, starving.

Harry realized that it was a Paris that Madam Flamel must have witnessed first hand… and the blind were beggars with clawed, groping hands, pitied and grotesque in their helplessness and filth. Not only that, it was considered a punishment for past sins that they had lost their sight.

*Geez. Add insult to injury. Literally.*

And this guy, Valentin Haüy, who gives a poor, blind, begging boy some coins and watches him discern their value by touch and realizes that the boy has intelligence.

*Great. I guess I’m lucky I was born in the 20th century… Me. Lucky. Ha!*  

He put it aside. He’d have to try again later. He sat in the window seat for a while just listening to his roommates putter around in their spaces. He imagined that Aminah had checked out the space as he did, figuring out the distances between the furniture, determining what was the same and what was different.

*I hope they don’t go changing our space often.*

He knew that Gemma had assured that Mei’s necklaces were safe. He wondered why it had shocked her so much that the room had changed.

He was glad that Mei seemed to be okay with the wall between their spaces. He wondered what the new guy would be like.

*What a strange name. Arig.*
It almost sounded like Eric, but not quite.

He heard Gemma walking over to his space, and started climbing down out of the window seat, but she tapped his hand, “no.” So he sat back and she climbed up with him. She was small enough (and so was he) that there was room for the both of them in the window, side by side. He felt her reach over him to run her hands over the leaded window and the long sigh that she let out blew against his cheek.

*It must be beautiful.*

He *accio’d* his notebook, pencil, and *anagnóstis* from his staff so that they could talk more freely and said, “Is there a view from the window?”

She tapped his arm, “yes,” and began to write. He wondered if they could open the window so that he could smell the air and hear the noises of the city below (he imagined it was the city - just like up in the owlery - but now all the lights of the city at night).

She tapped his hand gently with the notebook and he grabbed it and read, “I can’t really see very well out of the window, except if I press my eye up against one of the clear glass panels. When I do that, the view is similar to that from the owlery, but lower and we’re facing the other direction I think. Right now there are just there are a bunch of night lights - it is shimmery.”

He nodded and smiled. He liked being able to hear her voice.

“Does the room look really different? It seemed like you were surprised when we first came in the room,” he asked, the *Scribunt loqui* paper fluttering by his mouth.

She took the notebook again and wrote, “Yes, it really is different. All the colors of the curtains on the beds, and the bigger space, and the wall between your space and Mei’s. It’s like a totally different room. I thought we were in the wrong room at first, but then I saw Mei’s tank, and I knew it had to be ours, even though there were too many beds and then I saw the message from Healer Jordan and I figured she had a sound message for you, too.”

“Are all the curtains Aquamarine?” Harry asked.

She drew a question mark on his palm.

“What?” he asked.

She took the notebook, “How do you even know that they are that color - let alone the name?”

He laughed, “My staff told me. I used the *Indica color* spell that Godric taught us today. I’m not really sure what Aquamarine is, Mei said it is a blue-green.”

“Yeah, all the colors in here are ocean themed. It seems to be a theme throughout the Center. It’s pretty calming, I guess.”

“Yeah, Hermione was telling me about the lighting in the entrance and the hallways, that it makes it seem like we’re underwater.”

“She was really excited in the library. I was watching her in there. Like most kids get in candy shops. She looked really worried about you,” Gemma wrote.

“Yeah, she loves libraries. Well, what she really loves are answers and solutions. She’s always looking for…” but he stopped when he heard Tony coming through the door talking to someone.
He turned his head toward the door, listening.

“Hey, everyone!” Tony called out. “Oh, good you’re all still awake.”

Aminah, Mei, and Harry responded. Gemma started climbing down out of the window seat and Harry followed. He trailed his fingers on the bed until he found the posts at the bottom of his bed and faced the door expectantly. Harry heard a sound that he couldn’t quite place near Tony at the door. He turned his ear to listen more carefully, trying to figure it out.

“This is Arig, he’s our new roommate,” Tony announced. He sounded really happy.

“Hi, Arig.” Harry said. He felt Gemma’s hand on his arm and guessed that she signed a greeting as well.

“Hi,” Arig’s voice was low and quiet. He hadn’t moved far into the room, but Harry heard the noise again.

Harry heard footsteps outside their door and then a sharp knock.

“I’ll get it,” Tony offered.

Harry realized that he was beginning to be able to tell Tony’s footsteps apart from Gemma’s and Aminah’s. The tile in the room made it easier to hear them.

The door opened and Harry heard Tony greeting Healer Jordan.

“Hi, Tony, Remember, I asked you to tell me when you were going to return to the room so that I could help facilitate introductions?”


“It’s okay. Luckily, I saw you both from a distance,” Healer Jordan said.

“Yeah, we were just starting,” Tony said.

“Great.” Healer Jordan sounded relieved. “Let’s gather around Mei’s tank,” Healer Jordan paused, “Is that alright, Mei?”

“Sure, I guess. Go ahead,” Mei said.

“Do you want to stay in your tank?”

“Yes,” Mei said.

“Great, I’ll conjure some chairs for the rest of us.” There was the popping sound as the chairs entered the space - Harry felt the air moving, too, as if it had been pushed out of the way as the chair entered. He reached forward and found a chair in front of him, and walked around it to sit down. Gemma settled into the one next to him. Harry listened to Arig walk to his chair and understood the noise he’d heard earlier.

Crutches and only one footstep. Amputee.

He heard Arig tap them three times on the floor and imagined that they were like his staff - now tiny and easily stuffed in a pocket.

“Aminah, can you join us?” Healer Jordan projected across the room.
“Yes, coming,” Aminah said.

“Arig, can you cast the *Scribunt loqui* charm?” Healer Jordan asked.

“No, what’s that?” Arig asked.

“It’s a charm that writes out the words you speak on a piece of paper so that Gemma and others at the center can understand you,” Healer Jordan explained.

“Oh, I was wondering why everyone had those papers,” Arig laughed nervously.

“Here, I’ll do it for you right now, and then afterward show you how so you can do it and it stays after I leave the room.”

She quickly cast it and Harry heard the fluttering paper noise when Arig said, “Oh, whoa. That’s cool.”

That made Harry wonder if Gemma would be able to learn how to cast the spell that Healer Jordan had used that made Gemma’s voice audible in the first council they had after Mei dumped them off the bench.

*I imagine it is pretty hard to learn how to cast nonverbal spells.*

Aminah had come over and Healer Jordan led her to the chair next to Harry.

“Healer Jordan, when we introduce ourselves it is okay if we say why we’re at the Center?” Aminah asked. “I mean, I know it is pretty obvious for some people, but for me, sometimes I’m left guessing for a long time because it isn’t obvious to me and then I feel like I’m missing something important that everyone else understands and well, it makes me feel left out. I don’t know if you feel the same way, Harry?”

“Um, yeah. I do, actually,” Harry agreed.

“I mean, I know we’re supposed to respect each other’s privacy and I get that. And yeah, I don’t want the fact that I’m blind to be the only thing that people know about me, but also, it is something that stands out and people do notice it, so we might as well get it out of the way and move on,” Aminah finished.

“Yes, of course, Aminah. That’s a very good point. I understand what you’re asking. How about we go around the circle introducing ourselves and if you’d like to share why you’re at the Center, please do that and if you’d like to add something else that you’d like your roommates to know about you, then add that as well,” Healer Jordan said. “How does that sound?”

They were pretty unanimous in agreeing that it sounded like a good plan, though Harry noticed that Arig didn’t say anything.

“Okay, Aminah, would you like to start and then we’ll go clockwise from you?” Healer Jordan invited. “Let’s just let everyone say their bit and save questions and comments for later, okay?”

They all agreed, though, again, Arig was quiet. Harry wondered if he was nodding.

“Um, okay. So, I’m Aminah Khan and like I said, I’m blind. It has been three months since this happened. I’m here at the center to learn how to get around with pretty much no vision (I can see some shadows and blurry shapes) and how to perform magic without sight. One thing that I’d like you to know about me is that I love to knit and I found out recently that I can still do it.”
“Uh, I guess that means I should go next,” Harry said. “I’m Harry Potter and I’m also blind. I can see bright light and it actually kind of hurts - but really nothing else. I got some venom in my eyes about a month ago. Um, something that I’d like you to know about me… um, I dunno. I really like flying on my broom. I want to do that again - I’m going to do it again.”

Gemma was up next and Harry wasn’t sure if Healer Jordan had cast the spell that allowed gave Gemma a voice.

Apparently, she did, because Gemma spoke next, “I’m Gemma Boot. I lost my hearing and my voice and was scarred pretty badly when I got really sick with Spattergoit and almost died last year. Don’t worry, I’m not contagious anymore. I’m here to learn how to sign and manage without my hearing and speech. I’m going to learn how to cast nonverbal spells and work on my balance. I really like animals and I would like to work with magical creatures some day,” Gemma said in the calm adult voice that sounded nothing like what Harry actually knew her voice sounded like through his anagnóstis.

Mei was next and Harry heard the water splashing out of her tank as she came nearer to the edge to talk, “I’m Mei Lee. Obviously, I’m here to deal with having a fishtail instead of legs. I use a muggle wheelchair because part of the problem for me is that I’m half wixen and half Jiāorén and the magic kind of clashes. I know that everyone thinks the tail is amazing and beautiful, but miss having feet and legs and I wish I was just normal again. I want you to know… well, it’s really hard to choose clothing to go with a fishtail.”

There was a bit of nervous laughter after that remark. Harry realized that he hadn’t really thought about what Mei was wearing and that he was kind of imagining her wearing a seashell bikini top like images of mermaids he’d seen in books before he started at Hogwarts. He was glad he hadn’t said that out loud - he shuddered imagining the stinging hex she’d cause if he did.

“Okay, I’m Tony Montague and I’m here to learn how to use my new magical arms that I just got today and that are so cool, but not as easy to use as I thought they’d be. I lost my arms when I was apparating when I shouldn’t have been because I hadn’t passed my test yet and I was splinched. And yeah, I know that you can reattach splinched things, but not if you don’t know where they went. And yes, I’ve heard about Skel-e-grow - but they don’t have anything that regrows skin, nerves, and veins. I guess I’m lucky to be alive, but it doesn’t always feel like that. Um. Something else about me. I’m the Slytherin champion at Exploding Snap and I am going to figure out how to use these arms so that I can defend my title if I have to.”

There was more laughter at that.

Harry was surprised. He realized he had been thinking that Tony’s lost limbs had to do with an encounter with a magical creature. Aragog or something. Splinching had always sounded so funny when Dean, Seamus, and Ron had been joking about it in Gryffindor tower… It never occurred to him that you couldn’t be put back together after being splinched.

I never want to apparate. I probably can’t now anyway…

“I guess it is my turn. The new guy. I’m Arig Gurgisya. I know my name is strange - its Zoroastrian, but my family has been in England for a long time. I’m here because I need to learn how to get along with just one leg.” He stopped, but it seemed like he wasn’t done.

“I couldn’t come yesterday because…” There was a long pause, then Arig took an unsteady and deep breath, “because the Ministry of Magic was… well, let’s just say that there are a lot of hoops to jump through when you’re a Lycanthrope. I lost my left leg when I was attacked by a werewolf, and now I’m one, too.”
There was a collective gasp, but Arig went on, “I’m guessing that you probably don’t want to share a room with a werewolf. Believe me, I’d rather not, too. But I won’t be in here when the moon is transitioning. I’ll have my own room and also a potion that keeps me from fully transforming, so you’ll be completely safe. I’m actually taking that potion right now because the full moon will be on Saturday.”
In the middle of the shocked silence that followed Arig’s introduction, there was a wave of water that splashed over everyone who was seated in the semicircle around Mei’s tank. She had disappeared dramatically through her portal. Healer Jordan quickly cast a drying spell and as the warmth settled over them, she addressed the group.

“Before you comment, please listen. Arig has requested that I have this conversation with all of you in his presence. He is very much aware of the prejudice that Lycanthropes encounter in the wixen world. Just like you, he is adapting to a dramatic and unexpected alteration of his body and the way that he goes about his everyday life, and at the same time he has encountered fear, ignorance, and shunning for something that was foisted on him in the most brutal and traumatizing way.

Unfortunately, it is not widely known that the effects of the full moon on a Lycanthrope can be controlled and rendered harmless with the Wolfsbane potion - mostly because it is a complicated and expensive potion that most Lycanthropes don’t have access to. We are trying to change that here at the Center.

You have my absolute assurances that you are in no danger while you’re rooming with Arig. You are in no danger of being exposed to the Lycanthropy contagion nor to the dangers of a fully actualized werewolf.

The next full moon is on Saturday, July 3rd. This week preceding the full moon, Arig has been taking the Wolfbane potion which means that he will transform, but peacefully and sleep through the full moon. For extra precaution, he will stay in a warded and heavily armored room for the weekend of the full moon - and this is at his request - because he is very concerned that you feel safe in his presence and during his transformation.

All of your parents and guardians have been notified and have signed secrecy agreements. I’m going to ask you each to make a vow of secrecy as well and understand that you are not to share information about any of your fellow residents.

It is my expectation that you will welcome Arig and make him feel at home at the Center, just as you have been welcomed. Arig, is there anything else that you’d like to add?”

“Uh. Well, I guess. I asked if I could be placed in the dormitory with you all because I thought you might be a little more accepting of me than the older folks, even though I’m technically a bit older than you. I am eighteen. Um, do you have any questions?” Arig added nervously.

The room was quiet except for the lapping of slight waves against the sides of Mei’s tank.

Harry was too shocked to think of any questions. His brain was still wrapping around the concept of the werewolf. He remembered someone commenting on the werewolves in the Forbidden Forest, but he hadn’t taken them seriously.

“Welcome to our dormitory, Arig. I’m sorry to hear about all that you’ve been through. It sounds rough.” Gemma was the first to speak.

“Thank you, Gemma,” Arig’s voice broke a bit when he answered.

“Yeah, man. I can’t imagine,” Tony said.

“Arig, thank you for sharing your story with us. I know that’s hard. I… I’m nervous about sharing a
room with a werewolf, to be honest. But I also know that Healer Jordan wouldn’t put us in danger, so I’ll try to get over it,” Aminah added.

Harry felt like he should say something, but nothing that was coming to his mind sounded good and he kept rejecting it.

“Yeah, welcome to our room and the Center. In the morning there’s a bright flashing alarm that talks and wakes us up, so don’t be surprised by that,” Harry said.

The others laughed nervously.

“How do you… oh, yeah, you can see bright light. I forgot,” Arig said.

There was another loud splash as Mei resurfaced.

“What did I miss?” she said.

“Well, pretty much everything,” Tony stated.

“Yeah, well, I needed to think. Arig, welcome to life as a semi-human creature. It sucks. Thanks for making my life seem like a poffle of puffskeins,” Mei said.

“Mei, I’ve asked the others to make a vow of secrecy to protect Arig’s privacy and I am asking the same of you,” Healer Jordan said.

“Yeah, okay,” Mei said.

“Okay, well, thank you all for welcoming Arig so warmly. It is late and you all need to get to be, but Harry, may I have a word with you before I go?” Healer Jordan asked.

“Um, sure?” Harry replied.

Healer Jordan vanished the chairs as the others made their way back to their areas. Harry wasn’t sure why Healer Jordan wanted to talk to him and if they would need to go somewhere private to speak, so he stood awkwardly by his bed running his fingertips over the carving on the post, following the tendrils that spiraled up.

“Okay, thanks for waiting, Harry,” Healer Jordan said, coming over to where he was standing. “I’m going to cast a privacy charm so that we can speak here. Is that okay?”

“Sure, do you want to sit in the chair over here?” Harry invited, motioning to the new chair in his space.

“Yes, thank you,” Healer Jordan said and sat down after she had muttered the spell. He heard the silence enclose them as the sounds of the room were shut off. Harry trailed his fingertips on the bed, and then found the desk chair. He pulled it out so that he was sitting across from Healer Jordan.

“Harry, I told you that I would tell you when I had made arrangements to visit your guardians,” Healer Jordan said.

“Yeah?” Harry answered.

“Well, I’ve contacted them and Mr. Burbage and I are going to visit them early tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, okay.” Harry shifted nervously in his chair. He really wanted to tell her not to do it, but he had a feeling the more he argued against it, the more determined she’d be.
“I also wanted to check in with you and see how you’re feeling this evening. Healer Geller said that you were feeling better after you slept. Are you hungry at all? Would you like another nutrition potion?” Healer Jordan asked.

“Yes, I’m feeling a lot better, thanks.” Harry was embarrassed to have her attention focused on him like this. “Um, yeah. I would like another one of those potions. They are delicious.”

Harry heard some bottles clinking and she put a vial in his outstretched hand.

“Have you ever fainted before like you did this afternoon?” she asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” Harry answered, thinking about when he fought Quirrell, but that was different, he reasoned.

“Okay, please let me know if you’re experiencing anything like that again,” she requested.

“Okay… I’m sure it was nothing,” he mumbled.

“I’ll let you know about the meeting with your guardians when I return, okay,” she stood up, so he did, too.

“Okay, thanks Healer Jordan,” Harry said.

“Thank you, Harry,” she said as she canceled the silencing charm and left his area. Her quick footsteps went over to the other side of the room and he heard her checking in with Arig.

He sat for a while mulling over what he imagined his Aunt and Uncle’s reactions would be. He wondered if they were going to visit before Uncle Vernon went to work.

Healer Jordan had moved on and was talking quietly to Aminah. Harry drank the potion, licking the lip of the vial to get all the delectable drops. He yawned. He was more than ready now for bed. He tempus’d his staff and found that it was later than he realized and he stifled another yawn.

As he was gathering up his clothes from his wardrobe (they were still damp from his trip to the south seas with Mei) he discovered that the school robes and his winter jacket were neatly folded on the floor of the wardrobe. He put them back in his staff and went into the bathroom and accio’d all his dirty laundry from the staff. Whoa, my socks stink! He asked his staff to direct him to the laundry chute that Aminah had described and shoved them in. He had one more T-shirt and trousers and one more pair of socks and pants, then he’d be out of clean clothes. He hoped that the laundry service was as fast as Aminah described. He changed into his pajamas, slippers, and robe and brushed his teeth.

oO0OooO0OooO0OooO0Oo

Harry was just coming into consciousness when the chiming bell went off in the morning. It wasn’t quite so surprising this time.

“It is 6:30 am and the dining hall will open for breakfast at 7 am. Breakfast will be served until 8 am, classes start at 9 am. Your schedule has been updated,” said the clear voice.

Harry could hear a vibrating noise in the room as well and figured that Gemma’s bed had been charmed to vibrate with the alarm. He smiled and stretched. He felt actually rested for the first time in a long time.

There was a groan that Harry thought might be Arig and some loud splashing noises from Mei’s side
of the wall. He was really glad that he was no longer being awoken by droplets of water on his face.

He heard Tony groan, too. “Someone turn that blasted thing off!”

“I turned it off yesterday,” Harry said, rolling over and gathering his warm blankets around himself in a cocoon.

“MMmrph,” Aminah grumbled.

Harry heard Gemma’s footsteps, different though they were without shoes, on the tile. The alarm shut off (to the muttered sighs of relief from her roommates) and then her footsteps came over to his area. She shook his shoulder, his back was to her.

He rolled over and smiled at her, “Thanks for turning off the alarm!”

He extracted himself from his tangle of sheets to sit up.


He rubbed his eyes with his knuckles and stretched again. “I don’t know. Why don’t you look?”

He heard her picking up the paper on his desk and slid his legs off the bed, rooting around for his slippers.

She tapped his hand with the paper so he took it. He ran his hand over the incomprehensible braille, then listened as Godric spoke in his aftí again. He felt around his desk trying to find his staff until Gemma moved it against his fingers. He accio’d his anagnóstis and the notebook and pencil out of it. He handed the notebook and pencil to Gemma and asked her where she was going to be today and then paid attention to what Godric was saying as he ran his fingers over the braille.

Harry Potter’s Schedule

Wednesday 30 June, 1993

7 am Breakfast

9 am Self-defense with Agatha Midgeon in the O&M room

10 am Navigating with your staff with Mr. Burbage in the O&M room

12 pm Lunch

2 pm Braille with Madam Flamel in the Library

4 pm Meet with Healer Geller in Mind Healer office.

6 pm Dinner

She flapped her schedule in front of him and he grabbed it and started read it with the anagnóstis until he noticed that it was also written in braille.

I wonder why hers has braille, too?
Gemma Boot’s Schedule

Wednesday 30 June, 1993

7 am Breakfast

9 am Self-defense with Agatha Midgeon in the O&M room

10 am Balance with Agatha Midgeon in the O&M room

12 pm Lunch

2 pm BSL with Corbin Huw in the Braidwood room

4 pm Council with Healer Jordan in the Mont Blanc room

6 pm Dinner

“Hey, we’re going to be together for self-defense! And in the same room all morning. That’s good!” Harry said.

She tapped his arm, “yes!” and then waved across his palm and jumped up and left and he gathered that she going to get ready for the day.

He put everything back in his staff and listened to see if anyone else headed to the bathroom. He heard Gemma enter the bathroom on the other side of the hallway, and figured that he could go to the other one. He shook out his staff and started walking toward it when he heard Arig’s crutches alternating with one footstep on the tile floor. He stopped as Arig approached.

“Hi,” he said as the pivoting metal sounds approached. He guessed that they were the kind of crutches that had arm rings from the sound they were making.

“Hi, Harry,” Arig greeted.

“Go ahead, I’ll wait,” Harry offered.

“Hey, thank you. I’ll be quick!” Arig said as he went by Harry and into the bathroom on the left side of the hallway.

Harry went back to his desk to write a response to Ron’s letter while he waited.

He accio’d the ruler, pencil, sharpener, and pad of paper out of his staff and started to write.

“Hi Ron, Thanks for writing again. No fire, just water. It will be great to see everyone on the weekend. Thanks for the note about the magical eyes. I’ll look into it (ha ha). The address is 56 Charing Cross Rd, it has a magical entrance - the Pernel Flamel Adaptation Center. Tell it that you want to enter. What time on Saturday? I’ll meet you at the reception area. Tell Ginny not to worry. I’m okay. Harry.” He listened to it and corrected the spelling of Perenelle with the help of the anagnóstis, then he rolled it up and put it in his staff.

He listened to the sounds of his roommates starting to stir for the day and then decided to look at the Louis Braille book again. Instead of reading it with the anagnóstis, though, he decided to try to
figure out some of the braille. He used the *anagnóstis* to read the words on the cover and then felt them carefully trying to discern the letters. He found that the “r” and “i” were the easiest for him to pick out of the letters, but it was really hard to tell the letters apart. He sagged a little wondering how he was going to learn to read by touch.

Finally, he heard the toilet door open and realized that it was Gemma who was out first. He put away the book and other things in his staff and then asked his staff to take him to the available toilet.

Mei was splashing around in her tank when he closed the door and asked his staff for a description of this toilet. It was a mirror image of the one on the other side of the hallway with all the same features. When he was taking a shower, he accidentally pressed against a button that he hadn’t noticed before that brought out sponges on poles at various heights that seemed to fill with suds. He guessed that they would be useful if you didn’t have arms and pressed the button again to make them go away. Another button conjured a stool that caught him in the back of the knees and almost made him fall, but he steadied himself on the shower wall before pressing the button again and making it disappear. He decided to stop messing with the panel and just wash his hair.

He dressed in his last set of clean clothes - dingy baggy hand-me-downs from Dudley (the *Indica color* charm confirmed that they were a dull gray) - and brushed his teeth and hair.

Gemma was waiting for him when he emerged from the toilet, her hand fluttering against his arm.

“Are you ready to go down to breakfast?” he asked.

“Yes,” she tapped against his arm. He heard Arig’s crutches and lifted his head so that he could talk over Gemma’s head. “Are you ready to go down to breakfast, Arig? Want to walk down with us?” he invited.

“Sure, I’ll join you. Hey, should we make sure that Aminah is awake first, though? It seems like she’s still sleeping,” Arig said.

“Yeah, good idea,” Harry agreed. He heard Arig moving over toward Aminah’s area and then he gently said, “Hey, Aminah? Are you awake?”

“Mrumphh,” she responded.

Gemma left Harry’s side and he imagined that she was helping Arig wake up Aminah who didn’t seem to be a morning person.

Harry could hear the shower going in the other loo, so figured that Tony was in there as Mei seemed to still be swimming in her tank.

“Hey, Mei, we’re going down to breakfast, are you ready?” Harry asked.

“Naw, you all go down. I need to wake up a little more. I’ll wait for Tony and Aminah,” she said in a surprisingly pleasant voice.

“Okay, see you down there,” Harry said.

Mei snorted in response.

Gemma was back and tapping the back of Harry’s hand for sighted guide. He took her arm and collapsed his cane. He heard Arig’s crutches behind them and gathered that they felt like Aminah was awake enough to leave her.
“So were you both at Hogwarts?” Arig asked them as they went out into the hallway.

“Yes, well, I was. Gemma was supposed to start last year, but she was sick, so she hasn’t been to Hogwarts yet,” Harry answered.

“So, you’re the real Harry Potter, then?” Arig asked.

“Yes, I guess so,” Harry said.

“What happened? Is it okay if I ask?” Arig said.

“Um, you didn’t hear already?” Harry stalled.

“No, nothing,” Arig said.

“Well, I had a run in with a big snake in the dungeons at Hogwarts and some venom got in my eyes,” Harry said.

“How big of a snake?” asked Arig.

“A Basilisk,” Harry said.

“Seriously? I thought those were a myth,” Arig said.


Gemma stopped. She tapped the hand that was on her arm.

“What is it, Gemma?” he asked, perplexed.

“She wants to know what we’re talking about. I guess she couldn’t see your slips of paper,” Arig said.

“I was telling Arig about how I was blinded by the Basilisk in the dungeons in Hogwarts,” Harry told Gemma. “The venom got in my eyes. Dumbledore’s phoenix, Fawkes, was there and helped heal me, but I guess not before the venom damaged my optic nerve.”

Harry felt Gemma grab the slip of paper by his mouth.

“That’s wicked bad luck,” Arig said.

“Well, I could have died, so I don’t know, I guess it could be good luck, too,” Harry said.

“Gemma’s saying not to talk anymore until we get to the dining hall because she doesn’t like being left out of the conversation,” Arig said.

“Sorry, Gemma,” Harry apologized.

She tapped his hand and then started walking again. They walked in silence - the only sound was Arig’s crutches.
“Why can’t we hear what Gemma’s saying today? Like we could last night?” Arig asked as they entered the dining hall.

“That’s a spell that Healer Jordan casts when we’re in a group, but it stops when she leaves the room,” Harry explained, catching the paper fluttering by his mouth, and handing it to Gemma.

“So, Harry, how do you and Gemma communicate if you can’t read the notes from her signing?” Arig asked as they settled into the chairs at their favorite table in the dining hall, the aromas of another English breakfast floating around them.

“She writes in my palm or we write on paper and I have an anagnóstis that reads things to me,” Harry explained.

“Oh, that’s cool,” Arig said. Harry heard him tapping his crutches on the floor three times.

“So your crutches shrink down so that you can put them in your pocket, too,” Harry stated.

“Yeah, I saw you do the same thing with your staff. Pretty nifty,” Arig said.

“Do you have storage in your crutches, too?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, that’s the best thing about them. I don’t have to carry a book bag or anything,” Arig said.

“That would be hard, huh, with crutches, to manage a book bag,” Harry agreed.

“Yeah, it’s always shifting and hitting my crutches,” Arig said. “Yeah, I’ll be getting a magical leg at some point.”

“Huh?” Harry asked.

“Oh, I was answering Gemma. She asked,” Arig said.

It sounded like there were only a couple in the dining hall, so Harry wasn’t surprised when the table started vibrating and the whistle went off.

“Whoa, what’s that?” Arig said.

“That’s letting us know that our table can go up to the buffet. It’s more of an issue when the dining hall is full. It doesn’t sound like there’s many people here,” Harry said.

He felt Gemma getting up next to him and also started rising.

“Yeah, there’s just one other guy down here at the table across the way. He’s talking to himself, though,” said Arig.

“Oh, who is it?” Harry asked.

Gemma took his hand and wrote, “A-D-A-M” space “F-I-T-Z”, then tucked it in her arm and started leading him to the buffet.

“Oh, Gemma says that it is Adam and Fitz. Adam has vanishing sickness, so you can’t see him. He’s invisible. Fitz isn’t by himself.” Harry explained as Arig started following them.
“Oh, wow,” Arig said, “I didn’t know that was really a thing.”

“The trays float, just so you know,” Harry said as they approached the buffet.

“Oh, that’s a relief. I was wondering how I was going to manage,” Arig said.

“You spilled some fried tomatoes off your plate, did you know?” Arig asked as Harry was eating.

“Um, no. It’s okay. They are super slippery,” Harry said, trying to hide his embarrassment. He was just hoping that none had slid down his front.

He had been trying to corner the tomatoes with his toast, but apparently, some had gotten away.

“Oh, here comes Mei, Tony, and Aminah,” Arig said.

Gemma, Harry, and Arig greeted them as they settled into the remaining chairs at their table.

“Is anyone else in self-defense this morning?” Harry asked and learned that they were all in it, except for Mei who was going to be working with someone on managing her Jiāorén magic.

“Who’s your professor for that, Mei?” Aminah asked.

“It’s one of my Jiāorén relatives, Hāi rén,” Mei said.

“Are you going to the South Sea for that lesson,” Harry asked.

“Yeah, wanna come?” Mei teased.

“Not today, thanks,” Harry said. He had finished up his breakfast and pushed back his chair.

“I’m going to go to the owlery before self-defense,” he announced standing up.

Gemma tapped on his arm and Arig said, “Gemma says to wait for her, she wants to go with you,” Arig said.

“Oh, okay, sure,” he said as he sat back down.

It didn’t take too long for Gemma to finish her plate and push it away from her. She tapped Harry on the arm to let him know she was ready.

“Do you mind if I tag along? I want to make sure my owl made it safely,” Arig asked.

“Sure, no problem,” Harry said as Gemma tugged impatiently on his arm.

“What is it, Gemma?” Harry asked.


“Oh, okay,” Harry said and added quietly, “We could talk in the courtyard?”

They walked in silence to the owlery, where the odor seemed extra strong as they walked into the tower - it was already warmer than it had been on Tuesday.
“Oh, wow. This is weird. So this is some kind of portal?” Arig asked as he walked in.

“Watch out for the owl droppings, they are slippery,” Harry warned as he heard Arig moving over to the window quickly. “Yeah, Gemma says the view is way above the city and that we can see Big Ben from here.”

“You mean the Clock Tower? Oh, yeah, there it is, cool.” Arig said from the window.

Harry heard Hedwig hoot and the burst of her wings as she descended. He was glad. He tugged gently on Gemma’s arm and pointed up to the sound and she led him to the perch.

“Hiya, Hedwig,” Harry said as he buried his face in her feathers, breathing in her piney scent. He pulled out some of the table scraps he’d saved for her and winced as she pecked at his fingers as she grabbed them.

After a quick greeting to Hedwig that consisted of her own table scraps, Gemma had gone over to the window with Arig to look at the city. They were pointing out sights in the city that they both recognized from what Harry could tell from Arig’s side of the conversation. He seemed pretty at ease with them even though he was quite a bit older. Maybe he also has younger siblings? Harry wondered.

Harry found the note attached to Hedwig’s leg and took it off. He accio’d the one he’d written to Ron and fastened it to Hedwig’s leg. “You don’t mind taking this to Ron, do you, Hedwig?” He asked as he scratched her head. She chortled and growled.

“Hey, your owl is a beauty!” Arig exclaimed.

“Thanks,” Harry said, rubbing his cheek against her face as she nibbled on his earlobe.

“Did yours arrive?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, he’s here. He’s not glad to see me, though,” Arig said, “ever since I was attacked… I guess I smell different.”

“Oh, that’s…” the thought made Harry sad for Arig. He’d hate it if Hedwig suddenly didn’t like him as much. “That is total pants.”

“Yeah.”

Harry could tell now that even Hedwig felt a bit antsy around Arig. He let her fly up back to her perch.

The door of the owlery opened.

“Is Harry Potter in here?”

“Yes, I’m here, Godric,” Harry responded.

“Do you have a minute? Could you come with me?” Godric asked.

“Um, sure. Let me tell Gemma - just a second,” Harry said as he shook out his staff and put the scroll away.

“I’ll tell her, Harry,” Arig offered. Gemma must have still been enthralled with the view of the city. She did spend a lot of time looking at it every time they came up to the tower.
“No, it’s okay. I need to tell her,” Harry said as he navigated to Gemma, he’d remembered to add her to his staff’s memory along with the other people in the dining room that morning.

“Sure, no problem,” Arig said.

Harry touched Gemma’s arm, “Gemma, I have to go. Godric needs to talk to me. I don’t know how long it will take. Can I meet you at the O&M room and we can see if we have time to talk before class?”

“Oh, okay,” she tapped on his arm, and then three taps, “I understand.”

“Thanks, Gemma. See you then,” he said and she waved across the back of his hand.

Harry navigated to the doorway where he wiped off his shoes and followed the sound of Godric’s staff across the corridor to Healer Jordan’s office.

“We’re just going to meet briefly with Healer Jordan in her office,” Godric explained over his shoulder as they reached the door.

“Oh.” He heard as Godric’s staff tapped the door, then he opened it and passed through. Godric held it open for Harry and he followed him in.

They settled into the chairs by Healer Jordan’s desk as she greeted them both.

“Harry, Mr. Burbage and I just returned from visiting your guardians,” Healer Jordan explained.

“Oh?” Harry responded.

“Well, I’ll get right to the point. We encountered some resistance and I think we’re going to need to involve the Ministry of Magic as well as Hogwarts as we work with them to make sure you are getting the best care,” Healer Jordan explained.

“What do you mean, resistance?” Harry asked.

“They refused to let us in, despite our prearranged agreement to meet,” Healer Jordan said. Harry was impressed at how neutral she managed to keep her voice, given how frustrating that must have been. He wondered if she’d had any time to sleep when he considered all the extra time she was spending on him and there were sixteen other residents who likely had similar things that needed to be dealt with.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Harry said, flushing. “They aren’t used to wixen.”

Godric made a noise that he tried to pass off as a cough.

“Listen, Harry. Please understand. None of this is your fault. Okay? How have visits from the professors at Hogwarts gone in the past? Or from the families of your wixen friends?”

“Oh.” Harry could only think of the visit from Madam Pomfrey the month before. “Well, okay, I guess? I mean, it was only Madam Pomfrey who took me there after … It was a pretty quick visit.”

“What about when they delivered your letter?” Godric asked.

“Oh, well. That was… Disastrous, he thought, remembering Hagrid knocking the door of the sea shack off the hinges.

“How did that visit go?” Healer Jordan pressed.
Harry sank into his chair trying to make himself small.

“I dunno. My aunt and uncle tried… to keep me from going to Hogwarts, but I got to go finally,” Harry admitted.

“And visits from your wixen friends? How are those?” Healer Jordan asked.

“Um. I haven’t had any visits… ” He didn’t suppose the visit by Fred, George, and Ron in the Ford Anglia counted.

“Okay, well. We’ll reach out to the ministry and to Professor Dumbledore and see if we can figure out how to bridge this divide,” Healer Jordan said. “How are you feeling today? Did you eat a good breakfast?”

“I’m fine. Yes, I ate breakfast,” Harry said, straightening up a bit.

“Okay, well. Thanks. You can go on to your self-defense class now,” Healer Jordan dismissed him.

Harry stood up and asked his staff to take him to the door. As he went out into the corridor, he realized that he was feeling a little shaky. What would it mean if they brought in the Ministry of Magic and Dumbledore? How would it change things? He tried to push the thoughts out of his head. There wasn’t really anything he could do about it.

He found the wall of the corridor. It was cool as he pressed his hand against it. He leaned against it, collapsed his staff, then slid down to the floor. He needed to think for a moment.

He heard the door open again and held his breath. It was Godric and he walked by without noticing Harry. Harry breathed a sigh of relief once it sounded like Godric was out of earshot.

*Like wearing my invisibility cloak…*

He put his head against his knees and hugged his legs. He had never had people poking into his business like this before. Even when Hagrid had to track the Dursleys down out in the middle of the ocean. After he and Hagrid spent the day getting his things in Diagon Alley, Hagrid just put him on a train back to the Dursleys like it was no big deal.

He took in a deep shuddering breath. He was pretty certain no one else was in the corridor. He lifted his glasses and wiped his eyes (they had leaked a little) then stood up. The only way this was going to be okay for him was if he didn’t have to go back to the Dursleys, but he didn’t see how that was going to happen. He reminded himself sternly that he still had three and a half weeks away from the Dursleys.

Steeling himself, he asked his staff to take him to the O&M room for his self-defense class.

*I’m going to need it more than ever if the Ministry, the Center, and Hogwarts are all visiting the Dursleys… they are going be pitch a fit when I return if they’ve had all sorts of wixen stomping through their house.*

Ms. Midgeon was waiting outside the door of the O&M room when he approached it a few minutes later. He could hear her talking to someone and he remembered her voice from yesterday when he had face planted in front of everyone. He had run into Adam and Fitz in the corridor and they had both asked how he was doing.
So embarrassing!

He asked his staff to tell him who was in the area and learned that Gemma was there and had started walking toward him. He turned to her and waited.

“Hi, Gemma,” he said, smiling and offering his palm to her.

She took it and wrote, “H-O-W” space “K-N-O-W” space “I-T” space “W-A-S” space “M-E-?”

“My staff. I was able to add you to my staff’s memory of people. I learned how to do it yesterday in Godric’s class,” Harry said. “Do we have time to talk? Do you know where the courtyard is?”

“Yes, yes” she tapped on his arm four times with a pause between each pair and then offered her arm to guide him. He Tempus’d his staff and learned that it was only 8:32 - they did have time.

Gemma led him to the library and through the library to the door that led out to a courtyard - on the same level. As they walked through the courtyard, Harry caught a whiff of the owelry.

The air in the courtyard was a little cooler than it had been up in the tower. Harry supposed that was because of the tree and the walls shaded that it from the sun. He was able to open his eyes in the courtyard, unlike the library. He briefly wondered why the library was so bright if it looked out onto the courtyard. More windows?

Gemma led him to the bench under the tree and they sat down. Harry accio’d his notebook and pencil and anagnóstis out of his staff. He also fetched the letter that Hedwig brought that morning, figuring he could read it while he waited for Gemma to write.

She drew a question mark on his palm. “I think it is from Hermione. Hedwig brought it this morning. I’ll read it while you write,” Harry explained.

“Okay,” she tapped on his arm and he heard her start to write in the notebook.

He unrolled the letter, then spread it on the bench so he could press the anagnóstis against it to read.

“Dear Harry,” Hermione’s voice sounded in his aftí as if she were next to him on the bench.

“I’m sorry your letters were accidentally destroyed. How did that happen? Was it that Ravenclaw who dumped us on into the sand? I wanted to warn you about her, but Healer Jordan was so strict about the whole privacy thing. I hope that she hasn’t done anything else. She seems so angry at everyone. I guess I would be, too, if that happened to me, but still, it’s not fair to take it out on people who are going through something similar. I imagine that’s why she’s there. Maybe she’ll get the help she needs.

I hope that your classes are going well and that you’ve had a chance to rest and eat, too. I was worried about how thin and tired you looked. So the letter that was destroyed, it must have just been the one where I was explaining how Dad and I were going to come get you and take you to London. I don’t think I said anything else.

I’ve been doing some research at our local (muggle) library about braille and I’m going to try to learn it. I sent away for a mail order slate and stylus…” Harry paused, What’s a slate and stylus?

“… so that I can learn. I’ll send you a letter in braille when I get it. I know you have the anagnóstis, but I imagine it would be nice to just be able to read something without having to use a tool to access it. Though, from my research, it sounds like it is pretty hard to learn to read by touch.
I wrote to Ron and told him about the center. He said that all the Weasleys are going to visit this weekend. I wanted to visit, too. Do you think that will be too many people? I could wait until later… Let me know. Take care, Hermione.”

Harry thought it was the end of the letter, but as he picked up the anagnóstis it slid over another word "remembered", and he scanned the end of the paper and found a P.S. from Hermione.

“P.S. There was one thing that I had written in other letter. I just remembered. I told you about Quick Quote Quills that will write down what you’re saying. They are not just for wixen with vision or other impairments - loads of people use them to make taking notes easier during interviews or at work. I guess they are not allowed at school unless you have special permission to use them, or all the students at Hogwarts would use them during classes. I wonder if you can get one through the Center or if you’d have to visit Diagon Alley. Maybe we can go there this weekend, if you’re okay with me visiting, too.”

Harry rolled up Hermione’s letter and straightened up, turning toward Gemma and listening to see if she was still writing. It sounded like she was done, too.

She touched his knee with the notebook and he took it.

“I wanted to talk to you about why you told Arig about how you were blinded when you just met him, but you wouldn’t tell me. I guess it kind of stung and I thought we should talk about it because you are an important friend to me and I thought that maybe I was an important friend for you, too, even though we just met and everything.”

Harry felt his gut seize up as he read Gemma’s note. He could also feel lots of eraser crumbles on the page and realized that it had taken Gemma a long time to compose the short note because she kept re-writing it.

He had just told Arig right away about the Basilisk venom when he asked, but with everyone else, he had deflected the question.

Why did I do that?

“Gemma, I’m sorry. You are an important friend, even though we just met two days ago. I don’t know why I could tell Arig when I didn’t want to tell anyone else. I didn’t want to tell you at first because I was afraid it would scare you and that you wouldn’t want to go to Hogwarts if you heard about a big serpent in the dungeons. I didn’t tell Tony or Mei because they were both pretty, well, mean at first. I don’t know why I didn’t tell Aminah. I guess, I figured since they were all at Hogwarts, they already knew, and that you would have heard about it from your brother. So, I really didn’t need to tell it. It is kind of hard to think about.”

She grabbed the paper that fluttered by his lips. After a little bit, she reached over and laid her hand on his wrist.

He motioned with the notebook, wondering if she wanted to write more. She hesitated, then took it and he heard her writing, then she gave it back to him.

“Okay, I guess I get it. But could you tell me the story, please? Is it weird that I want to know?”

“No, I think we all want to know what happened to each other, but it’s kind of hard, too. You know?” he paused and took a deep breath.

“So, what happened was Ron’s sister Ginny was trapped in the Chamber of Secrets below Hogwarts by… ” he stopped. What’s scarier - a basilisk or Voldemort? “… by a boy named Tom Riddle who
was a student at Hogwarts 50 years earlier. He grew up to become Voldemort.” He stopped again when he heard her draw in a sharp breath.

“Anyway, he had this diary and he enchanted it somehow and he got Ginny. So, Ron and I decided to go rescue her and we took Professor Lockhart with us, but he got hurt and couldn’t help us and then Ron was trapped behind a pile of rocks, so just I could go on. And, well, Terry already told you that I can speak to snakes, so I could get into the chamber because of that. And so I…” he paused, his heart was racing as he was retelling the story. Gemma put her hand on his.

“… so I found Ginny, but Riddle was there and he was like a ghost but he was starting to get a body, I guess he was stealing Ginny’s soul to do it… and he set the Basilisk on me. Dumbledore’s phoenix Fawkes came and gave me the Sorting Hat and there was a sword in it. And Fawkes blinded the Basilisk and I fought it, but when the sword went into its mouth, one of the fangs got me in the arm, and blood and venom got in my eyes. I thought I was going to die. But then Fawkes healed my arm with his tears. I stopped dying then. I couldn’t see anything because of venom in my eyes, though I didn’t know that was why. It stung so bad. And Fawkes brought the diary to me and I don’t know why, but I stabbed the diary with the fang from the Basilisk and it made Riddle disappear and then Ginny started coming back to life. I didn’t think to ask Fawkes about healing my eyes until after I knew Ginny was okay. And once he cried his tears in my eyes they stopped hurting so bad, but I still couldn’t see. And yeah, Ginny and I went back to Ron and we got out of the Chamber. I thought that Madam Pomfrey and then the Healers at St. Mungo's would be able to heal my eyes, but they couldn’t.”

He let out a big breath and realized that he felt both exhausted and relieved.

A tear fell on his hand. He wasn’t sure if it was his or Gemma’s.
Harry shifted on the cool stone bench and listened to the breeze as it picked up a little, pushing more warm air into the courtyard, and moving the leaves on the tree. He wondered what kind of tree it was. He brushed his hand over the herbs beside the bench and inhaled their pungent aroma. Gemma was writing in the notebook and gently pushed it against his hand.

“Thanks for telling me, Harry. Terry did tell me some of it, but I really didn’t understand how scary it must have been. And when he told me, I thought it was scary! How is Ginny doing? Is she okay?”

“Yeah, I think so. She’s coming to visit this weekend. Well, all the Weasleys are. It’ll be a little wild here. I should probably warn Healer Jordan,” he smiled at the thought. “I think you’ll like Ginny, she’s your age.”

He Tempus’d his staff and stood up, shaking it out, “We better head up so that we’re not late for class. Are you ready?”

She tapped his hand twice and handed back the notebook and pencil. He put everything back in his staff and took her arm. He could tell that she felt better than she had earlier by the way she was guiding him. She wasn’t holding her body so rigidly.

He sighed.

As they walked through the bright library, Harry heard Besel’s chair and greeted her as they got close. He stopped Gemma, “Hey, do you know Healer Besel Geller?” he asked her. She tapped “no” on his hand.

“This is Gemma Boot, Besel,” Harry said.

“Hi Gemma, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” Besel said and Harry could hear her signing.

“Oh, do you know how to sign, too?” Harry asked.

“Yes, a little. I’m still learning,” Besel said.

“I’d like to learn,” Harry said, surprising himself a bit. He did want to learn, but he was also feeling overwhelmed about learning all the things he was supposed to learn, like braille. Really, with the Scribunt loqui charm, he didn’t need to. But it could be useful to sign occasionally with Gemma, even if he couldn’t see her responses. And it would probably be hard to learn - someone would have to move his hands through the motions to teach him or describe what they were doing really accurately.

Gemma seemed excited, though, to learn that Harry wanted to learn. She signed something into his hand that he didn’t understand.

“What was that?” he asked.

“She said she’d teach you,” Besel said.

Harry smiled at Gemma, “Okay.”

“We’d better get to class so we’re not late. Nice to see you, Besel. See you this afternoon,” Harry said.
“Yes, I’m looking forward to it, Harry. Nice to meet you, too, Gemma,” she replied.

They left the library and went across the hall to the O&M room.

Harry tapped Gemma’s hand, “What’s the layout of the room today?”

She guided him to the panel outside the door so that he could feel the map and listen to the description. He felt a little self-conscious because he could hear other people in the corridor, but told himself sternly to get over it.

It was Agatha Midgeon’s voice in his aftí today that said, “This morning, the O&M room is set up as a gymnasium with an entryway that has corridors to the left and right where you’ll find individual changing rooms, and straight ahead that leads into a seating area with benches and a center walkway that leads to a large room fitted with padded floors and walls for gymnastics. Please use the changing rooms to change into work out clothes that you’ll find in your individual changing room with a locker labeled with your name. Please remove your shoes, but keep your socks on. You may bring any assistive tools that you normally use such as a staff, wheelchair, crutches, prosthetic limbs, etc. but don’t bring any other gear into the gymnasium. Extra gear can be secured in your locker or changing room. Once you’ve changed, sit on the benches until everyone is assembled. We’ll start there with a discussion of self-defense and then start some exercises that will, over time, lead to increased balance and strength.”

Harry ran his fingers over the map to get a sense of the layout of the room and also found that the individual changing rooms were labeled on the map, so he learned that his changing room was the third on the right as they entered the space. That’s handy.

“I guess we better head in so that we can get changed. Do you know where your changing room is?” he asked Gemma.

She tapped “yes,” on his hand and led him to the entrance. When they walked over the threshold, Harry didn’t feel the pull of the portal that the room had had previously. The room smelled kind of like the Quidditch changing rooms at Hogwarts and the sounds echoed off the walls in a weird way - he supposed it was the padding.

Harry navigated to his changing room on his own and confirmed it was his when he ran his fingers over the sign to the right of the door and it said his name. Inside he squeezed his staff to get a sense of the room and learned that it was pretty small with just a locker and a short bench. In the locker, he found a change of clothes (much newer and nicer than the cast-offs from Dudley that he was currently wearing). It was a t-shirt and joggers that felt very soft. He was curious about what color they were and did the Indica color charm to find out that the T-shirt was white and that the joggers were aquamarine. He imagined that his socks, which he was sure didn’t match, were a dull and crusty grey. He was glad that no one was going to see his pants, if he had anything to say about it.

He wondered if he could get some new clothes while he was in London… he did have the muggle money that Hermione had converted for him. And maybe if they did go to Diagon Alley on the weekend, he could get some more money from his vault at Gringotts and convert some of it to pounds to use while he was at the Center. And it would be nice to have more than one pair of shoes in case his trainers got wet again.

He went out to the benches to wait for class to begin. There were some people there… Martha, Fitz, and Gordon. He wondered where Tony, Aminah, and Arig were, but then he heard them coming in behind him, headed to their changing rooms. Gemma hadn’t come out yet. So, Harry waited by the benches for her. It sounded like Tony and Arig were already best friends by the way they were laughing and jostling each other. They are nearly the same age - just a year apart.
He heard very soft stocking-foot footsteps approaching him from behind and turned. Gemma greeted him in her usual way by placing her hand on his arm.

“Hi, Gemma, where do you want to sit?” he asked.

She took his hand, hooked it around her arm, and led him to the bench behind Martha, Fitz, and Gordon. Harry greeted them as they sat down, collapsing his staff.

“Are you feeling better after your spill yesterday?” Martha asked.

“Um, yes, thanks,” Harry responded as he felt his face flush.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to embarrass you,” she said.

“It’s okay,” Harry lied.

Gemma squeezed his arm and he put out his hand for her to write on.


“Oh, Gemma asked if I could teach you the Scribunt loqui charm so that when you talk she can understand what you’re saying,” Harry said to Martha.

“Oh, sure. How does that work? Is that the little papers I’ve been seeing floating around everyone’s mouths? I was wondering. So, why does Gemma write in your hand, then?” Martha asked.

“Well, since I can’t see, she has to write on my hand. That’s how we communicate. That or on paper and I use my reader to hear what she’s said. There’s a charm that gives Gemma a voice, but she hasn’t learned how to cast nonverbal spells yet. Healer Jordan can cast it for her, but it only works when she’s in the room. I guess I need to learn how to cast it for Gemma,” Harry explained.

“So, Gemma would have to write on my hand for me to understand what she wants to say?” Fitz asked.

“Yes,” Harry agreed.

Harry taught Martha and Fitz the charm. Gordon said he’d try it later and Harry guessed that Gemma picked up on that because she didn’t say anything else about Gordon and the charm.

While they were working on that, Arig, Aminah, and Tony joined them on the bench.

“Looking good, Harry!” Tony said cuffing him on the shoulder with his new hand, “You’re finally wearing clothes that actually fit you.”

“Er. Thanks?” Harry replied. He realized that at Hogwarts his school robes usually covered his ratty hand-me-downs from Dudley. Here he’d just been wearing the T-shirts and trousers that he had because it was so hot and no one had said anything about a dress code and wearing school robes.

I really need to buy some new clothes. No wonder Gemma’s mom thought I was a waif.

He felt the heat rise in his neck again and wished it would go away. He hoped Agatha Midgeon would arrive soon and start class. He noticed that some people he didn’t recognize had come in and settled in the benches on the other side of the center aisle. One of them was using a levitating chair like Besel’s, but it wasn’t Besel. It was a man from what Harry could tell from the voice. Someone came down their line of benches, “Hi Harry,” Shannon greeted as she maneuvered past Harry and sat on the other side of Gemma. Harry heard Gemma signing with Shannon.
As if on cue, he heard someone approaching with a limping gait. He had noticed it earlier in the corridor, but didn’t know who it belonged to.

“Okay, it looks like nearly everyone is here,” Agatha Midgeon began. Harry took in a deep breath and let it out slowly trying to remain calm even though the last time he’d been listening to her voice he had apparently hyperventilated.

*It would be really bad if I fainted every time I heard her speak.*

“I’m going to go ahead and get started because I want to allow time to have a good discussion as well as time to start continuing our work of strengthening our core. So, yesterday we began by getting to know each other and sharing our stories as well as some basic strengthening exercises. I introduced some ideas that I asked you to think about for today’s discussion.

The question was ‘why do you think the center believes that self-defense is such an important topic for the wixen enrolled in the residency program.’ Anyone have any ideas that they want to share?” Ms. Midgeon invited. “Yes, Fitz?”

“Well, because we’re more perceived to be vulnerable, we’re more likely to be victims of crimes of opportunity,” Fitz said.

“Very well stated. That’s exactly right - it’s not that we are more vulnerable, it is that we are perceived to be more vulnerable,” Ms. Midgeon agreed. “Any other reasons? Yes, Donna?”

“Well, people might take advantage of the fact that we are more likely to ask strangers for help,” Harry had heard this woman’s voice before. It took him a moment to place it. She was the woman he’d met in the owlery.

“Yes, absolutely,” Ms. Midgeon said.

“People might take advantage of us because they think we’re not going to tell anyone about an attack or that we might not be believed and so they can more easily get away with the crime,” Shannon said.

“True, Shannon, that’s a good point,” Ms. Midgeon said.

“I think that sometimes people think of us as less than human and so think that it isn’t really a crime,” Arig said.

“Ah, yes, Arig. That is possible.”

“And they might that what’s happened to us is an act of God and so they are just carrying out God’s will by hurting us even more,” Aminah said.

“Sure, Aminah. There are some people, fortunately very few, who act on those very archaic and harmful beliefs. Please know that anyone acting on those beliefs would have committed a hate crime and would suffer greater consequences in both wixen and muggle courts in most countries if they were found guilty.

So, it appears to me that you are very much aware of your need to practice self-defense. Of course, not all crimes enacted against us are violent crimes intended to hurt us, but those are the crimes that we’re going to learn how to defend ourselves against today and in many of our sessions. We’ll have other lessons that focus on protecting our identities and bank accounts, securing our homes, and learning how to vet the people who assist us.
I know that this all seems very bleak. The reason why we are bringing our awareness to these facts is not to scare us or make us feel vulnerable; it is to give us the tools to protect ourselves so that we can prevent it from ever happening. We’re going to work on building skills so that if we ever find ourselves in a dangerous situation, we have the confidence and skills to know that we can get through it safely.

Today we’ll be working on strengthening our core with some simple exercises that we’ll adapt to our individual needs. In the future, we’ll work on some magical defenses. Some can be embedded in our assistive tools - such as our staves, canes, crutches, or even other nondescript accessories such as watches, belts, necklaces, rings, etc. So even if we’re not able to cast a spell to protect ourselves, we can be protected.”

Gemma grabbed Harry’s hand and he realized that she wasn’t able to cast any spells. He squeezed it what he hoped was a reassuring manner. He remembered the troll in the bathroom and Ron’s *Wingardium leviosa*.

*Maybe she can still do accidental magic - like when I ended up on the roof of the primary.*

“Okay, I’m going to ask you to come out to the center floor and space yourselves about two arm spans from each other. I’m going to levitate a rectangular mat that will give you a firm surface for your exercises and also define your space. I’ve charmed the floating mats with a little bell that will stop once you grab it. Unroll it so that the long edges run parallel to the west wall. The entrance that you came in is on the south wall, behind me is the north wall. Take off your socks and stand at the top of your mat (facing the south wall). Once we’re all at the top of our mats I’ll give the next instructions. While you're waiting, just breathe. At that point, you can collapse your mobility tools. I’ll come around and provide individual support as well. It’ll take us a little bit to get set up and that’s okay, we’ll get faster at it as we become more accustomed to the routine. Okay, you can start now.”

Harry felt Tony stand up next to him and stood up, too, shaking out his staff. “Hey, Harry, do you want me to guide you?” Tony asked, and touched his arm against Harry’s hand that was holding the staff.

“Sure. Thanks, Tony,” Harry said, switching hands and placing his hand above Tony’s elbow. The texture of Tony's prosthetic arm was smooth and firm and a bit cool to the touch. He followed Tony out to the mats and Tony helped him find a spot and judge the distance between him and Gemma on his other side. He heard the tinkling of little bells and was able to grab his mat when it came near.

“Maybe we can put this charm on a snitch?” Harry asked, mostly to himself, but Tony overheard.

“Yeah, I bet we could. Maybe we can organize some pickup Quidditch games in the O&M room after classes? But how would you fly?”

“Well, yeah. I want to figure that out. But bells on snitches and other people’s brooms could work,” Harry said thoughtfully.

“Gemma says she wants to do it, too,” Tony said.

“Me, too,” said Arig from the other side of Tony.

“I guess we’ll have to find some brooms and balls… well, and learn that charm. Hopefully, Mei’s figuring out how to manage her magic so that she can join us,” Harry said.

He heard Arig asking Aminah if she wanted to play. She sounded hesitant.

Ms. Midgeon was coming around and helping students with specific accommodations - she asked
Arig if he wanted to use his crutches for balance or if he wanted to try some supports. He chose to do a bit of both and Harry listened as she showed him how to change the height of the supports for different stretches that they’d be doing.

She moved on to Tony and suggested that when there were stretches that put pressure on the arms, that he makes sure to take it really slowly and easily so that he didn’t get hurt.

Gordon also had some supports that gave him more resistance to work against from what Harry could tell. There was the man in the levitating chair that was going to be working from a seated position and then later transitioning to the floor.

Soon, they got started with some basic stretches. Harry wasn’t sure exactly how this was going to help with self-defense, but it did feel good. At first, he was really struggling with not falling over when they were in bending over stretches or balancing on one foot.

Ms. Midgeon said it was common with vision loss to lose some balance and that’s why they were working on it. Gemma was also struggling with it, because of the damage to her inner ear. Even Martha, who was there to learn how to help her little girl adapt and not because she had a disability herself, was struggling to not fall over from the sound of it. That made Harry feel a little better as he picked himself up again. He was thankful for the padded floor.

Harry noted that Ms. Midgeon was really pretty skilled at describing the stretches and anticipating everyone’s needs - whether it was his, Aminah’s, and Fitz’s need to have very precise descriptions of body placement or Shannon’s and Gemma’s needs to have visuals, or Tony’s, Donna’s, the levitating chair guy’s, and Arig’s need for adjustments based on their missing limbs. He was really impressed that she was able to keep up with everyone and keep the class moving along. Sometimes she came around and did small adjustments, helping him square his hips or align his arm or leg with the ceiling. It was over before he was really ready - though he really liked the final pose, a resting position where he was just lying on his back and breathing deeply. He was pretty certain he had fallen asleep for a moment.
Ms. Midgeon explained that they could keep the training clothes for their next class and simply wait on the benches if they were in the O&M room. As Harry went back to his changing room to put on his trainers, he wondered how it was going to work with both the navigation class and the balance class in the same space. Tony and Arig were in Gemma’s balance class. Harry was feeling like he could use more work on his balance, but also wanted to learn more about navigating with his staff.

He went back to the benches and found an empty space on the bench to sit. Gemma came back out and sat next to him.

“Do you have a broom here, Gemma?” Harry asked.

She tapped once on his arm, “no,” and then tapped on his chest with her finger. It took him a second to understand, “Uh, yes, in my staff,” he answered.

She took his palm in her hand and wrote, “S-H-O-W” space “M-E-?”

He nodded and was accio’ing it from his staff when he heard Arig approaching them, “Ha! I have mine in my crutches, too! Sometimes I’m really tempted to get it out and just fly. Especially when my arms are killing me. Of course, I can’t do that out on Charing Cross Road, but maybe I could do it here in the center.”

Harry laughed as he pulled his broom out of his staff imagining Arig zooming through the corridors on a broom.

“Oh, wow! A Nimbus 2000!” Tony said, sitting on a bench in front of them. “Do you think I could try it? See if I can manage a broom with my new arms?”

“You mean in here?” Harry asked, his fingertips running over the familiar grain of the wood. Gemma was also feeling the broom handle - her fingers brushed against his.

“Yeah, could I just take it for a spin? It’s padded, so even if I crash, it’s not going to get hurt,” Tony pleaded.

“I guess so,” Harry said reluctantly. He really wanted to fly, but he wanted to do it in a larger space where he was less likely to run into a wall right away.

Harry held the broom out so that Tony could take it. It was hard for him to grasp and it took a moment for him to take it from Harry, but he managed. “Thanks!”

Harry listened to Tony’s footsteps as he walked to the padded area of the gymnasium and listened, trying to hear him take off. He could hear some of the sounds of someone flying on a broom - the sound of wind moving through clothing and the very slight rattling of the bristles of the broom rubbing together whenever Tony went close by them. Mostly what he could hear was Tony’s whoops of joy as he flew. He sounded really happy.

“That does sound like fun,” Aminah said softly. Harry hadn’t noticed that she had sat down on the bench behind them.

“Yeah, it does,” Harry agreed.

“Even though I wasn’t on a Quidditch team, I did like flying lessons. It is really fun just to zoom
around,” Aminah said.

Gemma wrote a question mark in his hand.

“Hey Aminah, come over here so that Gemma can read your notes,” Harry suggested.

“Oh, sorry, Gemma,” Aminah stood up behind them. He felt Gemma helping guide Aminah over the bench between them and then to a seat on her other side. He leaned out of the way.

Harry heard someone approaching using a staff for guidance. He imagined it was Godric. Fitz, Adam, and Martha were sitting on a bench on the other side of the corridor talking quietly.

“Is Tony flying on a broom?” Godric asked.

“Um, yes,” Harry answered.


Harry heard him dismounting a little clumsily at the edge of the mats.

“Hiya, Mr. Burbage,” Tony said.

“Hey, Tony - this really isn’t the place for flying brooms. And it should be outfitted with a bell charm so that the blind students don’t get blindsided, okay?”

“Uh, okay. It’s not my broom,” Tony said.

“It’s my broom,” Harry stood up, shaking out his staff and stumbling over Gemma and Aminah’s knees and feet as he tried to walk to the corridor. “Sorry,” he said quietly to his friends.

“How do you charm it with the little bell sound?” Harry asked. Tony tapped his knuckles with the broom handle, and Harry took his broom.

“Oh, it’s a simple charm - Campanis minima ,” Godric said. “You should be able to cast it with your staff as it is considered a navigational aid, so it is one of the charms that is built into your staff.”

“Can you change the sounds so that you can tell what’s near you if you’ve charmed multiple items with the same spell?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, you can. Are you thinking about Quidditch?” Godric asked.

“Um, yeah. Some of us were wanting to play,” Harry admitted.

“Well, then we need to work on your navigational skills so that you can do that,” Godric said.

“Is it possible, then?” Harry asked, his heart racing.

“Of course! I do it!” Godric laughed quietly. “Okay, are we ready to start working on navigating?”

Godric gathered up his group and led them through the gymnasium to another door that Harry hadn’t paid much attention to on the map when he’d been examining it earlier. Harry waved to Gemma as they were leaving, hoping that she saw him.

When everyone was gathered in the little entryway by the door, Godric stopped them.

“Okay, we’re going outside to the park we were in yesterday, but this time we’re entering from the
north, instead of from the south. Do you remember walking by this building when we were walking around the park?

Harry thought carefully and remembered that his staff had described a large stone building on the north side of the park. “Is it the big stone building that we passed?” Harry asked.

“Yes, that’s right. Do you happen to remember the color of the stone?” Godric asked.

“Um, no,” Harry hadn’t thought to cast the *Indica color* charm on the building.

“Oh, is it the yellow sandstone one?” Aminah asked.

“Yes, that’s the one,” Godric said.

“Why does the color matter?” asked Martha.

“Well, you’d be surprised at how many sighted people will give directions by describing colors. So if you happen to know the colors of familiar landmarks, it can be helpful,” Godric explained. “Oh,” was Martha’s response.

“Of course, some of us can see color, right?” Godric went on.

“Yeah, I can see some color, if it is big enough or close enough,” Fitz said.

Harry was surprised by this. He hadn’t really thought about how Aminah, Fitz, or Godric might see some things. He chided himself.

*I can see bright light and I never thought about blind people being able to see light until I couldn’t see. I had always assumed that blind meant absolute dark.*

*It’s not really dark, either, it is just nothing. But it’s weird because when I hear things, I start to visualize them as shapes. Like when someone is walking toward me, it’s almost as if I can hear all of them, not just their footsteps. I’m not just thinking about their feet, but about their whole body and what shape it is by the sound of their feet, even if I’ve never seen them before.*

Harry realized that he was being left behind when he felt the hot summer air on his face and heard his classmates walking through the door. He closed his eyes against the bright light that must have come through the open door, and followed the sound of the group through the door and outside.

Godric had them practice finding landmarks and walking across different kinds of terrain by sending them all in different directions and then return to the picnic benches they at worked from the first time they’d met. It wasn’t nearly as hard as it had been walking on the mountain path in Mont Blanc or on the beach at Fernando Po and Harry found that it was really nice just to be outside and walking. His landmark was the post box.

*What’s a post box doing inside a park?*

He soon realized that his staff was leading him outside of the park to the street.

*That makes more sense.*

His staff told him that he had reached the post box, but when he stuck his hand out to confirm that he’d found it, all he could feel was the scratchy branches of a hedgerow. When he asked his staff to describe the area, it mentioned the post box, but he couldn’t find it. All he could find was hedgerow. He tried low and high and all around and he was beginning to feel really silly for spending so much
time feeling the hedgerow. He tried poking around on the ground in front of him with his staff, but couldn’t find the base. The hedgerow was even more dense down there. He tried walking around the corner and navigating back to it, but kept ending up in the same spot. His hands were getting scratched up by the pruned branches.

It was kind of eerie to be in a town with no inhabitants, but he was thankful that there weren’t any witnesses to his predicament.

He finally resorted to sticking the top of the staff into the bushes and finally made contact with something metal. It was down lower than he imagined a post box would be and nearly completely overgrown by the hedgerow. Godric had given him a letter to put in the post box, so Harry found the hole and stuck the letter in after feeling the stamp to make sure it was stuck on securely. He then asked his staff to give him directions back to the picnic area in the park.

His staff was taking him along the road outside of the park instead of through it and the path was narrow where the hedgerow pushing out toward the road… a couple times he had to walk in the road to avoid hitting his head on the branches of the hedgerow.

*I’m not even that tall.*

He was glad there wasn’t any traffic, remembering his nerve-wracking walk from Privet Drive to the train station on Monday morning. *Three days ago. It seems like an eternity.*

Finally, his staff directed him to turn left onto a walkway to the park and he found that he recognized the path from when they had been walking the day before.

He heard someone walking a little way ahead of him and use the *Reveleo Memento* charm on his staff to see if it was someone he knew, “Fitz Warren is walking 5 yards ahead of you.”

“Hi, Fitz,” Harry called out. He heard Fitz stop.

“Oh, hi, Harry. How did your landmark hunt go?” Fitz asked as they started walking toward the picnic area together.

“I found the post box eventually, but it was totally overgrown by a hedgerow, so it took a while, and posted the letter,” Harry said. “How about you?” It took some concentration to stay on the path, listen to the directions from his staff, and talk to Fitz.

“Yeah, I found the red telephone box,” Fitz said “but how muggles use that contraption to communicate is beyond me. I was supposed to circle it or something. Nothing happened. I couldn’t get around the whole thing, so maybe that’s why. It was against a building.”

Harry stifled a laugh, “You mean ring someone?”

“Yes, that was it. Do you know how to do it?” Fitz asked.

“Did you go inside it?” Harry asked.

“Um, no. Is it an entrance?” Fitz asked.

“No, er, well, I guess so, but just for privacy - it is small space that holds a telephone - it looks like a small box with buttons on it and a handle that you hold against your ear to listen and your mouth to talk. Then you press the numbers of the person you want to ring,” Harry explained.

“What? How on earth was I supposed to know that?” Fitz said.
“No idea,” Harry commiserated. He wondered if he’d be able to call Hermione from the phone box and wondered how many coins he’d need to make a call. Would it be connected? What about the letter he posted? It felt like it had a real muggle stamp on it.

“So, are you Muggle-born, then?” Fitz asked.

“No, raised by muggles,” Harry said.

“Oh, that’s odd. Don’t hear of that too often,” Fitz said.

“Nope,” Harry agreed. Up ahead he could hear voices and guessed that they were getting close to the picnic area. “I think we’re almost there.”

“So, did they know you were a wizard when they took you in?” Fitz asked.

“Uh, I dunno,” Harry said. “Have you flown on a broom since you went blind?”


“I was just thinking that a broom could be fitted up with charms like our staffs and maybe we could put that bell charm on the snitch and quaffle and bludgers,” Harry said.

“Bludgers and blind people on brooms. That sounds like a bloody brilliant idea,” Fitz said.

“I guess we wouldn’t have to use the bludgers at first until we got good at it,” Harry reasoned.

“Hey, Harry and Fitz, come join us over here. You’re the last two. Of course, you had the farthest to travel,” Godric greeted. “So, I’d like everyone to tell us about their experiences and what charms they used to find their way.”

Harry tried to listen to his peers, but he found he was still thinking about flying on his broom.
At the end of class, Harry approached Godric, “Um, Godric, so, I was wondering. Is there somewhere where I can practice flying on my broom?”

“Oh, sure. But before you do that, we need to modify your broom. Do you have some time now? We could go over to the Gonnelli workshop.”

“Sure, that would be great!” Harry could hardly contain his excitement.

“Do you want to change out of your training clothes?” Godric asked.

“No, if it’s okay, I’d rather wear them,” Harry admitted.

“Sure, that’s no problem. Just stick them in the laundry when you’re done and they’ll be laundered and waiting for you at your next defense class,” Godric explained.

“That’s awesome,” Harry said.

The Gonnelli workshop was just around the corner from O&M room, on the way to the dining hall. Harry inhaled the aromas of wood, oil, and metal as they walked in and was intrigued.

“Hullo?” Godric called out.

“Greetings, Godric. What can I do for you?” The voice was growly, reminding Harry of the goblins at Gringotts.

“Greetings, Figora. Harry Potter here would like to make some modifications to his broom. Oh, and your staff as well, right Harry” Godric had turned to him.

“Harry Potter? Is that right? Well, come on over here and show me what you’ve got.”

Harry followed Godric and squeezed his staff to get a description of the room. It was another circular room, like the owlery and the dormitory. Harry wondered if the center, when viewed from a distance, had a bunch of towers like Hogwarts.

“I’ll just get my broom out, then,” said Harry nervously as he pressed the three dots that opened the storage, and accio’d his broom out of it.

“Whoa, careful there. You about knocked over my goblet of cherry ice,” Figora said.

“Sorry,” Harry muttered.

“So, Harry Potter, who I understand is a fine Quidditch player, wants to fly on his broom again and needs it to be fitted up with some navigational charms so that he can do that. What do you suggest, Figora?” Godric asked.

Harry suddenly felt hot.

“Oh, well, that’s actually pretty simple. You just add a spot for your staff on your broom and then charm them to work together. They can be fitted together to work together seamlessly. Now, do you have your wand stored in your staff?” Figora asked Harry.
Harry was surprised that this goblin (he was pretty sure he was a goblin) was so pleasant.

“Um, yes, I do,” Harry said.

“Putting all your ashwinder eggs in one basket, then?” Figora stated.

“Er,”

“Well, Harry what if you’ve placed your wand in your staff and your staff in your broom and then your broom goes and floats off? What are you going to do then? Eh?” Figora probed.

“So I should take my wand out then,” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Godric confirmed.

He wasn’t sure what to do with his broom and stood awkwardly for a second, trying to hold both his staff and his broom and open the extendable storage again. Figora took his broom and set it down on a table, by the sound of it.

“Thanks,” Harry muttered and opened up the extendable storage again to summon out his wand. He realized that he hadn’t held it since he put it in there and it felt almost foreign in his hand.

He shoved it in his front trouser pocket.

“You’re going to blow off something that you’ll miss, doing that, young human,” Figora said.

“Don’t you have a holster?” Godric asked.

“Um, no. You mean like for a gun?” Harry asked.

“No, for your wand,” Godric said.

“Oh. Wouldn’t it fall out?” Harry asked.

“Not as often as wands fall out of pockets or blasts off your bits,” Godric explained. “Holsters are usually fitted it the underside of your wrist, so that you can flick them out easily. You can get one that holds both your wand and your staff.”

“Oh. I guess I kind of thought that my staff was going to take the place of my wand now,” Harry said.

“Oh, well, it can for a lot of things, but there are things that you’ll want to do with your wand,” Godric explained.

“Like get your broom back when it takes off with your staff,” said Figora.

“Right,” said Harry.

“Harry, I’m going to head out. I think you’re in good hands with Figora. Listen to her advice and don’t forget to eat lunch!” Godric said.

“Ha. Okay, thanks,” Harry said. Her advice? I thought she was a he. Dang.

“Here, let’s get your broom sorted out and then we can talk about holsters afterward,” Figora said. “So, I’m going to create a place in your broom for your staff. When you want to ride it, you place your staff inside and then use the same navigational spells. The broom’s magic and the staff’s magic
are really similar and channeled similarly to wands. Let me take a look at your wand.”

Harry pulled it out of his pocket and held it out. Figora’s long fingernails rasped over Harry’s fingers as she took the wand and Harry shivered involuntarily.

“And let me take a look at your staff,” Figora said.

Harry took a step forward and found the edge of the table and handed over his staff.

“Hmm. How is it that all three of your magical objects are composed of the same wood?” Figora asked.

“Holly? Really?” Harry said.

“It’s not just Holly - this is *Ilex aquafolium* and it’s an unusual wood for wands, brooms, and staves,” Figora breathed. “Did you select these woods on purpose when you bought them?”

“Well, my wand chose me, didn’t it. The broom was a gift and they gave me the staff at St. Mungo’s. I just thought everyone one, well, everyone who needed one was given the same kind of staff,” Harry stumbled. He resisted the urge to reach out for his three most precious objects.

“Hmm, curious,” was Figora’s response. Harry could hear her running her hands over the broom, the wand, and the staff.

“What's curious?” Harry said, feeling as though he were back in Ollivander's shop.

“Ah. Well. Not much you can do about it, is there?” Figora said.

“Do about what?” Harry said.

“Your fate.”

“Huh?”

“You are the boy who lived,” she said obliquely.

“It wasn’t anything that I did,” Harry muttered.

“Exactly,” Figora said.

“Well, how about my broom?” Harry said.

“Right,” and she started muttering spells in Gobbledegook. The hair on Harry’s arms and the back of his neck stood straight on end.

He heard wood cracking, “what’s happening?” He followed the edge of the table until he was standing near Figora.

Figora grabbed his hand and pulled it toward the broom, placing his fingertips over an opening that had formed on the handle of the broom, near the tip. Harry felt it expecting it to be rough, but it was smooth as if it had always been there.

“This is where you’ll place your staff. When it is closed, it’ll have three raised knots, just as your staff does. Depress it with your thumb to open it and place your staff or take it out. Make sure to remove your wand from your staff before you put it in. All three together - well, that would be foolish indeed, wouldn’t it?”
“Sure?” Harry asked.

“Be certain. Just don’t do it. Okay, well, what about your staff?”

“Oh, I was hoping to put a metal tip on it,” Harry said.

“What kind of metal?” Figora asked.

“Something that sounds good, you know, when it hits things,” Harry explained.

“It would have to be durable,” Figora said.

“Like steel?” Harry asked.

“Like Goblin forged silver,” Figora said.

“That sounds expensive,” Harry said.

“Sure, but this is part of the services provided by the center, so you need not worry about it,” Figora explained.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Would you like to make it yourself?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Is it something that I can do?” Harry said.

“That will be entirely up to you,” Figora replied.

“I guess I could try.”

“Trying is a step in the right direction. I will walk you through the process - but not at this moment. I will take the measurements and get the materials. You can come back this evening after dinner and we can get started making it,” Figora said and Harry listened as she took the measurements and scratched notes on a piece of parchment with a quill.

“Okay, here is your broom and staff.” Harry could hear Figora pushing them toward him on the table and reached forward until he found them.

“Make sure you get a lesson on how to fly from Godric before you try it out - it will be very different. You will need to adjust,” Figora said.

“Okay, thank you,” Harry said.

“Now, here’s a holster that might fit you. Do you want to try it on?” Figora asked. Harry heard small metal pieces clinking against each other.

“Sure,” Harry held out his hand and Figora placed some leather straps with buckles on them in it. He felt along the straps and determined that there were two wristwatch-like straps with buckles and holes for the buckle prong and a long piece of leather connecting them with small loops that would hold a long cylinder.

“How is this going to work, though?” Harry said as he placed his wand along his right forearm. At 11 inches, it was longer than his forearm.
“Just a little magic, not unlike that in your staff, will size it down so that it fits comfortably along your forearm,” Figora said. “Unbuckle the straps, lay your dominant arm on it and say, ‘fibulam’ to fasten it to your arm.”

“Do I need to point my wand at it?” Harry asked.

“Touch your wand to the straps otherwise your aim could be off and you could fasten something else,” Figora explained.

Harry poked around awkwardly with his left hand holding his wand until he felt the leather strap under the wand tip. He said the incantation and felt the straps twitching under his arm. Figora repeated the pronunciation and Harry tried again and the straps buckled around his wrist and his forearm just below his elbow.

“Now, place your wand into the loops,” Figora instructed.

Harry slipped the wand into the loops and felt his wand shrink down until it was snug against his right arm and secure. “Oh, that’s cool.”

“When you want to use it, you’ll think about using it and move your wrist like this,” Figora was moving Harry’s hand through the motion. “Are you thinking about the wand in your hand?” Figora asked.

“No, I was trying to remember the motion,” Harry confessed.

“Try again while moving it,” Figora encouraged. “That’s right,” she said as the wand jumped into his awaiting hand. Harry felt to it to make sure it was back to its normal size.

“Now you’re set.”

“Thank you,” Harry said as he picked up his broom. “See you after dinner.” He was so tempted to try out flying immediately that he was trembling with the effort to not hop on his broom. He hastily put it in his staff to reduce the temptation.

“Well, I’ll see you,” Figora replied with a growl that Harry took as a chuckle.

“Right.” Harry shook out his staff and navigated out of the workshop and to the dining hall. He was excited to share this new development with his friends. My friends, he smiled.

oO0OooO0OooO0O00O0o

At the entrance to the dining hall, inhaling the pleasant aroma of fried cheese sandwiches and tomato soup, Harry said Reveleo memento and found his friends seated at their normal table. He went over to Gemma and found that there was a seat waiting for him and that Mei was on the other side. He could tell by the sounds of silverware on plates that they had already gone through the buffet.

“Hi, Gemma, Hi Mei,” he greeted.

“Gemma was wondering where you were,” Mei said.

“I was getting my broom modified so that my staff could be put inside to help me navigate while flying,” Harry said.

“That sounds like a disaster waiting to happen,” Mei said.

Gemma tapped his arm on the holster and drew a question mark on the back of his hand.
“This is my new holster to hold my wand,” Harry explained. “I guess putting my wand inside of my staff and then putting my staff inside my broom could cause problems, so this was a solution so that if my broom flies off without me I can get it back.”

“I wonder how many times that will happen before you hang up your broom,” Mei said.

“Hey, Godric thinks it is possible,” Harry defended.

“Sure, that’s great,” Mei said.

“Well, I’m going to get lunch,” Harry said a bit huffily and strode out for the buffet before he really checked what was in front of him. He ran into a tray and listened as plates and silverware crashed to the floor. He felt warm liquid splash against his legs.

“Merlin’s beard! Watch where you’re going!” Gordon shouted.

“Oops, sorry,” Harry said. “Didn’t see you.”

Harry flicked out his wand and pointed it at the floor and said, “reparo” and then “scourgify.”

Mei started laughing, “Potter, how did you do that?”

“Do what?” Harry asked.

“Turn the plates rainbow colors,” Mei said.

“Oh, I don’t know. I guess I have to work on my reparo charm,” Harry said. “Are they fixed?”

“Well, I guess you could call them that,” Gordon grumbled. “Not that it does me much good.” It sounded he had turned around and was headed back to the buffet.

Harry knelt down and felt around on the ground until he had gathered up the plates and silverware and put them on the tray. He ran his hands over the plates (a plate and a bowl, he discovered) and they did feel whole again as well as clean. He sent it back to the kitchen. Gemma had jumped up and was helping him. She was also making a weird breathy sound - and he finally figured out that she was laughing.

“Is it that funny?” he asked.

“Yes,” she tapped on his arm.

He stood up and pointed his wand at his legs and cast the scourgify charm, hoping that he didn’t change the color of the joggers.

“Did that work?” he asked Gemma.

She tapped “yes,” on his arm - she was still heaving from her laughter.

“Thanks. I guess I should go get my lunch. Is Gordon through the line yet? I’d rather not run into him again,” Harry said.

She held his arm for a minute and then gently pushed him toward the buffet. He was more mindful as he set out this time - listening to his staff.

They should put the bell charm on the trays.
Harry dipped his sandwich in his soup and leaned over the bowl in an attempt to minimize stains down the fresh white T-shirt. Even so, Gemma pressed on some spots after he ate that he pointed his wand at and muttered “scourgify” to clean.

“I didn’t change the color of the shirt, did I,” he asked her quietly.

She tapped his hand, “no,” and he could tell she was laughing again.

“Must just happen with reparo,” he muttered.

Tony was talking to Arig about flying on Harry’s broom that morning.

He leaned toward Mei and asked, “How did your lessons go this morning?”

“Oh, they were okay, I guess,” she said.

“Are you learning how to control your Jia - ja… how do you say it? Magic?” he asked.

“Jiāorén,” she supplied. “Yeah, it was better today. I’m better able to control it when I’m in swater, of course.”

“Oh, that makes sense, I guess,” Harry said. “What if you carry water with you?”

“What do you mean? Like in a cup?”

“Sure, I dunno,” Harry shrugged.

“Why do you care?” she asked.

“Well, I don’t like getting hexed with your magic,” he felt defensive. “And we were thinking of trying to play Quidditch and I thought you might want to play.”

“Oh,” her voice was small. “I still have trouble sitting on a broom.”

“Have you visited the Gonnelli workshop yet? Figora modified my broom to hold my staff. Maybe she can help you, too. I’m going back tonight after dinner to work on my staff - to add a metal tip to it,” Harry said.

“I dunno. I’ll think about it,” Mei said.

“Okay,” Harry said and he turned back to Gemma, “Do you have a broom at home?”

She took his hand, “T-E-R-R-Y’S space O-L-D space B-R-O-O-M.”

“Maybe your mum will bring it when she visits this weekend?” he asked.

“M-A-Y-B-E space I space A-S-K” she wrote on his palm.

“Will you?” he asked.

“Yes,” she tapped.

He turned a small smile toward her. “Do you want to go to the courtyard until it is time for class?” He stood up. “Oh! I have to go early to class - Madam Flamel asked me to. I almost forgot.”
“Harry, don’t you want to try out your broom?” Tony asked from across the table.

“I have to wait until I have a lesson with Godric,” Harry said.

“Come on, what if you did it in that padded room?” Tony cajoled.

“I, er… Godric said I should wait,” Harry said, though it was a struggle to say it. His feet were itching to take him to the O&M room.

“Yeah, I suppose,” Tony let it go.

Gemma tugged on his arm and guided his hand to her elbow.

“You want to go?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she tapped impatiently.

“I need to read that book that Madam Flamel gave me before class,” Harry explained. She tapped three times, “I understand.”

It was warm in the courtyard, but Harry was glad to be outside. They sat in the grass beneath the tree reading with their backs against the bench and their arms touching - so that Harry could tell when Gemma was turning pages in her book. She was also practicing signs as she read. When he asked her what she was reading, she had guided his anagnóstis to the cover, “Dictionary of British Sign Language.”

Harry was easily distracted. The book Madam Flamel had given him about the life of Louis Braille was written in a flowery style that made it difficult to understand… and it continued to be bleak and gory as it was set during the Reign of Terror followed by years of instability during Napoleon’s quest for power. The chapter that described how Louis Braille stabbed himself in the eye with a leather working tool in his dad’s saddle-making workshop when he was just three was almost too much for Harry.

“Do you want to teach me some signs that we could use?” Harry asked, setting his book down. She drew a question mark in his hand.

“I don’t know. Some signs you use a lot that would make things faster for us,” Harry said. She ran her index finger over his palm several times.

“What does that mean? Is it ‘write?’ Do you want me to get the notebook out?” he asked.

“Yes,” she tapped on his hand.

“Okay.” He put away his book and took the notebook and pencil out of his staff.

She took it and wrote, “This is the sign for ‘walk,’” and then she ran the tips of her index and second finger across his palm.

“So, like if you wanted to go somewhere, you’d make that sign - kind of like ‘let’s go,’” he asked.

She tapped “yes.”
She tapped her index finger on his chin twice and he furrowed his brows. She wrote, “that means ‘who?’

“So we could use that if I’m talking about someone and you don’t know who I’m talking about.”

“Yeah,” she tapped.

She held his hand and tapped the edge of his hand with the edge of hers. He was confused. Then she took both his hands, so he set down the *anagnóstis* and she held them out in front of him face down and then motioned with her palms face up underneath them, back and forth, mirroring the motion of her hands.

“Is that ‘where?’” he asked.

“Yes!” she tapped enthusiastically.

“How am I going to know to hold my hands like that so that you can do the where underneath them?” he asked.

She put his hand on her shoulder and shrugged and they burst out into laughter, Gemma’s shoulders heaving up and down as she dissolved into giggles. Harry could hear her breath - her soundless laughter. Tears squeezed out of his eyes.

Finally, they got their giggled under control and she tapped his wrist. Without thinking, he *tempus’d* his staff and told her, “it’s 1:25,” and he grabbed her hand and skimmed two of his fingers across her palm, “Let’s go!”

She squeezed his hand, delighted.
Gemma waved goodbye across Harry’s back and he turned and waved to her, hoping she saw him. Then he headed across the library to the room that Besel had shown him earlier. He hoped that Madam Flamel wasn’t going to quiz him too much on the book she’d lent him and he wondered if he was supposed to read the whole thing.

He paused at the entry to the classroom, listening to get an idea for who was in the space before he entered.

“Hello?” said Aminah.

“Hi, Aminah,” Harry said.

“You’re really good at recognizing people’s voices, you know that Harry?” Aminah said.

“Oh? I don’t know. I mean, I guessed you were in this class. And how do you know I didn’t just do the _Reveleo Memento_ spell?” Harry said.

“Did you?” Aminah asked.

“No, I just guessed and your voice is kind of distinctive… it reminds me of caramel,” Harry said.

“Oh, well, that’s nice, I guess,” Aminah said laughing.

Harry moved into the space and found an empty chair next to Aminah.

“Is it okay if I sit here?” he asked.

“Sure, I don’t think we have assigned seats,” Aminah answered.

He pulled out the chair and sat down and did the _Reveleo memento_ just out of curiosity. It was just the two of them in the room.

“I’m supposed to meet Madam Flamel here early so that she can catch me up on what I missed yesterday,” Harry explained.

“Oh, I just got here, but she wasn’t here when I arrived. I came early so that I could practice. I think it is going to take me a really long time to learn how to read braille,” Aminah said.

“Yeah, me, too,” Harry sighed.

He got out the Louis Braille book and continued to read it, pausing occasionally to listen for Madam Flamel.

Finally he heard people approaching, but as they got closer he decided that it wasn’t Madam Flamel. He heard Martha talking as she walked through the library and guessed that she was with Fitz. They came through the door a moment later.

“Hi Aminah and Harry,” Martha greeted. “Fitz, where do you want to sit?”

“Oh, where we sat last time is fine,” Fitz said.

“Harry, you missed this lesson yesterday,” Martha stated.
“Uh, yep,” said Harry.

Harry heard Madam Flamel’s distinctive gait approaching the door.

“Oh, well, this is excellent. I love the punctuality of the British wixen,” she exclaimed. “Le métier de Morgan! Harry, I’m so sorry! I forgot that I had asked you to arrive early!”

“It’s okay. I just used the time to read the book you lent me,” Harry said, holding it up.

“Well, that’s very good of you. Again, I apologize,” she said. “Martha, go ahead and put on your blindfold so that you can experience this fully.”

After a moment, she started *Wingardium leviosa*’ing items off shelves behind them and they floated over their heads to the table, all with different tiny bells sounds so that it sounded as if a forest of fairies had been suddenly awoken from sleep, rose into the air, and then descended upon them. Finally, it was quiet and everyone seemed to be holding their breath.

Harry held his hands tightly in his lap. He was so tempted to reach out and see what had descended in front of them.

“Don’t be shy, go ahead. Take a look,” Madam Flamel encouraged.

He heard his classmates reaching out so he did, too.

He jumped in surprise as his hands came in contact with something spiny. It didn’t hurt him, but it was a lot more prickly than he imagined. He had no idea what it was. He had pulled back his hand and reached out again more tentatively.

“Go ahead and explore what you find in front of you, but don’t reveal what you find. When you think you’ve identified it, pass it to the person on your left,” Madam Flamel instructed.

Harry heard Aminah passing something across the table to him that rattled.

He couldn’t figure out what he was holding… it was like a bristle brush but with thick spines and it had no handle. Spiny sticks stuck out in all directions. It smelled briny. He turned it over in his hands. Finally, he decided it must be a dried sea creature like a sea anemone.

He pushed it across the table to Fitz, then reached carefully to find what Aminah had pushed to him. It wasn’t prickly, but covered in small balls connected together.

*Beads*.

He put his hand around it to pull it toward himself and the beads shifted and clinked. The threads connecting the beads reminded him of the cord that had held the beaded necklaces for Mami Wata, though it was a little finer and smoother. The beads were covering a hollow rounded object that was shaped like a lopsided vase, round at the bottom where it was covered with the beads and then tapering to a neck that was smooth. He guessed that this was something from nature, the surface had slight imperfections.

*A gourd*?

When he picked it up by the neck, he couldn’t resist the urge to shake it and the beads against the gourd made a pleasant sound, like sand shifting. It smelled like dried pasta he decided.

*Is that even a smell?*
He wanted to keep exploring this one, the beads weren’t all uniform and he found that there were knots on the cord that were keeping beads in place, but Aminah had pushed something else in his direction. He reluctantly pushed the gourd across the table to Fitz.

The thing that Aminah had pushed to him this time was flat and it was held in a wooden frame. It was heavy as he reached for it to bring it closer. He expected glass on the surface, but was surprised when his hands grazed over something rough like a stone.

He pulled it closer and found that the flat surface of this framed object had a textured pattern on it that radiated out from the center like petals. He was so entranced as he carefully traced the ridged patterns that his nose nearly touched the surface. It smelled dusty and he rubbed his fingers together and they were covered with a gritty dust. He explored it to all the edges and formed an image of a flower that was opening gradually with intricate leaves and petals that reached out to the edges. He was also reluctant to give this one up, but Aminah had pushed another object toward him, so he moved the framed painting across to Fitz.

The next item was composed of halves. The bottom half was like a little metal tart tin. The top half was soft and firm - patched together fabric filled with something like wool, but weighted at the bottom. A needle, no a pin, was stuck in the center. Harry pulled on it and it slipped out and then stuck it back in and discovered that under the wool there must be sand - he could feel the pin grind against the grains. That explained the weightiness of the tiny object. It smelled musty and old - like something you’d find in Mrs. Figg’s house. The fabric was covered with evenly placed stitches at angles to each other that were so tightly sewn that they were like seeds baked into bread.

“I imagine you are all wondering why I’ve asked you to look at these objects when you thought you’d be learning braille,” Madam Flamel said.

There were murmurs of agreement.

“In order to learn braille, you need to first learn how to feel with your fingertips and so we will spend a portion of every lesson sensitizing our sense of touch,” Madam Flamel explained. “Just as the human brain had to adapt to the concept of reading visual symbols with the eye and converting those symbols into language, so it does with reading by touch. You are, of course, descendants of people who have evolved to read. You can no longer read using your eyes - well, except you Martha dear - but you will learn how to read by touch. If you were like Martha’s child, learning from infancy how to read by touch, it would be as easy as it was when you learned how to read the first time. This time around it might be a little more challenging and yet you are up to the challenge.

We discussed yesterday why the center believes that learning braille is useful for wixen - did any of you who were here yesterday have any thoughts about our discussion that you would like to share now that you’ve had some time to ponder it?” Madam Flamel invited.

“Um, may I ask a question?” Harry interrupted.

“Certainly, what is it?” Madam Flamel answered.

“The first thing that I held - was it a sea anemone?” Harry asked.

“Close! It was a sea urchin,” Madam Flamel corrected. “Okay, any thoughts?”

“Yes, Madam Flamel,” Aminah said quietly. “I was thinking that if I’m not able to learn how to magic now that I’m blind, I may have to live as a muggle and would have to rely on braille for a job or just to get around.”
Fitz and Martha both erupted as this, assuring Aminah that she’d be able to learn magic.

Madam Flamel gently shushed them.

“Aminah, being flexible is a virtue and it will serve you well. Many years this Center has been in operation and truly there are very few wixen with injuries such as yours who have not been able to perform magic when they leave or very soon shortly after. Always there are fears of being cut off from our wixen life… after such a loss, it is natural. What we’ve found, though, was that it was fear that stoppered the flow of magic and once the fear was faced, the magic flowed again.”

“Well, if we’re not using braille to live as muggles, why do we need to learn it?” Fitz asked.

“Maybe some of your peers have thoughts?” Madam Flamel asked.

“Well, I have to go between the muggle and wixen world, so I’ll need it for when I can’t use my magical tools in front of muggles,” Harry offered.

“And it might be nice just to be able to read for one’s self without having to use a tool or magic to read a book or write a message to a friend,” Aminah offered.

“Yes, these are reasons that other wixen from this program have stated for why they were thankful that they had an opportunity to learn braille. ‘Braille brings the world to their fingertips’ they have often told us. Well, perhaps you will discover other reasons as we do this work. Let’s get started on learning braille, shall we?” Madam Flamel whisked the items away again in a shower of tinkling bells and brought out other things from the shelves so that for a moment they were again surrounded on all sides by the cacophony of a thousand little bells.

“I have found that the best way to learn to read braille is to learn how to write braille. Some people disagree with me - especially when it comes to learning with the slate and stylus - because some people find it more challenging. But in my experience (and it is considerable) is like learning how to make yarn on a handspindle, rather than a spinning wheel. With the simpler tools, you get right to the mechanics of the process. Yes, they are a little harder to manipulate, but it’s all new to you so it is going to be challenging no matter what. Might as well just jump in and learn. So, please explore what I’ve set in front of you.”

Harry reached out and found a piece of metal that had a bumpy back and front with many holes. He set it down and found a small Y-shaped tool (is it made from bone?) with a blunt metal pin fitted into the base. A little more exploring yielded a heavy piece of paper. He went back to the sheet of metal and discovered that one side had hinges, and then figured out how to open it. He figured that the paper went inside the hinged device and slid it in, tried to line it up at the top of the paper, and then closed it. It made a satisfying noise as it closed as if it had punctured the paper. The paper was stuck now and didn’t slide around. Then he started poking around with the Y-tool and making holes. He stopped, though, as he realized he seemed to be the only one making puncturing noises.

“Please continue, Harry. It’s okay,” Madam Flamel encouraged. “Don’t be shy, try it out.”

He forged ahead and finding the holes in the upper left-hand corner started puncturing the paper. He found that there were grooves on each of the holes that guided the tool in a rhythmic way around the whole. He turned it over and felt the back again - it wasn’t just bumpy, there were raised dots on the back in groups of six, lined up in rows. He turned it over again and found that he could make six punctures in each hole. He went to the next one and filled it up, too. And the next, and then he experimented with just puncturing some of the spaces with holes and leaving some of them open. He opened the metal thing and pulled out the paper and ran his fingers over, then quickly turned it over
because of course, the dots were on the other side. He found the dots where he’d filled in all six holes right away - they stood out, but the others were harder to discern. He kept running his fingers over them, trying to remember the patterns he had punched.

He was putting the paper back in when Madam Flamel said, “Okay, now that you’ve had a chance to explore making the braille dots, I want to tell you a little about them.”

Harry laid down the Y-shaped tool and turned his face toward Madam Flamel. He heard Aminah and Fitz do the same and a little bit later, Martha.

“The braille system is really very brilliant. Six cells to make six dots that can be read with the tip of a single finger at one touch. The first systems devised for the blind to read were cumbersome and large and impractical to reproduce - so reading was an onerous task and only available to the wealthy.

As I told you yesterday, Louis Braille started figuring out this system when he was only twelve-years-old and he had completed a full usable alphabet by the age of fifteen. It is not the first time that the course of humanity was changed by an adolescent, nor will it be the last,” Madam Flamel expounded fervently.

Harry fully expected trumpets to start sounding and an angel or two to drop down from the ceiling with that statement. He smiled to himself and then felt his throat tighten.

I know I’ll ever achieve anything like that by the time I’m fifteen. At the rate I’m going, I’ll be lucky to still be alive.

“Okay, enough about changing the world. Let’s get to work. Feel your slate. Count how many windows each row has. You can feel it with your fingers and also with the stylus. What do you notice about the windows?” Madam Flamel asked.

Harry counted six rows with nineteen windows. There were three raised dots on the smooth metal between rows one and two and a ridge that ran down the center between rows two and three. That pattern was repeated in the following rows. Harry supposed it was to help him know where he was on the slate as he progressed.

“They aren’t smooth - there are indentations,” Martha observed.

“Yes, that’s right. How many notches on the sides of the windows?” Madam Flamel asked.

“There are six, three on each side,” said Fitz.

“Correct,” Madam Flamel commented, “There are six dots - two columns of three. Okay, this bit can be a little hard to wrap your head around. With the hinge on the left side and the windows facing us, we are essentially working on the back of the stylus. When we make the dots, we press from the back and they appear on the front of the paper. So, from this side we read the cells starting on the right side and going down the cell from top to bottom, we have dots 1, 2, and 3. On the left-hand side, from the top to the bottom, you have dots number 4, 5, and 6. The letter “a” as well as the number 1 are made using dot number 1. When you read the “a”, you will turn your paper over, and the “a” will appear on the top left-hand side of the paper in dot number 1, now on the left-hand side of the cell in the top corner.”

Harry was following Madam Flamel’s instructions, and he made a few “a’s” starting in the upper right-hand corner of the slate. He took his paper out and felt the dots. It made a dotted line. He couldn’t tell where they were in the cell once he’d taken the paper out of the slate.

“What? Do you mean we have to learn how to write backward?” Martha exclaimed.
“No, it’s not backward, you just have to work from the back of the paper so that you can feel the texture of the dot on the other side of the paper,” Madam Flamel insisted.

“Oh, like knitting,” Aminah said. “When you make a purl stitch on the front of your work, it looks like a knit stitch on the back.”

“Exactly. That’s an excellent analogy, Aminah. It is the same stitch, it is simply a matter of perspective.”

“So it is backward?” Martha said.

“Well, no. It is not backward. We who teach braille find that calling it backward gives a negative meaning to the process and that can inhibit how students approach the work. We are writing in the manner necessary so that it can be read from left to right,” Madam Flamel insisted.

“There is nothing wrong-footed or backward about this process, it is simply the way it is written so that it can be understood. Go ahead and make a number of ‘a’s’ in the first row of your slate. Make sure to apply an even pressure with your stylus,” Madam Flamel instructed.

Harry moved the slate into position again and started making another series of ‘a’s’.

“So, what if you make a series of dots in the wrong dot, say in dot 1 instead of 2,” Fitz said, “theoretically?”

“Well, do you mean dot number 4? That would just be a mistake. And it’s okay. You’re going to make them and it will be okay,” Madam Flamel encouraged.

“Once you’ve made several ‘a’s take out the paper and feel it, get comfortable with the feeling of the raised dots under your fingertips,” she said.

“The next letter of the alphabet is ‘b’ and in braille, we read “b” and the number 2 in dots 1 and 2. Go ahead and make a series of ‘b’s’.”

“How do you know if you’re reading a “b” or a number 2, then?” asked Harry.

“That’s a great question. There is a number symbol that will precede all the numerals,” Madam Flamel answered.

“Oh, is that the funny little backward L?” Harry asked. “I noticed that on my schedule.”

“Yeah, but don’t call it backward,” Fitz said under his breath.

Harry snorted.

They continued working this way through half of the alphabet until they had filled sheets of paper with repeated dots of each of the letters. Harry’s hand was getting sore from holding the stylus and his fingertips felt raw from rubbing over the dots and trying to discern one from the other. He had to really concentrate to make sure he was in the right window on the correct row. It was easy to skip a window or move down to the next row - so he found he needed to use his left hand to guide his right hand with the stylus to the next window.

“Okay, we’re about out of time. You can take the slate and stylus with you as well as extra paper. Here is a card that has the full braille alphabet - you can probably figure out the rest of the alphabet based on what you’ve learned so far, but if not, you can use a reader to listen to it and then learn how to recognize the letters with your fingers. One last thing, what you’re learning right now is called
grade 1 braille where all the words will be spelled out. Later we’ll cover grade 2 braille where you will learn nearly 200 contractions of braille words that will make reading braille faster.”

“Madam Flamel, I would like to get a reader like Harry has - where can I get one?” Aminah asked.

“Oh, what kind of reader does Harry have?” asked Fitz.

“Harry’s reader is a one of a kind. But I’m looking into getting it duplicated. It would be good for other students to have access to something so fine,” Madam Flamel responded. “Harry, would you like to show your reader to Fitz and Martha?”

“Sure,” Harry said. He accio’d it out of his staff and held it out to Madam Flamel.

“Here, Fitz,” Madam Flamel said.

Harry heard Fitz sliding the reader across his paper.

“Oh, that is a nice reader,” Fitz said.

“What is different about it?” Harry asked.

“Well, it speaks in the voice of the writer of the words,” Fitz said. “Where did you get this?”

“Professor Dumbledore gave it to me, he said it had been Homer’s,” Harry said. He felt conflicted knowing that Aminah or Godric should have received the anagnóstis before him.

“I’ve talked to Figora in the workshop and she’s looking into it. Actually, Harry, she would like you to bring the anagnóstis by tonight so that she can take a look at it. She’s pretty sure it was goblin made,” Madam Flamel explained. “Here you go.”

“Okay,” Harry answered and put his anagnóstis back in his staff. He remembered that his next class was a meeting with Besel in Healer Jordan’s office. He wondered how that would go.
Harry and Aminah walked out of the library together after their braille class. Aminah was headed to Council along with most everyone else, but Harry had a mind healer meeting with Besel. He felt a bit singled out, but tried to push down that feeling.

He walked the short distance to the Mont Blanc classroom with Aminah and hung outside the entrance for a little bit after she went in, hoping that Gemma would come by before he needed to go to meet with Besel. He kept casting the *Reveleo memento* spell to see if she was approaching, but she must have already gone in. It was right across the hall from the Braidwood room where she was learning BSL.

After a bit, he decided to head down to Healer Jordan’s office. Maybe if he had time, he could duck into the owlery and see if Hedwig was back. He knew that she couldn’t possibly be back yet, but it was something to do.

When he reached the owlery, he walked across the threshold and held his breath against the stench for a moment to delay the impact.

“Oh, are you here again?” the painting greeted him.

“Oh, yes,” replied Harry walking up to the perch, hoping to hear Hedwig’s familiar hoot. He angled his ear up, hoping to catch a sound of her growling, but only heard other owls shifting on their perches.

He then navigant’d to the window to listen to the sounds of the city below.

“Why do you bother with looking out the window when you can’t see?” the portrait asked him.

Harry tensed his shoulders trying to deflect the judgment of the portrait.

*I don’t have to answer his stupid question.*

Down below in the heat of the day, the city was teeming. He could hear car horns, people yelling, trains, and planes speeding through the airways. The city was pulsing in contrast to the quiet sounds of the owlery behind him. There were aromas, too, that came up on the hot wind - diesel and baking bread, curry and fish, the tarmac and the damp-basement odor that had to be the Thames.

He tempus’d his staff and decided he better head over to Healer Jordan’s office. He wondered what they’d talk about today.

Harry was feeling a little weak as he was leaving the meeting with Besel. He had talked for a good hour and a half about what happened in the Chamber and the month that followed at the Dursleys and how it all made him feel. He didn’t realize that he had felt so much and going through it all again made him feel that he had been running for hours. Now he was spent. He was glad it was almost time for dinner. He was hungry.

“Oh, Harry, could you come here for a moment?” It was Healer Jordan who asked him.

“Sure,” he found his way to her desk - just outside the little room where he and Besel had been meeting.
“How was your time with Healer Geller?” Healer Jordan asked.

“It was… ” he paused, searching for a word to describe it, “fine.” It wasn’t really ‘fine’ but he couldn’t come up with anything else that wouldn’t lead to more questions.

“Good, good,” Healer Jordan responded and Harry got the feeling that other things were on her mind. “Go ahead and have a seat. I have talked to Professor Dumbledore… ”

Harry caught his breath as he sank into the seat.

She continued, “… and he’s going to send your head of house Professor McGonagall to visit the Dursleys with us this evening. He’s asked us not to involve the Ministry of Magic at this point.”

Harry was taking shallow breaths. He put his hands under his legs in an attempt to stop them trembling.

“I’m telling you this not to distress you… ” He felt the implied, even though it clearly is… in her pause, “but because I think it is important that you know what is going on as it concerns your welfare,” she concluded.

“Okay, thanks,” he mumbled. Welfare, he didn’t like that word. It was one that the Dursleys threw around with contempt and sometimes applied to him, though Healer Jordan was using it differently.

“How have you been?” she asked.

“Okay, I guess,” he muttered.

“Have you had any other experiences like the one you had before you passed out?” she asked.

“No, I’ve been okay,” he said, feeling the heat rising in his throat.

“And how about your roommates? How are things with them?” she asked.

“They are fine. Thanks for putting up the wall - it is nice not to get splashed while I sleep,” he said.

“Of course, that was an easy solution,” Healer Jordan said. “Let me know if you need anything else, okay?”

“Okay, thanks,” Harry said, moving forward in his seat with the hope that he’d be released soon.

“You can go now. I’ll let you know how things go this evening,” she said as she dismissed him.

“Oh, okay,” he said and muttered ‘Navigant door’ to his staff.

He had a little bit of time before the dining hall would open for dinner, so he went across the hall to the owlery (the portrait commented on his appearance again) and then down the stairs to the courtyard.

He wanted to be by himself for a little bit while he thought about what it would mean for Professor McGonagall to visit the Dursleys. If they hadn’t let in Healer Jordan and Mr. Burbage, would they also refuse entry to Professor McGonagall? He could imagine the struggle they’d be having… they would hate the spectacle caused by wixen piling up on their doorstep but they would also not want to let them in the house.

Who would win out in the end?
He imagined that they would have a harder time putting off Professor McGonagall. He ran his hands over the herbs by the bench under the tree, releasing the rosemary scent that reminded him of chicken dinner and Yorkshire pudding. He reached a little further and found a plant with a fuzzy leaf that had a pungent odor. He broke off a leaf and brought it to his nose. It was almost overpowering and seemed to travel deep into his lungs opening them up and relieving the tightness that was constricting them. This one also reminded him of savory food and he tried to place it. The sun had moved in the courtyard and the shadows cast by the walls were making it a bit cooler, more tolerable than it had been earlier in the day. He wondered how long this nice warm weather would last. It seemed like they’d had some really beautiful days. He listened to little birds that were jumping around in the tree above him, chittering to each other and inhaled the aroma of the leaf again.

Noticing that the jittery feelings that he had while talking to Besel and then Healer Jordan were finally settling down, he decided to head to dinner.

*After dinner, I get to go to the workshop and work on my staff and maybe find Godric to see when I can have flying lessons.*

He took the leaf with him, lifting it to his nose on occasion.

Harry was behind Tony as they went through the buffet line and Tony’s frustration with his new arms was palpable. Harry held back from offering to help and tried to wait as patiently as he could - he had to remember to stop tapping his foot nervously a couple times, though. He was glad that Mei had gone through first.

It was clearly really hard for Tony to grasp things with his new hands - he was still getting the mechanics down.

“Oh, Merlin’s bollocks! Not again!” Tony groaned as another serving spoon clattered to the ground and Harry felt clumps of food pelt him.

*Great, I’m already wearing dinner and I haven’t even started eating yet.*

“Sorry about that, Harry,” Tony muttered.

“No problem, Tony. It’s okay. You should have seen me the first time I made sausages,” Harry said.

“What, before you were blind?” Tony asked.

“No, last month. I burned my hand and the sausages,” Harry offered. “And then when I was sweeping the kitchen afterward, I ran right into the broom closet door.”

“What are you? A house elf?” Tony laughed.

“Er. No,” Harry said.

“Seriously, dude…” But Tony was interrupted by someone down the line wondering what the hold up was, and he started working on cleaning up his mess.

“Wingardium leviosa!” Tony said.

Harry stepped back. He wasn’t sure what Tony was *leviosa-ing*.

“Scourgify serving spoon,” Tony said.
“Whoa! You can do magic now?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, both of my arms have bits of my wand in them to help with my magic and help me operate my arms. But since I’m always holding my wand now I have to be really careful about accidental magic.”

“They broke up your wand and put it in your arms?” Harry felt a little sick hearing that.

“Yeah, it was that or muggle fake arms that aren’t connected magically,” Tony said, attempting again to scoop out something. He managed this time and Harry was able to move in next to him and discover that he had bits of leeks, spinach, and mushroom saute on him. It was the side to the cheese souffle. He scooped a bit onto his plate. He figured he’d do a scourgify charm after he ate dinner.

*I hope they have a class on how to eat without wearing your food.*

Tony had an easier time with the rolls, though Harry was pretty certain that Tony gave up on the tongs and just grabbed one in the end.

At the dinner table, Gemma was excited to share with Harry that she had met someone in her signing class who was deaf and blind and that he communicated with a sign language that was spelled into the hand and that she had started learning it. She started signing into his hand - some of the signs that she had learned. Harry sat with his hand held out in front of him while she made signs into his hand, but they were incomprehensible to him. He felt his chest constricting again and held the leaf to his nose and it helped calm him. He could tell that she was super excited to share this with him, but once she had switched to signing in his hand from writing on the notebook, he had stopped being able to follow what she was saying. Also, he had fallen into a dark hole as he imagined what it would be like to be cut off from people like that - not being able to see them or hear them - only touch them and smell them…

*Well and taste, but that would be weird.*

Gemma shook his hand and he realized that he hadn’t been paying attention.

“What?” he asked.

She tapped him on the chest and then wrote, “O-K-?” on his palm.

He nodded, then said, “I was just thinking about how lonely it would be to not be able to hear or see people.”

She tapped three times on his palm, “I understand,” then wrote “W-A-N-T” space “T-O” space “M-E-E-T” space “P-E-T-E-R-?”

He paused. He knew Gemma was excited, but he felt really nervous. He and Gemma struggled to communicate, how would it work with Peter? But then he thought about how isolated he must feel and swallowed his fear and nodded.

She tugged at his hand. “What? Right now?” he asked.

She tapped “yes.”

“Let me finish my dinner first, okay?” he pleaded.

She tapped “okay,” impatiently on his hand and let him return to chasing the last bits of souffle around his plate with the roll and his fork.
He took a last sip of water and wiped his mouth with his napkin, and said, “Okay, let’s go meet Peter.”

He started to get up, then paused and asked, “Gemma, how do you communicate with Peter?”


“What’s Erumpent horn powder?” Harry asked. It sounded like something Hagrid would have in his pockets.

Gemma placed his hand on her shoulder and shrugged and they burst into laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Mei asked.

Harry got his giggles under control, “Oh, I dunno. It’s hard to explain.”

“Fine,” Mei said, huffing and he heard her wheels crunching over sand as she moved away from them and he wondered where she had been that morning that she had brought in sand. He felt a little bad, not just for making Mei feel left out but also realizing that they had been laughing at something that had blinded someone who was already deaf and sobered up.

Gemma took his hand and placed it on her arm and led him toward a table farther back in the dining hall. He hadn’t really noticed people sitting at this table… they must have been pretty quiet.

Gemma had stopped and Harry let go of her arm to give her more range for signing. He wondered how she signed with Peter and listened carefully for clues. Gemma had pulled out a seat and sat down, then jumped up again and pulled one over for Harry and placed his hand on the back. He sat down. They were all very close and Harry’s knees knocked into Gemma’s and Peter’s as he sat down. “Sorry,” he muttered, then realized that Peter wouldn’t know that he’d just said that. Peter reached out and touched his knee and Harry touched his hand and waved across it, like Gemma would do to him, in greeting. Peter patted his leg, which Harry took as a greeting and then it seemed like Gemma had his hands and they were talking. So, Harry waited patiently. Peter made some sounds - he wasn’t mute like Gemma, but it was clear that he didn’t use his voice for communication.

Gemma grabbed Harry’s hand and wrote, “**R-E-M-E-M-B-E-R**” space “**S-I-G-N-S**” space “**T-O-D-A-Y-?**”

Harry nodded while he was wracking his brain for the signs that he and Gemma had worked on. He tapped his chin twice with his index finger and said, “who?” as a reminder. She tapped his hand twice, “yes.”

He laughed and signed “where,” remembering how it had sent them into fits earlier.

Peter still had his hand on Harry’s knee and when he laughed, Peter scratched his knee which seemed like a kind of laughter. He imagined he was also touching Gemma so he’d know what she was doing and he hoped that Gemma had explained the joke. It seemed like she had because Peter had scratched his knee again enthusiastically. Occasionally Peter would take his hand off of Harry’s knee and Harry guessed that he was signing with Gemma.

Gemma grabbed his hand and folded back his fingers so that only his index finger was out and made the sign for writing on Peter’s palm.
Harry wrote, “**H-I**” space “**P-E-T-E-R**”.

Peter tapped his knee with his other hand, then took Harry’s hand and wrote “**H-I**” space “**H-A-R-R-Y**”.

Harry took his hand and wrote “**G-E-M-M-A**” space “**T-E-A-C-H**” space “**M-E**” space “**S-I-G-N-S**”.

Peter tapped on his knee, then scratched it.

Harry jumped a bit, “Oh!”

Gemma wrote a question mark on his palm.

“I just remembered that I need go to the workshop to work on my staff. Do you and Peter want to go with me?”

He felt Gemma taking Peter’s hand off his knee to sign with him and then Peter tapped twice on his leg. He wondered if that was a universal sign for “yes” or if Gemma had told him that’s how they said it.

They stood up and Gemma ran two fingers across Harry’s palm. He gathered that she’d lead Peter and he’d follow with his staff.

Harry was excited to work on his staff and also to ask Figora about the *anagnóstis*. Harry wondered about how Peter’s staff worked - if it was just through vibrations or if there was some way for him to get more information. He wondered if Peter had learned how to read braille yet and why he wasn’t in the braille lessons they were taking.

They walked through the dining hall and Harry heard Tony calling out to him, then his quick footsteps as he came alongside him. Harry stopped.

“Hey, Harry, are you going to try flying tonight?” Tony asked. He could hear Arig’s crutches coming up behind them.

“No, I’m working on my staff tonight in the workshop. Godric said I’d need lessons first and we haven’t figured out when yet,” Harry explained.

“Can I borrow your broom, then, for a bit and do some flying with Arig?” Tony asked.

“Sure, you’ll be careful with it, right?” Harry asked and he *accio’d* it out of his staff. Harry ran his hands over it before handing it over to Tony.

“Sure, mate. Thanks,” Tony said.

“Where are you going to be?” Harry asked.

“In the O&M room, probably out in the park,” Tony said.

“Okay, I’ll come by there after I’m done in the workshop,” Harry said.

“Okay, thanks, Harry!” Tony said, rushing off with Arig.

Harry continued on his way to the Giovanni Gonnelli Workshop. He bet that Gemma and Peter were wondering where he was. He imagined Gemma signing where and laughed to himself.
He could hear Figora talking as he entered the workshop and made his way over to his friends. He muttered *Reveleo memento* and learned that Gemma was in the room, but he hadn’t yet added Figora or Peter to his staff’s memories yet, so he added them. No one else was in the room. He was intrigued, though, as his staff identified people when he cast the *Reveleo memento* spell by giving a brief description of them if it didn’t know them by name. It had described Figora as a part witch/part goblin. Peter was described as a young, dark-haired wizard of medium build.

Harry hadn’t heard of people who were part goblin and part wixen before. He wondered if Figora had had to learn how to manage her wixen magic with her goblin magic like Mei was having to sort out and if it was as challenging.

*Mei!* He had forgotten that she might be interested in working on her broom seat. *Maybe she’ll stop by if she is,* he consoled himself.

“Hello, Harry,” Figora greeted gruffly.

“Hi, Figora,” Harry said. Gemma had put a hand on his arm, then pulled his hand over to Peter, he supposed so that Peter knew that he was there, too. Harry scratched lightly across Peter’s hand as Peter had done to him. “Hi, Gemma, Hi Peter,” Harry said.

“Your friends arrived before you,” Figora observed and Harry heard the *Scribunt loqui* papers fluttering by her mouth, so gathered they had figured out how to communicate while he had been delayed.

“Yes, I… well, some other friends wanted to borrow my broom,” Harry explained, knowing that Gemma would see the message and maybe let Peter know, too.

“So you wanted to add a metal tip to your staff?” Figora asked.

“Yes, and also Madam Flamel asked me to show you my *anagnóstis,*” Harry said and he *accio’d* it out of his staff and held it out to Figora.

She took it from his hand.

“Ahh, this is a fine instrument indeed,” Figora said. “I would like very much to study it for a bit. May I keep it overnight? It is possible that I can duplicate it so that other students here can benefit from its powers. Also, I imagine you haven’t learned yet of all its abilities. Say for instance, do you know that it can also be used by your friend, Peter as well as Gemma?”


“Have him hold out his hand,” Figora said.

Gemma seemed to have understood and Harry listened as Gemma was signing to Peter tactically about the *anagnóstis.* Gemma tapped Harry on his hand and held it out to her, then she made the sign for writing. He got his notebook out of his staff and handed it to her. He heard her put it down and gathered that she was guiding the *anagnóstis* to a bit of writing that they had written earlier. Peter made a sound that sounded pretty close to glee and Harry wondered what the *anagnóstis* was able to do for him.

“What’s it doing, Gemma?” Harry asked.

“It’s converting the text to a haptic language that Peter can understand through vibration,” Figora explained.
“What’s haptic mean?” Harry asked.

“It’s the sense of touch and communication through touch” Figora explained. “It is as if someone is touching his hands as Gemma does to sign with him, but it takes the written text and converts it to sign. Gemma can understand it, too, when she’s touching the anagnóstis.”

“I didn’t know it could do that. Does it know what each person needs when they touch it?” Harry asked.

“It is a very old instrument of magic. I believe it can translate any language it encounters to a language that the person who touches it can understand. If I were to place it on ancient Gobbledygook, it should be able to translate it into English for you and more modern day Gobbledygook for me. It could be a powerful and dangerous object in the wrong hands,” Figora said.

“I’m surprised that Dumbledore was willing to part with it,” Harry said softly.

“Yes, that is surprising,” Figora agreed.

Gemma tapped Harry on his arm to get his attention. He held out his palm to her and signed writing on it. “You need the pencil?” he asked. She tapped “yes,” on his palm. Harry accio’d it from his staff and handed it to her and Gemma and Peter moved over to another area at the workbench. Harry heard stools and the notebook and then the scratching of pencils and gathered that they were going to try out the anagnóstis for a while.

“Shall we get started on that tip for your staff, then?” Figora invited.

“Sure, what do I need to do?” Harry asked.

“Well, let’s take a look at your staff and determine how big this tip needs to be,” Figora said.

Harry handed over his staff.

“Okay, come over here, Harry,” Figora invited.

Harry followed the contour of the table over to Figora’s voice, bumping into the staff that was protruding off the edge of the table. “Ophff,” he said as it jabbed him in the belly.

“Oh, sorry, I should have warned you,” Figora muttered. She seemed to be absorbed in something else.

“Oh, sorry, I should have warned you,” Figora muttered. She seemed to be absorbed in something else.

“Okay, here’s a tactile ruler - this one has braille numbers (but without the number sign before them - there isn’t room). You’re learning braille, right?” Figora asked.

“I’m just learning. We did start with numbers and letters, but I’m still getting the hang of them,” Harry explained.

Harry felt the ruler that Figora handed him. It was metal and a bit thinner than the rulers he was used to and about a foot long. There were raised lines and he recognized the braille - he read an “a, b, and c” then reminded himself that they meant 1, 2, and 3. He was able to tell where the half inches were as well. It had a sliding bar that had a knob that could be tightened to secure the bar in place.

“Oh, brill! I can read this!” Harry said.

“For this, you just need to be able to recognize 1 or 2 depending on how deep you want your tip to
be,” Figora explained. “Hold the measuring tape against the tip of your staff and decide if you want it to be one inch or two inches deep.”

It was a bit awkward as he managed the staff that wanted to roll a bit, but he finally held it against the tip and ran his fingers over it.

“I dunno. Maybe 1 ½ inches?” he said, sliding the bar to the spot that he wanted and tightening the knob.

“I think that would work just fine,” Figora agreed. “So we’re going to make a mold of the tip of your staff and then cast a goblin silver tip that will be fitted onto the tip. First, we’re going to make a version of the tip out of wax, then we’ll pour plaster around it. If you’re interested in creating a design in the tip, this is the time to make it.”

“What kind of design?” Harry asked.

“You could create a pattern, here are some designs that you can press into the wax,” Figora handed Harry some pieces of clay that had geometric designs pressed into them.

“Once your wax model is complete and the plaster cast, then we pour in the molten goblin silver. The final step is to cut off the sprues and then polish the silver. Part of your model will include a screw fitting to attach it securely to your staff. The whole process will take a couple days.”

“Oh, wow. It sounds intense,” Harry said.

“Yes, it is and there are parts that you can’t participate in because there are magical aspects that the goblins don’t want to share, but the other parts that are part of an ancient world tradition shared by all cultures - muggle, wixen, and goblin alike,” Figora shared. “Let’s start working on the wax model of the tip.”

Harry liked the feeling of the soft wax. Figora was eager to share the craft. Soon, Gemma and Peter were also working on small wax items. Gemma was crafting a bracelet and Peter was making a ring.
“It’s time for me to close up the workshop tonight,” Figora said, “but I’ll be here tomorrow and we can work on the next step of the pieces.”

Harry had made a few versions of his staff tip and was pleased with how it turned out. He had pressed a pattern into the surface that reminded him of feathers and it made him smile to think of Hedwig’s downy undercoat, but cast in metal and making a clear ringing noise when it struck surfaces. It wasn’t exactly balanced, but close enough - Figora thought it would do the job.

Peter’s ring was simple and broad, but had a texture of lines reminded Harry of mountains or waves that ran all the way around the surface. Peter had also liked the texture of feathers that Harry had pressed into his piece.

Gemma’s bracelet was harder to form out of wax and she got frustrated as she’d get one section done and then accidentally break another section. She kept trying, though, and in the end decided to keep it, even though it was a lot more free-form than what she hoped for. “F-O-R” space “M-U-M” she explained and then she drew a smiley face into Harry’s palm.

“Harry, you can pick up your anagnóstis in the morning - I’ll take a look at it tonight and let you know if I think we can make something similar,” Figora told him.

They helped Figora clean up and then left the workshop. Harry had learned some new signs in the process as they learned how to talk about the tools they were using.

“Thank you so much, Figora,” Harry said as they left. He had learned the signs for thank you, please, and sorry (earlier when he accidentally disconnected a fragile section of Gemma’s bracelet).

She did ask me to look at it and the only way I can ‘look’ at things is with my fingers.

After her initial dismay, she patted him on the shoulder reassuring him. When he kept apologizing, she took his hand, folded it into a fist, and rubbed it on his chest in a circle.

“Is that the sign for sorry?” he asked and she tapped twice on his back.

They said goodbye to Peter at his dormitory that he shared with Adam, Shannon, and some other older residents that Harry hadn’t met yet. Harry was amazed at how much could be communicated just through touch even though he was just learning the language. Peter held Harry’s wrist lightly as he attempted the sign that Gemma had just taught him for “see you later!” and laughed - Peter put his hands on Harry’s shoulders to feel him laughing.

When they reached Montmorency, Harry did the Reveleo memento and realized that Tony and Arig weren’t back yet.

“Gemma, I’m going down to the O&M room to see if Tony and Arig are still flying my broom.” Harry tapped Gemma’s arm to get her attention. She tapped twice, “okay,” then grasped his hand and pulled it to her chest then made the “let’s go” sign across his palm, asking “can I go, too?”

“Sure,” Harry said and he took her arm again.

Outside the room, they checked the layout - it looked like it was set as it had been in the morning with the gym, but when they went inside, it was vacant.
“Oh, yeah, they said they’d probably be out in the park,” Harry said as Gemma wrote a question mark on the back of his hand.

Outside, it was cool and dark. Harry liked that he didn’t have to close his eyes against the sun as he had earlier in the day. It smelled like it was going to rain, too. He half expected the grass to be wet as they stepped onto it. Gemma was leading him across the grass. He’d only been on the paths in the park so far - but she must have seen them out in the middle of the field.

He tugged on her arm, asking her to stop and fished his staff out of his pocket so that he could use it on the grass - it was bumpy and he thought the staff might help him avoid falling into a gopher hole that maybe Gemma couldn’t see in the dark.

“Is it dark? Can you see?” he asked her.

“No” and then “yes,” then took his hand to write, “S-O-M-E” space “L-I-G-H-T” into his hand.

Now he could hear Tony whooping and his voice was traveling up and down as he hurled around the park. Arig was yelling at him from the ground, telling him to do different Quidditch moves. Harry wanted to be the one up on the broom and at the same time he remembered what it felt like to be on the gangplank with the little wooden board beneath his feet and the way it moved with the ship and the water and the feeling of not knowing what was beneath him - of not knowing how high up he was. He must have been grasping tight onto Gemma’s arm because she eased her fingers underneath his, trying to loosen his grip.

“Oh, sorry,” Harry muttered.

“Harry! Gemma!” Arig shouted to them and Harry could hear the metal of his crutches as he moved toward them, though they were more muffled in the grass than when he was walking on the stone of the corridors in the center.

“Hi, Arig! Sounds like you guys are having fun,” Harry said.

“Oh, you’ve got a great broom! Thank you so much for letting us ride it. Wow! Are you ready to have a go?” Arig said, a bit breathlessly.

“Naw, I haven’t had lessons from Godric yet. He said he’d teach me how to do it,” Harry said.

“Oh, come on! You’ve got to be dying to get on it,” Arig cajoled.

“Well, yeah,” Harry admitted. “Gemma, do you want to fly on it?”

Tony came whizzing by so close that Harry’s staff told him to duck, so he did, pulling Gemma down with him.

“Watch it, Tony! That was too close!” Arig hooted, “Whoa! How’d you do that?”

“What?” Harry asked as he stood back up tentatively.

“Duck in time and you saved Gemma from getting a foot in the back of the head,” Arig said.

“Oh, my staff warned me,” Harry said.

It sounded like Tony had dismounted a bit ungracefully. “Sorry about that - I’m still getting the hang of steering with my arms. Your Nimbus 2000 is so swift! I bet it is even faster than the Nimbus 2001 that Graham got from Malfoy!”
Harry managed to keep his grumble, “stupid git,” under his breath, but then heard the paper fluttering and felt his face flush.

“Ha! Yeah, he is a bit of a git, isn’t he,” Tony agreed laughing.

Harry heard a hand slap. “Hey, ow, what was that for?” Tony yelled. “Gemma, stop it already. I’m sorry! I said I was sorry!”

Harry reached out and found a trembling, gesticulating Gemma, “Hey, are you alright?”

“She’s brassed off!” Arig said. “She’s giving Tony a bloody earbashing for nearly mowing you two down!”

Harry tried to put himself between Gemma and Tony, but it was easy for her to evade him, her hands flying out in all directions. Finally, he resorted to putting his arms around her and holding her in a gentle hug. Her flying hands settled down, though he could tell she was still trying to tell off Tony, but losing her steam. She leaned her head against his shoulder and he could feel her hot tears soaking through the T-shirt. He patted her back awkwardly and pulled back so that she could read the *Scribunt loqui* message, “We’re okay, Gemma. We didn’t get hit. He didn’t mean it. It was an accident.”

He heard her sniffling and tried to *accio* a handkerchief from his staff, but remembered he’d given it to Mei. Arig had one, though, and gave it to her.

He felt her small hand whack him on the shoulder.

“Hey - what was that for?” he shouted stunned.


Harry felt the blood drain from his face as he understood her message.

“Oh, Gemma. I’m so sorry. I didn’t think. I didn’t want to silence you. I was trying to comfort you. But I didn’t think about how it would prevent you from talking. I’m sorry,” Harry hung his head and signed “I’m sorry” on his chest over and over until Gemma grabbed his hand and then pressed herself against his chest, hugging him.

She stayed close to Harry as she dried her tears then turned to Tony and was signing more gently.

“I get it, it’s okay,” Tony said, laughing a bit. Harry could feel Gemma stiffen next to him. She didn’t like being laughed at. He could hear the defensiveness in Tony’s voice when he turned to him, “Here you go, Potter! I want to see you fly!” He pushed the broom up against Harry’s knuckles.

“Oh, I dunno. Godric said he’d give me a lesson,” Harry said, though he held onto the broom. It felt warm in his hand, almost pulsing with energy. He wanted to badly to hop on it. He gave Gemma a squeeze.

“Alright then?” he asked.

She tapped a firm yes on his wrist.

He collapsed his staff and opened the enclosure for his staff in the broom handle and placed his staff inside.
“Whoa - that’s brill!” Arig said.

“Wait, why are you putting your staff in your broom?” Tony asked.

“It’s supposed to help me navigate,” Harry said.

Gemma placed her hand on his arm and Harry took the staff out again. He was really torn. He really wanted to fly. He really didn’t want to crash.

“Hey, Harry, how about I fly with you?” Arig offered, “You can put your staff in there, see if it works, and I can make sure you don’t go arse over elbow.”

Harry paused and then said, “Okay, just for a bit.”

Gemma tapped his arm three times, “I understand,” and stepped back. He smiled at her, trying to be reassuring. He put his staff back in the broom and mounted it and sat - it hovered over the ground, supporting his weight.

Harry felt the zip of anticipation. He was tempted to just take off but resisted. It took Arig a moment to move next to him, the metal of his crutches clinking. He tapped his right crutch on the ground to collapse it and held on to the broom while he swung his leg over the broom. Harry realized that he must be missing his right leg since he seemed to be leaning to his left before he settled his weight on the broom and collapsing the other crutch, storing it in his pocket. He reached around Harry and grabbed the broom handle in front of him. He was a lot taller than Harry and broader. Harry felt safe.

“Okay, are you ready?” Arig said near his ear. “You do the flying, I’ll just make sure we don’t hit anything, okay?”

“Yeah,” Harry said and pulled up on the broom to soar up. As soon as his feet left the ground, he felt unmoored - like a kite off it’s string. He loved the whooshing sensation of flying and at the same time, he was certain that he had left is stomach on the grass as they took off. He took in a deep breath and let it out.

“You okay, Harry?” Arig asked.

“Yeah - great actually,” Harry said, inhaling again. “This is awesome.” He heard the paper flap against Arig’s face and felt him flinch.

“Sorry about that!” he shouted as another one whipped back.

“Bloody papers,” Arig muttered.

Harry listened to his staff’s navigation - there wasn’t anything up here for him to navigate around but it gave a steady stream of numbers - calculating their height as they climbed and it seemed impossible that they were 25 feet above the park already. They were flying over the trees.

Harry let out a whoop and clung to the broom with his knees - he lifted one hand in the air and marveled in the whoosh of wind whipping between his fingers. His hair swirled around his face and he breathed in deeply. He put his hand back on the broom and pulled the broom so that they were headed straight up in a spiraling corkscrew and then turned on a knut and headed back down into a plummeting dive. The broom shook with the intensity of the speed and they both hung on as the force of the descent tried to peel them off the broom.

Arig hooted in delight behind him - his voice pulled out of his lungs and trailing behind them.
Far below Harry could hear Tony shouting and whooping - his delight evident as they neared. Harry listened to the numbers as they approached the ground and pulled up gradually. He was a little unsteady and he realized that it was because he wasn’t used to the extra weight of Arig that unbalanced the broom - making it heavier in the back.

As they were nearing the ground, his staff started describing the terrain and the closing distance - it seemed to be coming very quickly. Harry heard an urgent “Harry!” and couldn’t understand how Professor McGonagall could be here.

He cast a quick revealing charm and his staff identified Gemma and Tony and also stated that there was a tall witch standing with them.

Harry started with surprise as Arig’s foot struck the ground and he stuck out his feet to help with the landing, but his timing was off and they tumbled to the ground in a heap. Harry tried to untangle himself quickly feeling the inevitable spew that was building in his gut. The landing was too sudden. He wished he was still soaring through the air. He pulled himself to his hands and knees and sicked up on the grass in retching heaves and spasms.

“Oh, mate!” Tony yelled. “That was brilliant!”

The footsteps that had been running toward them stopped suddenly, but then Professor McGonagall was vanishing the sick efficiently. Harry laid his head on his arms hoping the world would stop spinning soon. It just made it worse - so he sat up and wiped the sick from his mouth. He flicked out his wand from the holster, saying “Aguamenti” a bit too forcefully so that his whole face was blasted by water. He gulped some of the water, said “Finite,” and wiped off his face again. Gemma’s hand was on his back, rubbing in small circles. Her hand was trembling.

“Is Arig okay?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, mate. Guess we should talk about the landing next time,” Arig said. “But, boy, can you fly!”

Harry smiled weakly.

“Well, Harry. I wish I could say I was surprised…” Professor McGonagall started, but didn’t finish.

“What are you doing here, Professor McGonagall?” Harry asked, standing up shakily with Gemma’s arm to lean on and taking a step toward her voice. He could hear Arig shaking out his crutches and standing up.

“Well, I came to see you,” Professor McGonagall said, brushing off his blunt inquiry.

“Oh,” Harry said, feeling unsteady and a bit thick.

“Here’s your broom, Harry,” Arig said and Harry held out his hand to accept it. He opened the compartment and took out his staff, shook it out and put his broom inside it. He figured that with Professor McGonagall here, flying was done for the night.

“We’ll just head back to the dorm, then. See ya, Harry! Goodnight Professor McGonagall!” Tony and Arig called out to him and the professor.

“Goodnight, gentlemen,” Professor McGonagall said curtly.

Gemma was still rubbing his back, but stopped when the boys called out to them and waved across his back.
“Bye, Gemma,” he said reluctantly.

“Are you feeling well enough to speak with me for a little bit, Harry?” Professor McGonagall said as Gemma’s light footsteps ran toward the sound of Arig’s crutches moving across the lawn.

“I guess so,” Harry said.

“Let’s go inside, shall we? Maybe we can find a spot of tea?” Professor McGonagall said and she started to walk across the lawn. Harry followed slowly. His feet felt like they were filled with sand.

*Why is she here? Is she going to tell me that I can’t go back to Hogwarts?*

She paused a moment and he was sure she was staring at him. He felt the heat creeping up his neck.

“Would you like some assistance, Harry?” she asked.

“What? No,” he said quickly and then added, “Thanks. I’m fine.”

She made a slight snorting noise that made Harry think that she didn’t believe him.

They had reached the door of the gym, and Professor McGonagall held it open for Harry. He felt awkward going past her, but moved ahead anyway.

“Healer Jordan said we could get a cup of tea in the dining hall,” Professor McGonagall said as she followed him, then moved around him to open the door out to the corridor.

“Sure,” Harry said and whispered “Navigant dining hall” to his staff not sure if Professor McGonagall knew the way.

He wondered how late it was… he was suddenly so tired.

He found the panel to the dining hall and opened the doors.

“You seem to be getting around well, considering everything, Harry,” Professor McGonagall said. He grunted in response then tried to cover it up as a cough and said, “thanks.”

He couldn’t think of anything else to talk about.

He asked his staff to take him to the table he always sat at and found a chair. He waited with his hand on the back of the chair, listening to Professor McGonagall sitting down, then sat down. She conjured tea for them and poured it out. “One lump? Milk?” she asked. “Yes, please,” he answered.

“Here’s your cup of tea, Harry,” she said and the teacup and spoon rattled a bit in the saucer.

He took it wondering why she’d be nervous. Fear gripped his gut as he thought about not being able to return to Hogwarts and he set it carefully on the table, but still managed to spill some in the saucer.

There was a pause, then Professor McGonagall said, “Here’s a serviette, Harry.”

“Oh, thank you,” he said and held out his hand.

He mopped up the spilled tea and then sat back, waiting for Professor McGonagall to begin.

He knew he should take a sip of tea out of politeness, but he couldn’t bring himself to yet - his stomach still felt unsettled - though he was sure he had emptied it completely on the grass.
The silence stretched. He could hear Professor McGonagall fiddling with her teacup and serviette.

“Did you…” “I have just…” they started talking at the same time.

“Sorry, Professor,” Harry mumbled.

“Harry, I have just arrived at the center after meeting with your relatives, the Dursleys,” Professor McGonagall said the name as if she were talking about dog poo… “and I decided to come to see you directly. I realize this is a surprise.”

“Um, yes,” Harry said, “Healer Jordan said you were going to talk to them today, but, yeah, I didn’t know you’d come to see me afterward.”

“Well, neither did I, but I felt some urgency,” she paused again and Harry heard her shifting in her seat. He waited, straining to hear clues.

“I felt some urgency to see for myself how you are doing,” Professor McGonagall continued.

“I’m doing okay,” Harry said, though he was having a hard time sounding convincing.

“Well, I’m sure you’ve been better.”

He shrugged.

He heard her take a sip of her tea, but felt scrutinized and tried to sit up straighter. He wasn’t sure what she was looking for.

“Why did you want to see me?” Harry asked.

“Ah, well, yes…” and it seemed like she was stalling.

He fiddled with his teacup, turning the handle this way and that.

“I was concerned about your current condition - with how you’re getting on with…” she paused.

“My blindness,” he supplied.

“Um, yes. That,” she said uncomfortably. “Yes, but also… after visiting your Aunt and Uncle, I have some broader concerns.”

He stilled. Maybe this wasn’t about attending Hogwarts.

“Harry, how have things been with the Dursleys? These past eleven years?” Professor McGonagall asked.

“Fine,” Harry said dully.

“Oh?” she asked.

He shrugged.

“Oh,” she said with an urgency in her voice.

He blinked and wiggled his jaw, realizing that he was clenching his teeth. Uncertainty pooled in his belly.

“I see,” she said, her voice had a heat to it that he had rarely heard. He cringed and tried to make
himself smaller, but she seemed to have turned her attention away from him. She vanished the tea and smoothed out her skirts as she rose.

“I must be getting on, I trust you know how to find your way back to your dormitory?” she said.

“Yes, Professor?” he said, confused.

“I will come to visit you again. I trust you will not try to kill yourself on a broom again.”

“What?” he said, lifting his face to her.

“You can’t possibly think that you can fly… in your condition,” she said sternly. “I will speak to Healer Jordan. I absolutely forbid it.”

“No, Professor McGonagall - it was brilliant. It was so freeing. I’ve got to be able to fly again. The landing, well, I can work on the landing… but the flying itself… it was the most me I’ve felt since all this happen. Please don’t tell Healer Jordan that I can’t fly,” Harry pleaded.

“I’m sorry, Harry. You just can’t do it. You could have died!” There was a finality in her voice that made him feel as if he were trapped in a tiny metal box.

She left swiftly, her skirts swishing, her shoes making a rapid clipping noise on the stone tiles until he couldn’t hear them anymore.

He got up slowly and numbly made his way to his room.

He ignored the greetings from his roommates and climbed right into his bed without bothering to undress except to kick off his trainers. He heard Gemma’s footsteps and closed the curtains around his bed before she made it over to his area. He listened as she went back to her bed, the springs squeaking when she sat down on it.

He curled up in a ball under his covers, knees drawn tight against his chest.
Grieving

Harry vaguely heard the alarm going off in the room the next morning, but rolled over and pulled the sheets over his head. He pulled them tighter when Gemma’s hands fluttered over his back and tried to pry them off. He heard Aminah, Mei, and Tony talking about him - trying in their own ways to roust him, but finally, they left him alone. When it had been quiet for a while, he got up, tripped over his trainers, then made it to the toilet to relieve himself. He was surprised to find a plate of toast and a cup of tea on his desk when he set down his staff. He had bumped the tea and made a mess, but didn’t bother to try to clean it up. It got all over his daily schedule, but he didn’t read it, just grazed his fingers over the incomprehensible bumps and then tossed it on the floor. He slumped back into bed, curling up again, and did his best to disappear.

_oO0Ooo000oo0000o_

Again, Gemma’s hands were rubbing his back and trying to coax him out of bed, but he kept still and willed her to leave him alone. At last, she did.

_oO0Ooo000oo0000o_

Later it was Healer Jordan who was touching him and talking to him - but her voice was so far away - it was at the end of a tunnel and was moving farther and farther away, disappearing into the darkness. It was dark in a way it hadn’t been before. He thought he heard Godric, too, also at a great distance, but he didn’t care.

_oO0Ooo000oo0000o_

Besel’s gentle voice lapped against his consciousness saying something about grieving, but he barely registered it. He was buried under ten tons of sand, his lips were parched, his eyes dry, and his insides were a dark hole of nothingness.

_oO0Ooo000oo0000o_

Then Mei’s caustic voice was grinding against his head and he pulled his pillow over his head trying to escape it. She pounded on the bed and raged at him, he felt closer to the surface, but still, he didn’t move.

_oO0Ooo000oo0000o_

Then Gemma climbed onto the bed and curled around him, draping her thin arm over him. He tried to move away, but she just got closer until he couldn’t go anywhere, except fall off the bed. So he lay there, breathing his own putrid breath under the covers and waited for her to leave. Her breathing changed from hiccuping silent sobs that seeped into the cracks to steady deep breaths. Then, he fell asleep, too.

_oO0Ooo000oo0000o_

When the alarms went off this time, Harry heard them. The lights were bright against his eyelids and Healer Jordan’s voice was telling the time and reminding them of their schedules. Gemma was still curled around him and he reached over to touch her. His fingers found her face, he could feel salt crusted in rivulets that undulated over spattergoit pockmarks scattered across her cheeks like constellations. He knew he should feel remorse for causing her pain, but he couldn’t feel anything. He felt her eyelashes flutter against his fingers and she grabbed his hand and then seized him and pulled him into a bone crushing hug.
It kind of hurt.

_I can feel that._

She let him go.

“I’m sorry, Gemma,” he tried to say, but he didn’t have a voice. The paper fluttered by his cheek - she grabbed it.

Her tears were falling hot on his hands. He patted her shoulder, trying to let her know that he was okay.

_I’m not okay._

Someone had removed the holster with his wand at some point. He didn’t remember that happening.

He had to go to the loo and he staggered out of bed, feeling almost too weak to wrestle against the sheets that held his legs.

_I can feel that, too._

He didn’t bother trying to find his staff and just stumbled to the loo, groping for the panel to shut off the alarm and then the door handle, then following the wall to the toilet. He leaned against the wall, the side of his forehead pressing into the coolness as he sat on the commode.

_I could stay in here forever._

Then he cursed himself for not bringing his staff. He was really weak. His breath was rancid and he reeked. He didn’t have his toothbrush or clothes to change into.

He splashed water on his face and ran his fingers through his hair and made his way back out of the loo, where he nearly ran into Tony.

“Harry, you’re up! Mate, you look horrid.”

“Thanks,” Harry mumbled.

“Oh, you stink. Why didn’t you take a shower?” Tony asked.

“I forgot my staff, it has all my clothes.”

“Can you make it to your area alright?” Tony questioned.

“Yeah,” Harry answered. He was hunched over, he couldn’t straighten up. He felt along the wall, then across the room to where he thought his bed was, but his hands kept encountering empty air until Gemma’s hands found his and pulled him over to his bed.

“Thanks,” he muttered. _I’m a mess._

She tapped his chest with her index finger, then opened up his palm and wrote, “**S-C-A-R-E-D**” space “**M-E.**”

He hung his head, it was so heavy, “Sorry.” He signed it at the same time.

He shrugged. It seemed so insignificant. So silly. And yet it was everything.

She drew a question mark in his hand, hard.

*I can feel that.*

He couldn’t say it. He felt numb.

She pressed his staff into his hand. He could feel how angry she was with him.

He shook it out and went back to the toilet - but they were both occupied, he hadn’t noticed other people up and about.

*I’m really out of it.*

Gemma had gone over to her area - he could hear her opening her wardrobe and pushing things around. He got up into his window seat and sat there, back pressed against the wall, head on his hands, draped over his knees.

Gemma came back - she was holding something that rattled. She put it over his head. It was a Mami Wata necklace. He felt the shells and the seed pods and the fibrous cord that held them together. He tried to smile a thanks, but his mouth seemed set in a frown. She climbed up into the window seat and sat with him.

He heard the toilet door open and Tony making his way out. He nudged Gemma, “you go get ready for class.”

She tapped his arm, “okay,” and hopped down.

He sat for a while and then he heard Aminah and her staff emerge from the other toilet. He wondered where Arig was. He hadn’t heard him yet.

*What day is it? Is it nearly the full moon?*

He climbed down from the window seat. He took the necklace off and left it on his desk, on top of his schedule for the day, then, still hunched over, went to take a shower.

O00OooO00OooO00O0o

Healer Jordan was waiting for him in the extra chair in his area when he emerged from the toilet, dressed in clean clothes and able to stand a little taller after the shower. His teeth felt squeaky and his gums raw.

“Harry, I’m so glad to see that you’re up. Have you had a chance to look at your schedule today?”

“Hi Healer Jordan,” he muttered, “No, I didn’t look at it yet.”

He was tempted to crawl back into bed. He wasn’t sure he had the energy to summon the *anagnóstis* from his staff. He had struggled to get clean clothes from his staff after showering. He felt sapped and swayed a bit on his feet.

“Here, sit down,” Healer Jordan jumped up, holding his elbow and guiding him to his bed to sit down.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.
“Harry, I brought you a nutrition potion. Do you think you can keep it down?” she asked.

The thought made him burp.

“I don’t know,” he said, his hand over his mouth.

“Could you try to eat some breakfast?” she asked.

He heard the sound of conjured china settling on his desk and the aroma of toast and tea wafted his direction. He heard the schedule and the Mami Wata necklace being moved to the farther corner of his desk.

He really wasn’t interested in eating. He thought about all the times he had laid in his cupboard wishing he could eat. It was weird, not wanting to eat.

Maybe I should put a crust in my pocket for Hedwig. Hedwig!

“Is my owl okay? I didn’t visit her. Is she back? Did someone feed her?” he asked in a rush.

“Yes, she’s fine. You received a message. It is on your desk, next to your schedule,” Healer Jordan told him.

“Oh, good,” he said, relieved.

He wondered if he had a teapot or a cup of tea already made and reached across his desk tentatively. He found a teapot and cup with a small sugar bowl and milk pitcher. He made himself a cup of tea and took a small sip. It was hot and he felt it warming his body.

I can feel that.

“Did you want tea, too?” he asked.

“No, thank you, Harry,” Healer Jordan said, with a smile in her voice.

He broke off a piece of the toast and nibbled on it.

It tastes like paper.

He stuck the rest of it in his pocket. He took another sip of tea.

“Your schedule is a bit different today, Harry,” Healer Jordan said. He heard her pick up the paper from his desk.

“Oh?” Harry responded.

“You will start out with a bit of stretching with Ms. Midgeon, have some time in the workshop with Figora working on the tip for your staff and after lunch, a private lesson with Mr. Burbage for navigation and later a conversation with Healer Geller.”

“I don’t know if… ” Harry trailed off.


He hung his head - he wasn’t sure he had the energy for his best today.

“What about braille? I missed it yesterday, didn’t I?” he asked, talking into his lap.
“Yes, Madam Flamel says she’ll catch you up once you’re feeling rested and that you have the tools to practice on your own if you have the inclination… but only if you want to,” she said.

He wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

“Could you please try to take the nutrition potion?” Healer Jordan urged.

Harry held out his hand and she placed a small glass jar in his palm, it was heavy for its size and warm. He felt the top and found a cork that he unstoppered. An aroma reached his nose - like warm bread and pudding. He took a hesitant sip and felt the warmth spread through him and then drank the rest of it. He’d never had a potion that tasted so good. He licked the base of the cork to get the last little drops.

He sat up a little straighter and reached for more toast. It didn’t taste like paper this time. They sat in silence while Harry nibbled on the toast and took small sips of tea.

“Harry, is there anything you’d like to talk about? I’ve cast a privacy spell around your area so that we can speak freely,” Healer Jordan invited.

“No, I’m fine,” he muttered.

“Harry, it is okay to be ‘not fine,’” she stated firmly. “It is okay to feel mad, sad, betrayed, angry, hurt, or any number of things that you may be feeling right now.”

“I’m not feeling much right now,” he admitted.

“And that’s okay, too,” she said.

“Are you also a Mind Healer?” Harry asked, lifting his head up.

“No. My area is physical health and healing and adaptation to significant change, with a strong interest in potions. I’ve just had many long conversations with Mind Healers for my own health and wellbeing. I’ve learned a few things along the way,” she explained. “When you’re feeling up to it, I’d like to have a conversation with you about your visit with Professor McGonagall as well as your experience flying on your broom in the O&M room.”

“Oh, you know about that?” Harry mumbled.

“Yes, your roommates were quite concerned about you and were trying to figure out if there was something that happened that made you want to retreat from the world for a little bit,” Healer Jordan said, “so they told me about what you’d been doing since dinner.”

“Professor McGonagall said I couldn’t fly,” Harry stated.

“Is it her decision?” Healer Jordan asked.

“But she’s head of Gryffindor house!” he said. It made him so mad!

_I feel mad!_ 

“It’s true that because you can no longer see, people are going to try to impose their prejudices on you. And it is true that, no, you can’t see. We can’t change that. But you don’t have accept someone else’s mandate about what you can and cannot do. That is something that you get to decide for yourself. I’ve met a lot of people who have come in here certain that they were cut off from what they thought made them who they were, but eventually they found another way to do what they
needed to do to feel like themselves again,” Healer Jordan said.

Harry heard what Healer Jordan was saying, but Professor McGonagall could tell him what he could and could not do while he was at Hogwarts. And what if she decided he couldn’t attend at all? What would he do if he couldn’t attend Hogwarts? Stay on at the center like Besel and Godric?

“IT’S NOT FAIR… ” he shouted and his voice broke.

He bit it off before it became a sob and he clenched his hands in his lap, trying to suck the tears back into his eyes.

*When had anything ever been fair for me? Other people got fair. I didn’t. I got murdered mum and dad and having to stay with the Dursleys and a murderer who kept coming back from death to hunt me down and finish the job. And now I can’t see. It would have been kinder for Fawkes to fly away instead of cry on me. Why didn’t I just die in the Chamber?*

“No, it is definitely not fair,” Healer Jordan said. “I don’t know where we get this notion that things are going to be fair, that life is going to treat us equally. I think pretty much everyone thinks that… maybe because we’re expected to treat others with fairness, we think should get fairness in return. You’re definitely right there, Harry. It is not fair at all. And it is not easy. I have to tell you, though, that I’m glad to see you like this…” she paused when he stiffened.

“… not that I’m glad that you’re experiencing so much pain,” she continued, “but when you came in I knew you had only had a month to adjust and you seemed to have already accepted this radical change in your body… and I suspected you had more work to do. So now you’re doing it and once you do this work and really face what it means to experience this loss and really grieve it, you’ll be able to adjust and adapt and move forward with what you want for yourself. It is not easy work, but it is necessary. You’ve already had to face a lot of hardships in your life, more than most people face in a lifetime… and I have a feeling I don’t even know the half of it.”

Harry had slumped back a bit and unclenched his hands.

“Grieve it? You mean like I died?” Harry asked.

“Well, grieve the loss of your sight. And grieve the loss of who you thought you were going to be before this happened and it changed things.”

“Oh,” he said. He didn’t know how to grieve.

*Is this what grieving feels like?*

It felt heavy and wet.

“Healer Geller is looking forward to spending some time with you today and talking about it,” Healer Jordan said. “If you’re ready to talk some more, of course.”

Harry shrugged.

“Gemma has asked if she can spend the day with you. How do you feel about that?” she asked.

“Oh,” and he felt a warmth in his chest.

*I can feel that.*

“Doesn’t she need to do her work? What about learning BSL? I mean, yeah, I’d like it. But she has
her own work to do. She doesn’t need to worry about me.”

“Well, she’s already worried about you. If you’d like it, then I’ll approve her request. Sometimes the best way to get through something is knowing that someone is on your side… and she’s definitely on your side,” Healer Jordan chuckled.

There was the sound of chair legs moving slightly on the floor and robes rustling.

“I need you to promise me something,” Healer Jordan, she had stood - her voice was coming from higher up.

“What’s that?” Harry responded, angling his face toward hers.

“I need you to promise me that if you don’t feel like going or doing something, that instead of retreating as you did the other day, that you come to my office. I will create a safe space for you to be while you’re resting and resetting,” she said.

“Okay, I guess,” Harry said.

*I don’t see how that will make a difference. Maybe it is so I don’t stress out my roommates.*

“I will also let Gemma know that if she feels that you’re struggling, she can contact me directly. I’ll give her a bracelet that will send me a message.”

“Oh, and Harry, do you know that your staff has a safety feature? If you need help… any kind of help… you simply need to say, ‘send help,’ while holding the three dots with your thumb? It will alert me and others at the Center of your exact location,” Healer Jordan explained.

“Uh, no,” Harry said.

“I imagine you’re not used to getting a lot of help and that’s something that you’re going to have to adjust to… in addition to everything else.” There seemed to be a bit of a sad smile in her voice when she said this.

“Oh, and let me know when you’re ready to talk about your discussion yesterday with Professor McGonagall.”

“Okay, thanks,” he said.

She muttered a spell that must have vanished the tea and another one that canceled the privacy spell and then walked over to where Gemma must have been waiting.

Harry was glad he didn’t have to face everyone in the dining hall this morning and really thankful that he’d get to spend the day with Gemma.

*I can feel that.*
The nutritional potion that Healer Jordan had given Harry not only was delicious, he felt full in a way he hadn't ever experienced before. He didn't remember ever feeling full until he and Ron ate their way through all those pumpkin pasties on the train to Hogwarts in his first year. After a big feast at Hogwarts, he would feel uncomfortably full - wonderfully satisfied, but on the edge of too full. This was a just-right full and it was helping push away the sticky wetness of grief that seemed to be pulling at him. Maybe not push it away completely, but help keep it at bay. Maybe he could leave the safety of the dormitory and try stretching with Ms. Midgeon - especially if Gemma was there with him.

I could try it.

He reached over to his desk and found the schedule and when he pulled on it, he heard the Mami Wata necklace scrape against the wood. He slipped it over his head, fingerling the shells and hairy cord. He ran his fingers over the braille and recognized a few letters, but couldn't read it. He reached for his staff to accio his anagnóstis.

Half way through saying the incantation, he remembered that he was supposed to go back and get the anagnóstis from Figora the next morning.

When was that?

He was surprised when it snapped into his palm.

Who put it back in here? I sure was out of it.

"Hey, Harry," Mei’s voice came from behind her wall with a splash.

He paused - setting the anagnóstis on the desk with his schedule, then stood up, shook out his staff and asked, "yeah?"

He walked toward her area… a little shakily and stood with his staff touching the base of her tank, but as far away as he could. He could hear the water lapping against the sides and briny odor was stronger on this side of the wall.

"Hey, are you doing okay?" she asked, her voice not as gruff as it often was. It sounded like she was lightly slapping the water with the tips of her tail.

"You scared us yesterday," she continued after a bit, "It was weird being on the other side of it. Seeing someone so weighed down by depression and nothing we could do to bring you back. It was scary."

"Sorry… I didn't mean to cause problems," Harry said.

"No, I get it. I really get it. Like you don't know how much I get it… or maybe you do, I don't know," Mei said. "I heard that you went flying with Arig on Wednesday and then spewed spectacularly when you crashed."
"We just fell - we were already on the ground, but yeah," Harry conceded.

"Was that it?" Mei asked hesitantly.

Harry shrugged, not trusting his voice.

"Yeah," Mei said. "Join the club. It sucks."

Harry shrugged again. He felt really tired and was tempted to just crawl back into bed again. But he had promised Healer Jordan and Gemma was waiting for him.

"Well, I've got to head out to sea. Hǎi rén is waiting. They say that I'm getting the hang of it. I might be able to try a magical chair while I'm on land - maybe something that would help with keeping me hydrated, too." She paused. "Hey, did you go to the workshop? Did you work with that goblin?"

"Fígora? Yeah, Peter, Gemma, and I each made things with her. She was actually pretty cool - patient," Harry felt a little flicker of warmth remembering.

"Who's Peter?" Mei asked.

"He's a friend of Gemma's - he rooms with Adam and Shannon across the hall," Harry said.

"The guy who's blind and deaf?" Mei asked.

Harry nodded.

"Okay, see you at lunch, I guess."

And there was a splash and then just the sound of the sea water lapping against the sides of the tank.

Harry turned and listened to the room. He couldn't hear anyone, so cast the *Reveleo memento* charm and learned that Gemma and Healer Jordan were still in the room, but everyone else had left. He guessed that he couldn't hear them because Healer Jordan had cast the privacy charm around Gemma's area.

He went back to his desk and read through his schedule with his *anagnóstis* and had a little shock when he realized it was Friday. *I missed a whole day.* He *tempus'd* his staff to see how much time until stretching started - he had a half hour still.

He heard Healer Jordan walking toward his area again.

"Harry," she said as she came near, "I'm heading out - I need to check on Arig. Are you doing okay? Do you feel like you're going to keep down that potion?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said, turning in his chair to face her. He tried to push his lips into a smile, but they wouldn't go. "What happened to Arig?"

"He's been taking his potion this week and now he’s in the safe room for his transformation. I just want to make sure he’s doing okay. It can still be a rough process… even with the potion."

"Oh, right," Harry nodded solemnly. "Hey, you said you wanted to talk to me about Professor McGonagall's visit."

"Yes?" And she sat in the chair by his desk.

"Well, there wasn't much to it. It was really short," Harry said, turning to face her. "I mean… I
already told you about how she said that I couldn’t fly. But after that she just asked me how I was doing - being blind and all - and then she asked me about my time with the Dursleys and then she left."

"That was it?" Healer Jordan said.

"Yep," Harry said.

"Hmmm," Healer Jordan paused. "I was there at your guardian's house with Professor McGonagall."

"Don't call them that," Harry said.

"What? Guardians?" Healer Jordan asked.

"Yeah," Harry said.

"Okay. What would you like me to call them?" Healer Jordan said.

"The Dursleys," Harry said flatly.

"Okay, I was with Professor McGonagall when she visited the Dursleys. We were both very concerned about how they spoke about you."

"Oh," Harry said. "They are just like that. It doesn't matter."

"It does matter, Harry," Healer Jordan said firmly. "They also indicated that you had run away on Monday."

"What?" He sat up straighter and then slumped back against the chair. "Well, I guess I did. They said they wouldn't bring me here, so I left on my own."

"I also received a letter from a Mr. Granger and it sounds like Professor McGonagall did as well. He expressed concern that your… that the Dursleys had refused to take you to training and that he and his daughter… Hermione… found you at the train station contemplating sneaking on the train because you had no muggle money for a ticket. He said that you also mentioned walking to London. He said that you were covered in bruises and very thin and pale. He was concerned that you had been abused," she said.

Harry put his hands under his legs to keep them from trembling.

"Abused? They… that's not… I'm fine," he mumbled.

"You don't think they were abusing you?" she asked.

"No, they just don't like me. But it's not that bad… it's not abuse," he said.

"Have they ever hit you?" she asked.

"No, well, not anything I didn't deserve. Just like other kids… just whippings for being bad," he muttered.

"And did they hit your cousin, too?" she probed.


"So, he's not bad?" she asked.
"I annoy them more," he explained. "'Cause I'm weird. A freak."

"Hmmm. This is because of your magic?" she asked.

He shrugged, then nodded.

"And what about when Madam Pomfrey took you back on Monday last month, after you lost your sight?"

"I dunno, what?" he cocked his ear toward Healer Jordan, trying to figure out what she meant.

"How did they treat you when you returned from school early and hurt?" she asked softly.

He shrugged, "pretty much the same, though Aunt Petunia was a little kinder than usual. She let me sleep some; made it easier for me to do my chores." He remembered how she'd laid out the tools for cooking for him.

"What chores did you have to do?" she asked.

"Just normal stuff… cooking and cleaning… taking care of the yard."

"Is that how you got the burns on your fingers?"

He nodded.

"Did they feed you?" she asked.

"Yeah, it was just harder to eat… not being able to see," he mumbled.

"But you were able to cook and clean and do yard work?"

"Well, it was harder, too, but I figured it out. I had help from Little Friend," he said.

"Who's Little Friend?"

"A little garden snake. He helped me weed and mow the grass and even wash the windows," Harry said.

"How did the snake help you do those things?" She sounded curious.

"Well… I can speak to snakes… in Parseltongue." He waited for the gasp, but she didn't make one.

"So, Little Friend would guide you verbally?" she said.

"Yes, I'd feed him worms and things and he'd help me by telling me what was in my path. He could also tell me what plants were weeds until I was able to recognize them by touch," Harry said.

"He sounds like a smart little snake," she paused. "And the bruises you had when you arrived here?"

"I told you. I ran into things, doors and things." He was starting to get frustrated.

"Okay, Thank you, Harry, we can talk more about this later. Professor McGonagall was going to talk to Professor Dumbledore about what we can do about the Dursleys. She said she'd come by today."

"Oh," Harry said.
"I'll be there with you," she reassured.

Harry nodded, feeling a little better, though he didn't think anything could be done about the Dursleys. They were just the Dursleys.

“Uh… could you speak to her about me flying? I really loved it. What if she won’t let me do it when I go back to Hogwarts? Do you think they’ll let me go back to Hogwarts? Other wixen have been able to return after injuries, right?” Harry asked in a rush.

“Harry, I understand that you’re afraid that you won’t be able to return to the life you had before you lost your sight, and yes, it’ll be different, but that’s why we’re here… to help you adapt and to also help the people around you adapt… in some cases, they’ll need more support than you do,” she said, her tone changing to something more stern. “I’m not exactly sure what Professor McGonagall said to you, but if you want to fly, you will be able to fly. Okay? I’ll talk to her. We’ll get this sorted out.”

“Thank you,” Harry said and some of the heaviness he’d been feeling fell away.

“Hey, that’s why we’re here,” Healer Jordan said lightly as she stood up, "I've got to go. Gemma's coming over. I hope your day goes well. Let me know if you need anything. Remember, you can use your staff to let me know if you need help."

"Okay, thanks," he said.

"I'll bring you another nutrition potion at lunch," she said as she walked away.

Harry felt around the desk for his schedule and *anagnóstis* and then found the scroll that Healer Jordan had said Hedwig had delivered.

Gemma waved across his back in greeting. He reached for her hand.

"Hiya, Gemma. Do we have time for me to read this note before we go?" he asked.

"Yes," she tapped on his wrist.

He unrolled the scroll wondering who it was from.

"Hey, Harry!" Ron's voice burst through his *aftí*. He started and adjusted the noise level.

"Mum says we'll be there around 10 am on Saturday and we'll stay the whole day. It'll be the whole lot of us, so you better warn everyone. Ginny's still working on her letter. Maybe she'll just talk to you. See you soon. Oops! Sorry. Ha ha! Ron."

Harry liked hearing Ron's voice.

He rolled up the scroll and stuck it in his staff along with the *anagnóstis* and his schedule, then stood up and shook out his staff.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked Gemma.

She tapped his hand, "yes," at the same time she signaled that she was ready to guide him.

They walked slowly to the O&M room. Harry felt as though all his limbs were weighed down with sandbags - though it wasn’t as bad as it had been before.

Once inside, he realized that he and Gemma were getting a private lesson with Ms. Midgeon and he was relieved. They went to their dressing rooms and changed, then met Ms. Midgeon in a smaller,
warm room that had wood floors that was filled with a spicy, smoky fragrance. Music was playing - it was strangely exotic - not in a key he was used to hearing - but still captivating. She spoke to them in hushed tones and handed them each a mat asking to find a spot an arm's length away from each other and take off their socks. Her voice was soothing as she explained each stretch and helped them find the pose. Harry's arms and legs trembled and he had to put down his foot a number of times to keep from toppling over. She spent a lot of time telling them how to breathe - it was so simple, but so hard.

There was one stretch that he liked a lot - Ms. Midgeon called it "child's pose" and he could have stayed in that for a long time. He was surprised when a tear trickled down his nose and he worked hard to keep the rest in.

By the time she was instructing them to lie down on their backs for the final pose called "corpse pose," he felt like he had stretched muscles he didn't even know he had.

Peter joined them for the time they spend in the workshop with Figora.

“Harry, did you get your anagnóstis back? I gave it to Healer Jordan,” Figora asked.

“Yes, thank you. She must have put it in my staff,” Harry said.

"I've cast your pieces," Figora said as they entered the workshop and Harry heard the clear ringing sound of metal on wood. He knew he should feel more anticipation than he felt, but he still felt like he was wading through muck. He guessed that the effects of the potion were wearing off.

Slowly, Harry slid his hands across the wood table - it was gouged and pockmarked from previous projects - until he found the small metal pieces that he had heard Figora drop. The first one he found was Peter's ring. He felt Gemma's arm glance across the top of his and he knew that she was picking up her bracelet. Cast in silver, the design was even more enchanting. He ran his fingers all around it and then found Peter's shoulder, his elbow, then his hand and placed the ring in his upturned palm.

He held his hands lightly over Peter's to feel his reaction to finding the cast ring in his palm and could tell that Peter was captivated by it. Gemma's fingers danced across both of their hands and it was as close as the three of them could get at delighting together over the beauty of the ring.

He reached out again, ghosting his fingers over the table until he found the tip to his staff. Figora had added a post with threads on it before she cast it in Goblin silver. It wasn't as delicately carved as Peter's ring, but he was still happy with it.

I feel happy.

It was a little burst of feeling that passed quickly, but at least it had penetrated the fog for a moment.

Gemma flitted over to look at his staff tip and show him her bracelet that had an organic beauty to it now that it was cast in silver.

"It's really nice, Gemma. I bet your mum will love it," Harry told her.

She squeezed his arm.

"There are some burs and other areas that you'll want to grind down. I'll show you how to do that if you come over here to this workstation," Figora said in her gruff voice.
The three of them worked again on their pieces, side by side with elbows touching companionably.

"Figora, I think the tip is ready to be screwed onto my staff," Harry said.

"Here, let me take a look at it," she said coming over. "Yes, I believe you're right. Extend your staff and let's drill the hole for the female part of the threads. We have to do this carefully or we could crack the wood."

Harry sighed. He was really tired.

"Here, I'll help you," Figora said. "Hand me the staff. Come on, you can do this."

Harry stood up slowly and Figora helped Harry secure the staff in a clamp and then line up the hand drill and secure it so that it wouldn't move during drilling. Slowly, Harry turned the crank on the drill, back it up every so often to empty the sawdust from the tip, until the hole was drilled. Figora handed Harry the female part of the threads and a rubber hammer to drive it into the wood. The fit was snug enough that it wouldn't fall out, but not too tight that it stressed the tip of the wood. Once it was flush with the tip, it was time to screw on the Goblin silver tip.

Figora undid the clamps and Harry heard a squeak which he guessed was a cloth being rubbed over the tip to shine it up, then she pressed the staff against his knuckles gently, and he grasped it.

"Give it a go - see how it works," Figora encouraged.

Harry adjusted the staff so that the navigational voice wouldn't speak and set the staff on the ground. The ring of the tip on the stone floor of the workshop was clear and resonate. It bounced off the surfaces of the objects in the area and Harry knew that he wanted to go someplace with a little more space. He swung it and tapped the ground, moving until he found a space that was more open and the ringing feedback was even more resolute. The sound vibrated through him.

"What do you think, Harry?" Figora asked.

"It is perfect," Harry said and a glow of happiness burned through the cloud that was hovering near his shoulders.

"It does have a clear sound," Figora agreed. "It looks fine, too."

The cloud settled back around him when he turned to share it with Gemma and Peter and realized that they couldn't hear it. His shoulders sagged.

He lifted his head when he heard approaching footsteps. He tried the Reveleo memento spell to see who was coming, but the staff was silent.

"Harry, I've brought you the potion," Healer Jordan said. "Oh, that's a beautiful tip you've added to your staff. Does it help you echolocate?"

"Echolocate? You mean like bats?" Harry asked.

"Yes, they send out a sonar that bounces off objects so that they can fly at night," Healer Jordan explained.

"I guess it kind of does," Harry said thoughtfully. He held out his hand and she placed the warm bottle of potion in his upturned palm. "Thanks," he said as he got a whiff of the potion and his stomach growled in response.
"How did your morning go?" she asked.

"It was fine," Harry said. "I was thinking that I would just have the potion and rest during lunch in the dorm. Is that okay?"

"Sure, that's probably wise," Healer Jordan agreed. "Do you want to try out the safe space I was telling you about in my office? It would give you a bit more privacy and quiet that you'll have in your dorm."

"I guess," Harry agreed, though he wasn't sure. He just didn't have the energy to argue.

"I'll tell Gemma and Peter that you'll meet up with them at the O&M room at 1 o'clock," she said.

He nodded and started walking toward the door… he could tell where the door was by the way the sound bounced off the walls on either side, but moved through the space directly in front of him. He imagined himself as a bat.

_They fly and they can't see._
Harry was glad that Healer Jordan had allowed him to walk in silence from the workshop to her office - he didn’t feel like talking. He was listening intently to the new sound of his staff as they made their way through the corridor. The stone in the corridor sounded different from the stone in the workshop. He supposed it was the shape of the corridor. The tone of the new tip reminded him of how Hermione had described the corridor on his first day - like they were deep underwater.

He could hear when they reached the doors to the dining hall before they passed through them and listened to the way the tinging of his staff bounced off all the furniture in the dining hall as well as the high ceiling. He wondered if he was also hearing the difference of being in a room with large windows versus the corridor which didn’t have any windows. He remembered that the dining hall looked out over the courtyard by the owlery. He thought about visiting Hedwig, but decided he’d go after he rested. He was just so tired.

Healer Jordan led Harry to a little room at the back of her office that he hadn’t noticed before - it was near the one he’d been in before when he was recovering from his face plant.

They stood in the threshold while she explained a bit about the room.

“Harry, this is a little tree house. Here’s the ladder you’ll climb to reach a small wooden deck with railings that is about six feet up in a tree.”

She placed his hand on a rough ladder rung that felt like it had been made out of tree branches.

“There are some chairs against the railings - that might be a nice place to sit and drink your potion - you can also request a tea service with sandwiches by tapping the table three times and telling it what you’d like. Straight ahead of you, about two yards from the ladder, you’ll find a little door and you’ll likely need to duck to get through it without hitting your head. Inside is very cozy, with most of the space being taken up by a large bed with lots of pillows and blankets. Directly across the room from the door and right up against the bed, is a large window that doesn’t have any glass - it has a frame, so you can’t fall out while you sleep, but it is open to the forest surrounding the tree house. The tree house is protected from the elements - so you won’t get rained on. It is warded in a way that alerts me and others at the center if you’re experiencing any kind of distress. There is a wind chime that will sound when it is time for you to get ready to go to your next class,” Healer Jordan said.

“How high up is the ladder?” Harry asked.

“It’s actually a short ladder, so just four rungs until you reach the deck. You can’t climb down to the forest floor on the ladder, it just comes back to this room. The tree house is also protected like the gangplank on the ship to keep people from falling off.”

“Oh, okay, thanks.”

Harry collapsed his cane and put it and the potion in his trouser pockets and then grasped the rungs of the ladder and climbed up onto the deck. He was glad to find that the ladder sides extended all the way up to railing height, so he still had something to hold onto before he stepped from the ladder onto the deck.

He stood for a moment breathing in the cool forest air - it smelled pungent like it had rained recently. A soothing breeze lifted the hair on his forehead and the back of his neck.

He shook out his staff and listened to the silver tip on the wooden planks of the deck. It was a really
different sound than the stone of the center. He used his staff to find the chair and small table by the railing and sat down to drink the potion. It was still warm and was as delicious as it had been earlier. He sat for a little bit listening to the sounds of the forest. It was alive with chirping birds and the scurrying of small animals - squirrels he guessed. He wondered if he’d be able to hear the rustling of a snake from up here… and if he was in a forest that had snakes.

_I should be afraid of snakes._

He wondered where this tree house was.

_Have I traveled out of England again?_

The air had a different quality… damp, but in a different way than an English summer. He left the potion bottle on the table and went back to the ladder so that he could find the door to the tree house.

He reached out to the door - it was made of roughly hewn planks and found a large wooden handle that was also made from a tree branch. He reached up to see how high the door went, then pulled the door open and ducked so he wouldn’t hit his head as he was going through. When he got through he reached above his head to see if he was clear and could stand up. The ceiling rose higher than his hand, it was just the door that was low.

He kept his hand on the wall by his head and explored the space inside with his staff - the silver tip didn’t ring very clearly - muffled by the close space. It was just one yard in that he found the edge of the bed and a sweep of his cane told him that there wasn’t much room except what was taken up by the low bed. It was just one yard on either side of the door and then one to the bed. There was a small rickety table made from tree branches and small planks of wood by the bed to the left of the door.

He collapsed his staff and put it on the table with his glasses and nearly knocked over a little vase of sticks. _Why would someone put sticks in a vase?_ He felt them and little round buds came off on his fingers. _Oh, lavender stems._ He kicked off his trainers, tore off his socks and stuffed them in his shoes, then crouched by the table to line them up.

_I’m not going to trip over them again._

He crawled onto the bed, wriggling his toes, and explored it - the bedding smelled freshly clean and released a hint of lavender. He found mounds of pillows and blankets in a circle like a nest that it went from wall to wall and all the way to the window on the other side of the room.

He found the softest, fluffiest pillows, and punched them into shape to put under his head and then laid down so that his whole body was stretched out next to the window. He pulled some blankets over himself so that he was warm, but could still feel the breeze on his face, smell the forest breathing around him, and listen to the birds. He thought about his cupboard - noticing some similarities, but he felt safer here even with the sounds of forest stretching out before him.

He knew that on the other side of the door Healer Jordan was working in her office - even though it felt like the center was hundreds of miles away. He drifted to sleep - the potion warm in his belly and pushing away the sad fog that seemed to be following him everywhere, even to this heavenly place.

oO0OooO0o0Ooo0Ooo0O0

Harry was flying his broom around the Quidditch pitch with Ron, Fred, and George Weasley. Their laughter was rising and falling with them as they swooped around the pitch; their bright red and gold Quidditch robes billowing out behind them as they flew. The stands were empty, except for
Hermione hunched over a huge tome on her lap and a stack of buttered toast next to her on the bench. In the distance, Hogwarts climbed into the clouds and the sun was casting a rosy hue on the stone and glittering golden off the window panes. The Forbidden Forest was a mass of black green tangles that fringed the grounds. The clouds and the castle were reflected on the smooth surface of the lake, a perfect mirror image. The chiming noise was coming from the snitch that Harry had spotted and was racing after... the sun reflected off its gold surface, nearly blinding him with its brilliance... as he neared it, his hand outstretched, brushing the wiry wings as it flitted just out of his reach.

Suddenly, he lurched, the broom no longer underneath him and he was falling through the air. He twisted in a desperate attempt to grab his broom, but the earth was rushing to meet him. The ringing became more persistent and shrill until... he gasped and sat up - his heart ran thundering past him.

His outstretched hand was empty and the scene before him had evaporated. A fog settled around him - dim and thick. He sucked in a deep breath and sank back into the nest of blankets and pillows, bringing his knees up to his chest.

Harry felt the tree house shift and the sound of the deck creaking under the weight of someone’s footsteps. The door to the tree house opened.

“Harry? Are you okay?” Healer Jordan said.

“I’m okay - it was just a dream,” he answered dully.

It was an odd sensation... to have someone notice when he had a nightmare. He wondered if he had cried out. It wasn’t really a nightmare until the last moment.

**Waking up was the nightmare.**

“Oh, okay. Would you like something to eat? Maybe some tea?” Healer Jordan offered.

“No, thanks,” Harry said. “Well, maybe some tea would be okay.”

He sat up after a bit, rubbed his eyes and ran his fingers through his hair.

Healer Jordan had gone back out to the deck.

Harry scooted over to the edge of the bed where he had left his staff, glasses, socks, and trainers. He took his time putting on his trainers and glasses, then stood up and shook out his staff. He felt like he was walking through molasses. He had just woken up, but he was ready to go back to bed.

He opened the door and ducked through with his hand on the frame.

He heard the clinking of china. “There’s a chair about a yard to your right,” Healer Jordan said from a seated position to his left.

His staff struck the chair and he felt for the back of it and sat down.

“You have a little bit of time before it’s time to head out to the O&M room,” she said.

Even though the tea smelled inviting, he wasn’t sure he had the energy to pour a cup of tea. He sat
back and hung his head.

“Would you like me to pour you a cup of tea?” Healer Jordan asked.

Harry shrugged.

He heard her pouring a cup of tea and then adding sugar and milk.

“Here you go,” she said.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

*She’s observant,* he noted as he took a sip and appreciated the warmth and the tangy contrasted with the sweet and milky.

A squirrel had scrabbled up a nearby tree and was chattering at them. Harry thought about asking his staff to give him a description of the squirrel, but then was too tired to manage.

*Does it really matter if it is a grey or red squirrel?*

He heard Healer Jordan’s own teacup against the saucer.

“Professor McGonagall is going to visit after you talk with Healer Geller this afternoon. If you feel up to joining us, come by my office when you’re done. It is fine either way,” Healer Jordan told him.

“Oh, you’re Lee Jordan’s aunt?” Harry said, turning his face toward her.

“Yes, he’s my younger brother’s son,” she said, still laughing at some remembered prank. “Well, that will certainly brighten things up around here. We should secure our toilet seats! I better warn Godric.” She stood up and vanished the tea service with a little pop.

Harry stood up, too. He wondered why he didn’t feel more rested after his long nap.

He supposed he better get going to meet up with Gemma at the O&M room.

Gemma’s light footsteps greeted Harry as he approached the O&M room, her hand landed gently on his forearm.

“Hiya, Gemma,” he said, trying to smile.

She waved across the back of his hand.

“What are you going to do while I’m learning how to navigate? Isn’t this going to be boring for you?” he asked her.

“Oh. Doesn’t the Center have someone who translates for Peter?” Harry wondered.

She tapped yes, “B-U-S-Y.”

“Is Peter here?” Harry asked.

She dragged two fingers across his palm and they walked over to him.

“Can’t Godric use that spell that Healer Jordan uses so that we can hear you? Wouldn’t it work for Peter, too?” Harry asked.

“No,” she tapped on his arm, then she told Peter what they were talking about. They were standing together close and Harry had a hand on Peter’s arm and the other on Gemma. He could feel them signing to each other. He vaguely wished that he knew what they were saying, but was really too tired to try to follow the conversation.

Why is all this so hard?

“Hey, you three. Are you all coming in?” Godric asked.

Harry jerked, surprised that he hadn’t heard Godric approaching and it caused Gemma and Peter to pause. Harry made the walking sign on Peter’s arm and said, “Gemma, we need to go to class.” Peter gently patted Harry’s forearm in response.

“Sorry, Godric,” Harry apologized, “we lost track of time,” and he willed himself to move toward the O&M room.

“Godric,” Harry said as he approached him, “How does Healer Jordan cast that spell so that we can hear Gemma speak? And can it work for Peter, too? Is it something that I could learn how to cast so that the three of us can talk?”

“Good questions, Harry. Let’s head to our spot for class today and then we can talk about that,” Godric responded.

He led them through the gymnasium where Harry could hear Ms. Midgeon leading another stretching class - yoga as she called it.

Whatever that is. Something strange that she learned in India.

He thought about what Ron would say if he saw them doing yoga and winced. He imagined that they looked pretty funny all upside down and twisted - trying not to fall over.

But it does feel pretty good.

Godric was leading them outside and Harry realized he wasn’t paying very close attention when his staff warned him of the door closing on him and then the door smacked against the silver tip of his staff. He held out his arm to catch the door, and then walked through and held it for Gemma and Peter. It was cool out - he felt like he had walked into a cloud and touched his face to see if it was wet.

Godric was walking a ways down a path he hadn’t been on before - this one turned left to go around the front of the gym.
Harry listened to the sound of his staff made on the gravel path and the reverberating as the tinging bounced off the tall building on their left as they walked by it.

He could tell that the path had extended beyond the building - not only by the change of the enshrouding air as it moved around the building, but also by the sound his staff made. He was pretty sure that there was a hedgerow coming up - an aroma of decomposing leaves reached his nose and the rustling of leaves and branches gave away the location.

As they neared, he reached out a hand to confirm the hedgerow and was rewarded with the scratchy grasp of the twigs and leaves across his palm.

They walked on in silence for a while until the sound of the gravel under their feet changed and they were on a spongy turf that reminded Harry of the football field by his Primary.

“Okay, we’re here,” Godric said.

Harry poked around a bit with his staff to try to figure out where here was, but he didn’t do the charm to make his staff give him descriptions.

“Harry, could you come join us?” Godric invited.

“Sure,” Harry said as he moved toward Godric’s voice. Gemma put her hand on his arm and drew him closer. They were standing in a small circle. Harry put a hand on each of Gemma and Peter and guessed that Godric was across from him doing the same.

“Harry asked if I could cast the spell that Healer Jordan uses so that we can hear you, Gemma, when you’re signing and if that would work for Peter as well,” Godric explained.

Gemma signed this to Peter.

“It would make it a lot easier if I knew how to cast that spell, but I haven’t mastered it yet, though I’m working on it. It involves runes and is pretty advanced,” Godric said and then paused while Gemma translated for Peter.

“Thanks for translating for us, Gemma. I appreciate it. I’m also working on learning protactile BSL, but I don’t know much yet. Harry, I understand you’re learning it, too?” Godric said.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. He felt guilty for not putting more effort into it, though.

“So, Harry, I hear that you flew on your broom on Wednesday with Arig,” Godric stated. “How did it go?”

“Well, it was actually pretty brilliant. I loved it. It was just like being on a broom before. The landing was hard, though, and I spewed. And then Professor McGonagall said that she forbade me from flying,” Harry said.

“Well, Healer Jordan said she’d talk to Professor McGonagall - she did something similar with me. She can be a bit overprotective sometimes. I don’t know if it is any consolation, but she does it out of concern,” Godric paused while Gemma signed this to Peter.

“Gemma tells me that Peter also wants to try flying again,” Godric said answering Harry’s unasked question.

Harry took his hand out of the circle to scratch enthusiastically across Peter’s back. Peter responded with joyful hand motions and Harry beamed.
“Gemma, will you tell Peter that he should absolutely try it? It is amazing,” Harry said.

Gemma tapped him twice and he could feel her translating his words for Peter.

“Running in wide open spaces is similar to flying, so I thought we could work on that today” Godric said.

“Really?” Harry asked.

“Yep, really,” Godric said with a chuckle as Peter patted their arms enthusiastically and made a strangled sound that Harry guessed was a laugh.

Though the fog seemed thicker around them, Harry felt as if the rain cloud that had been threatening to engulf him had dissipated a bit. He took in a big breath.

Godric went on to explain that they were going to work on speed walking around the football pitch and then work toward running. They would hold their staves in their collapsed forms and the charm would be set up to vibrate in their hand to give them direction, rather than use the descriptive commands as with practice, they could be interpreted more quickly and give them more time to react to the direction.

Godric led them over to the edge of the pitch and had them feel with their feet the edge of the pitch - where the football field met with the less tended grass of the park. They could discern the difference with their feet. He asked them to walk around the pitch with one foot on the football pitch and the other on the park grass. Gemma was to stay close to Peter, but allow him to experience it on his own - only guiding him if he strayed from the line between the pitch and the grass. They were to walk around it as quickly as they could manage without breaking into a run.

They met up after they went around the whole pitch. Harry’s breathing was labored, but it felt good to walk through space without wondering if he was going to run into something - just as he had when he was flying. His staff had warned him if he was getting too close to Godric who was leading the way.

The next time they jogged and though it was a little harder to go in a straight line, it didn’t require too many course corrections to get back on the line between the pitch and the park.

The third time around they ran. Godric let Harry go in front of him this time. Harry loved the burn in his calves and thighs, the way his lungs seared with each breath. He wanted to keep going, but a stitch in his side brought him to his knees and he rolled out of the way of Godric who was following him. Godric stopped, “You okay, Harry?” he asked panting.

“Yeah, I’m great, actually,” Harry said, gulping in great breaths. This pain feels good.

“You’re getting the hang of it,” Godric said.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. He was feeling more confident about moving through space faster and listening to the vibrating cues from his staff for when to turn.

Gemma and Peter came up next to them, breathing hard.

“Let’s walk the rest of the way and we’ll call it a day, okay?” Godric said.

The moisture in the air had become more tangible as they were running and now it was actually drizzling. Droplets were running from Harry’s hair and down his neck, soaking into his T-shirt. The football pitch had become more fragrant with the rain and he breathed in the earthy aroma.
“Hey, Godric, I thought this place wasn’t real. Can’t you just turn off the rain?” Harry asked.

“It’s real, Harry,” Godric answered.

“Why aren’t there any muggles around then?”

“Muggle-repelling charms. Suddenly no one wants to use the football pitch or the park while we’re using it. The gym is ours, though. Muggles don’t know it is there,” Godric explained.

“So, it’s a real place - we could keep walking and end up somewhere in the middle of England?” Harry asked.

“Yep,” was Godric’s response.

“So that letter I posted, it really went out via muggle post?” Harry asked.

“Yes, thanks for posting it, by the way,” Godric said.

“No problem,” Harry answered.

They were back in the gym and headed to their changing rooms to dry off.

Harry was feeling a bit more energetic than he’d felt in a while and decided to visit Hedwig before he went to his meeting with Besel. Peter and Gemma were off for more BSL.

“Back again, are you?” the portrait interrogated.

“Er, yes?” Harry responded.

“Well, your owl was beginning to wonder,” the portrait stated and Harry felt a tinge of guilt.

He went over to the perch and clicked his tongue, trying to get Hedwig’s attention. She seemed to be ignoring him. He waited for a bit, clicking, and then, feeling harassed by the portrait that couldn’t seem to leave him alone - *Who does this guy think he is?* - he decided to go over to the window to listen to the sounds of the city in the rain. The odors from the city were completely different in the rain, too. Wet concrete and asphalt predominated, but he was amazed at how much vegetation he could smell. Finally, Hedwig decided that she’d punished him enough and he heard the battering of her wings as she descended and landed heavily on the perch.

He went over to her, slipping a bit on some droppings. He wondered if he could shoot water out of his staff’s tip like his wand and clear a path on the floor.

*It’d just make a bigger mess - wet droppings, eew.*

“Hiya, Hedwig,” he said nuzzling into her feathers. She wasn’t feeling very forgiving and turned her back to him.

“Sorry, girl,” he said. “I was having a rough time.”

The truth of it was heavy in his voice.

She turned back to him and nibbled at his fingers. He found the crust he’d saved for her in his pocket and offered it up.
His stomach rumbled. He really had only had the potions today and had done a fair amount of exerting himself.

*I actually am starting to feel like eating something.*

He smoothed her feathers for a while longer, enjoying their silkiness and her musky, piney scent.
Harry felt raw when he left Besel’s office. It was as if he had been cracked open and his innards poked with a sharp stick. It was really hard work and all he was doing was sitting around and talking about his feelings.

*I’m knackered!*

They did work in an herb garden for a bit and he really enjoyed the fragrant little plants and sinking his hands into the dirt. It made him wistful for Little Friend, though. He told Besel more about the little snake. He asked if they could do more of that next time and Besel seemed glad that he requested it.

As he was leaving Besel’s office, he remembered that he was supposed to meet with Professor McGonagall and Healer Jordan. He was really tempted to slip on his invisibility cloak and just walk away. Really tempted.

“Harry, how are you?” Healer Jordan greeted him. “Professor McGonagall is here. Do you feel up to talking with us for a little bit?”

“Er, sure,” Harry said reluctantly. He walked over to Healer Jordan, his silver tip tinged on a chair leg as he walked by.

“Hello, Harry,” Professor McGonagall said.

“Hello, Professor,” Harry said.

“Harry, there’s a chair on your right about two feet,” Healer Jordan told him. He found it and sat down and collapsed his staff.

“Would you like some tea and biscuits?” Healer Jordan asked.

“Yes, please,” he said as his stomach rumbled.

There was a bit of awkward silence as his tea and biscuits were sorted out. He nibbled on a chocolate digestive and waited. He could feel a strange tension in the air and he was straining to figure it out.

“So, Harry,” Professor McGonagall began. “I’ve been looking into the matter of your… the Dursleys. It seems we were greatly misled in terms of their ability to care for you… as you should have been cared for. And I… I’m very sorry for my part in all of this.”

Harry sat still, his hand holding the teacup began to tremble a bit, rattling the china. It didn’t seem like Professor McGonagall wasn’t done yet.

“I want you to know that we’re working on a solution,” she finished. Harry felt like there was a lot she wasn’t telling him.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “What kind of solution?”

“Well, we don’t know yet. It is more complicated than simply removing you from their care,” she said.

“What? Do you mean I might not… ” He was afraid to say; afraid to jinx it.
“What would help us, Harry,” Healer Jordan stepped into the conversation, “would be if you could share some memories with us about your time with the Dursleys.”

“Like tell you about them?” Harry asked, confused.

“No, it is a process that allows others to experience your memories as if they were there. Remember, we were talking about this as part of your Mind Healing experience?” she explained.

“Oh, yeah,” Harry said. “What memories do you want?”

“We’d want several memories to give us an idea of what it was like for you to live with them - your worst and best and examples of a typical day,” Healer Jordan said.

“I dunno,” Harry grumbled. “There’s not much to share, is there? It’s just the Dursleys… sitting in my cupboard, doing chores, getting in trouble, right?”

“What do you mean ‘sitting in your cupboard?’” Professor McGonagall said sharply.

“You know, where my Hogwarts letter was addressed to… Mr. H. Potter, The Cupboard Under the Stairs,” he quoted.

Harry wondered if Healer Jordan and Professor McGonagall were each holding their breath. He cocked his head.

“You knew, right?” he asked quietly.

Professor McGonagall let out her breath.

“No, Harry, I didn’t.”

“Oh, I thought you knew.”

“I’d like to know now,” she said, her voice breaking a bit.

“Harry, if you chose to share some memories with us, then we will carefully extract the memories you’ve chosen - you just think about them while we’re performing the charm - to view in a pensieve,” Healer Jordan explained.

“What’s a pensieve?” Harry asked.

“It is a special magical object that can hold the memories - it can also reveal things that were happening during the memory that you may not have been aware of… it has the ability to view things more holistically,” she said.

“Will they be gone from my memory, then?” he asked.

“No, you keep your memory. For this, you’d just be sharing it with us,” Healer Jordan explained. “So, Harry, are you willing to share some memories with us of your childhood with the Dursleys?”

“I dunno,” Harry said hesitantly. “You said that you can’t remove me from their care. So that means I have to go back to them, right? What if what I share with you… what if it makes it worse?” The words rushed out of him and he wished he could swallow them back.

“Is that why you’re reluctant to tell us about how they treat you?” Healer Jordan asked.

Harry shrugged and put his hands under his legs.
There was a long silence as if they were waiting for an answer.

“It always gets worse when people poke around,” he finally admitted so quietly that he could hear both Healer Jordan and Professor McGonagall shift in their seats as if they were leaning forward to hear him better.

“Harry, I promised you earlier that I would do everything within my power to make sure that wouldn’t be the case. In order to do that, we need to know what we’re dealing with. We need to know what has been going on. I know that this means you have to trust me and I understand that many adults in your life have not been worthy of that trust. I hope that I can earn your trust. I won’t press you on this anymore. When you are ready to share the memories, please let me know,” Healer Jordan said.

“Okay,” Harry breathed out a captive breath.

Professor McGonagall made a strangled noise - as if she’d stopped herself from exclaiming. He felt the air moving as if someone was waving a fan. He furrowed his brow, trying to figure it out.

Harry was tempted to remind Healer Jordan to talk to Professor McGonagall about how she’d forbidden him to fly, but he couldn’t form the words.

“Is there anything else, Healer Jordan, or can I go to dinner?” Harry asked.

“That’s all for now, Harry. Thank you,” Healer Jordan said.

“Okay, thanks. Bye Professor McGonagall,” Harry said as he stood up.

“Yes, Harry. I’ll visit again soon,” Professor McGonagall said. Harry’s surprise must have shown on his face. “I’ll be working closely with Healer Jordan on this. I, too, need to earn your trust,” she said solemnly.

“Er,” Harry said awkwardly, “Thanks, Professor.” She pressed her hand onto his shoulder and he flinched.

“Sorry, Harry. I should have told you I was going to touch you” she said in a small voice.

“It’s okay. Just, it was a surprise,” he said.

“Right. I need to remember that,” she answered. “Bye, Harry.”

Harry, Gemma, Peter, and Aminah spent the time after dinner figuring out how to play a braille version of exploding snap that Madam Flamel had lent Peter - it was charmed to work without wands. Since they were all really new at learning braille (Gemma included), it was really slow going with all of their fingers pushing in to read the numbers - but somehow that made it even funnier when the cards exploded. His sides ached from laughing - it felt like ages since he had laughed. He was glad that Gemma made him play - he had tried to sulk off and just go to bed early, but she dragged him over and pretty soon he’d forgotten how tired he was.

As Harry climbed into bed that night, he realized that the fog that had been following him around for a while now seemed to have backed off a bit. Dinner hadn’t tasted like cardboard. It was just now as the room was settling down into quiet that he could feel it swirling around him again, settling in his lungs, making his breathing heavy.
He thought about some of the things that Besel had said that might help him when he was feeling that way. He laid in his bed and tried the body scan that they had done in her office - it was easier when she was guiding him with her gentle voice, but he tried doing it for himself. He thought about his toes, one at a time, clenching each of them and then releasing them as he thought about each digit, then the arch of his foot, then the top of his foot, then the heel, up to his ankle… by the time he’d reached the backs of his knees, he was asleep.

Harry woke in a heart-stopping lurch when his bed bounced under Gemma’s knees. He only knew it was Gemma from the fluttering signs that she was peppering across his back. She wrote “W-A-K-E” space “U-P” space on his shoulders - which weren’t nearly as sensitive as his palm, so it took him longer to figure out what she was saying… but he kind of figured it out anyway.

“I’m up!” he grumbled.

She took his palm and wrote, “T-E-R-R-Y” space “V-I-S-I-T-I-N-G!”

He sat up suddenly, “What time is it?”

She drew the numbers 7, 3, 0 on his palm.

“Oh!” He was relieved. *Ron’s coming to visit!*

She tugged at his arm, pulling him halfway out of his bed and pushing his staff against his palm. “Okay, okay, I’ll get ready,” he smiled at her enthusiasm and stretched and extracted his legs from his covers. He poked at the edge of his consciousness… *is the fog nearby waiting to envelop me?* It was there, but not as thick as it had been yesterday. His limbs felt less heavy.

“What’s all the commotion? It’s the weekend for Merlin’s sake! Can’t we sleep in?” Mei splashed grumpily from her tank on the other side of the wall.

“Sorry, Mei,” Harry said as he walked by, slipping a bit in a puddle of water.

Harry heard Gemma move by him to go back to her area. Tony (he was pretty sure it was Tony) was really driving his hogs to market. He wondered if he would be getting visitors or going home for the weekend. He’d heard Aminah mention that her mom was coming to pick her up and that she’d be coming back on Sunday evening, after dinner. He wondered what Mei would be doing this weekend and then thought of Arig spending the weekend in a cell while he went through his transformation. *That would be bleak.*

Gemma and Harry had the notebook out between them as they ate breakfast. The dining hall was pretty empty. Harry guessed that a lot of the older residents had gone home on Friday after their last class.

He wondered how the Weasleys were going to travel to London… their Flying Ford Anglia was still roaming feral in the Forbidden Forest.

“How’s Terry traveling?” Harry asked.

“I think they are doing side-along apparition,” Gemma responded.
Harry thought about Tony. He wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to travel that way after learning Tony’s story.

“What time are your folks arriving?”

“I think around lunch time. Mum’s always late,” Gemma wrote. “And Peter’s brother was going to pick him up this morning.”

“Is Peter going to travel on the tube?” Harry asked, remembering his own experience on it and imagining it would be even harder if you couldn’t see or hear. He shuddered remembering his fear of losing Hermione in the crush of people.

Hermione! I never wrote her back!

He listened to the pencil scratching on the paper, then read Gemma’s response, “No, I think they’re traveling by floo powder. Why did you jump?”

“I just remembered that I never wrote back to Hermione. She asked if I’d mind if she came to visit this weekend, even though the Weasleys are coming,” he explained. “Maybe I could ring her…”

“Do you mean on a muggle telephone?” Gemma asked.

“There was one in the O&M room, near the post box in the hedgerow,” Harry said. He accio’d his muggle money from his staff… he had some coins he’d scrounged while doing laundry and cleaning the sofa and carefully stowed away. The Dursleys would definitely think he was stealing, but he had no other way of getting muggle money. They never gave him an allowance as they did Dudley. Not that he’d ever had an occasion to spend it (they’d know in an instant that it wasn’t his money), but he always imagined that it was the money he’d use when he ran away finally. He felt the coins trying to figure out if he had ten pence. Gemma took the coins from his hand and then put one on his palm. “Is this the ten pence?” She tapped his hand twice, “yes.”

“How do you know about muggle money?” Harry asked.

“My pa uses it sometimes. He taught me,” Gemma explained.

He Accio’d the slip of paper that Hermione had written her number on and ran his fingers over it, trying to find where she’d written it. He couldn’t feel it. He ran his anagnóstis over the paper and found the phone number, and Hermione’s voice sounding in his aftí.

He heard Gemma writing, “I can dial it for you.”

“Okay, thanks - that’d be easier than trying to read it with my anagnóstis and then trying to dial,” Harry said as he put the notebook and anagnóstis in his staff. He stuffed the paper and the ten pence in his pocket as he stood up, shaking out his staff.

Gemma came alongside of him and tapped the side of his hand and he grasped her arm. They were walking through the door when Gemma stopped. Harry cocked his head, trying to hear what might have made her stop, then he heard Mei’s wheels.

“Hi, Mei,” Harry said as he felt Gemma signing.

“Hi. Where are you two off to?” she asked.

He felt Gemma replying, so he just waited.
“Sure, it’s too early to eat anyway,” Mei said.

“You want to come with us?” Harry asked.

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?” Mei curtly responded.

“Um, I’m just guessing as I can’t see what Gemma said to you,” Harry reminded her as Gemma started walking toward the O&M room again.

“Oh, right. I forgot. Merlin’s beard, it must be a pain for you two to talk,” Mei said.

“It’s not so bad. But Gemma doesn’t like it when we talk while we’re walking because she can’t follow the conversation,” Harry said.

“Right,” said Mei, gliding alongside Harry.

Harry heard sounds of metal striking metal coming from the workshop as they passed it and wondered who was working there this early in the morning. There was also a sulfur smell that wafted by.

“Whew, that stinks!” Mei complained.

They turned the corner and stopped outside the door to the O&M room.

“Is it set up as the gym?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, Gemma’s just reading the sign to make sure. It looks like it is,” Mei said.

Gemma opened the door and motioned for Mei to pass through first, then Harry and Gemma passed through. They followed the sounds of Mei’s wheels down the corridor toward the door to the park. When they got outside, Gemma was signing to Mei. It was another cool, drizzly day - he liked hearing the water on the trees and the aroma of wet grass and plants. The wet wood in the hedgerow was really pungent.

“She says she doesn’t know where the phone box is. That you need to lead us,” Mei said, skepticism in her voice.

“Oh, right,” said Harry. He let go of Gemma’s arm and said, “Navigant telephone box,” then remembered that he had to change how his staff talked to him and made it so he could hear the directions. He thought he could probably get there on his own, but didn’t want to attempt it with Mei. She wouldn’t be forgiving if he led them down the wrong path. And he could still hear the silver tinging on the path as they walked, over the sounds of his aftí giving him directions in his ear.

He started walking down the footpath and listened as Mei and Gemma followed behind him, Mei’s wheels grinding over the gravel on the path, squishing in the mud. She was grumbling about the rain, which he thought was funny, given that she mostly lived in water.

I wonder why she wanted to come with us?

He hoped the muggle repelling charms were working - it could be awkward if they encountered a muggle while walking around with a mermaid.

They turned off the footpath onto the pavement and walked along the hedgerow. It sounded like no one else was around. He could smell lilacs nearby.

Pretty soon his staff was telling him that he needed to turn left and cross the street. As he stood
listening, Mei said, “Harry, I’ll just wait over here. There isn’t really a pavement over on the other side of the street and there’s a car parked really close to the telephone box. I really hope the muggle repelling charms are working because if anyone sees me… ”

“Okay, Mei. Godric said that the charms should work anytime we come over here,” he said. Gemma came over to his side and tapped the back of his hand and he took her elbow and she led him across the street and over to the telephone box.

He could hear Mei’s wheels moving over the wet pavement nervously. He wondered what she was looking at.

Gemma took his hand off her arm and put it on the door. He found the handle and pulled it open. It smelled musty and a bit rank, but he went inside, arm held up in front of his face in case he was going to walk right into the phone and Gemma followed him.

It’s lucky we’re both small.

He moved the handle of his staff around the space until he found the telephone. He felt the buttons hoping that he’d be able to read the numbers in braille, but he was surprised that they weren’t labeled in braille. There was just a line on the button in the center. It felt grimy. He fished the ten pence out of his pocket and the paper with the number and handed them to Gemma.

“Thanks, Gemma.”

She tapped his hand twice, “sure.”

He heard her pick up the earpiece and he held out his hand for it. She dropped the ten pence in the slot. Harry listened for the right moment and then signaled for her dial. Harry felt his heart jump into his throat as the ringing started on the line.

“Hullo?” Dr. Granger answered.

“Hello, Dr. Granger, this is Harry Potter. How are you?” Harry said.

“Oh, Harry. How are you?”

“I’m fine, sir. Thanks. It’s just that I was hoping to speak to Hermione. Is she there?” Harry said. He really hadn’t had many phone conversations… the Dursleys had never let him use the phone, but he remembered Aunt Petunia coaching Dudley on how to properly use the telephone.

“Sure, Harry. Just a moment, I’ll get her,” Dr. Granger said.

“Thanks,” Harry was relieved.

He listened as Dr. Granger’s footsteps sounded on the other end of the line and then he could hear Hermione’s lighter steps running toward the phone, “Harry?” she nearly screamed into the phone and he held it away from his ear a bit. He could feel Gemma breathing behind him, her breath moving the hairs at the back of his neck. He wondered if she wanted to leave the phone booth. He tried to move closer to the far wall so that she could squeeze by him if she wanted, and she slipped out.

“Hi, Hermione. I’m sorry I didn’t answer your last letter,” he said. He felt like he should explain why he hadn’t answered, but he didn’t know how to explain it.

“You asked if I’d mind if you came today and of course, I’d love to see you. I mean it’ll be chaos
with the Weasleys here, but… you know…the more the merrier,” he said in a rush.

“Are you alright, Harry?” she asked.

Harry was surprised. She was really amazing - picking up on little things over the phone.

“Well, you know,” he said heavily, “I’ve been better.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said.

He really appreciated how much she really did get it.

“It’s really good to hear your voice, Harry,” she said.

“It’s good to hear yours, too. I’d really like you to come if you can manage it. There are some people I’d like you to meet… all my roommates: Gemma, Mei, Aminah, Tony, and Arig. And there’s Peter and Adam. Some of them will probably be gone visiting their own families. Professor McGonagall came to see me, too. There’s a really neat workshop here, too. I made a silver tip for my staff out of goblin silver that has a great tinging sound,” Harry stopped.

“That sounds great, Harry. I would really like to meet your roommates, too. I’m glad you called because I was trying to decide if I should just come or not. My mum said she had some things she needed to do in London today and she could bring me by and then pick me up afterward. I’ll just go tell her that I’ll go with her. I’ll see you soon, okay, Harry!” Hermione said. He could hear raindrops on the roof of the phone box and realized that it was raining harder now.

“Okay, that’ll be great. The Weasleys are going to be here at 10, what time do you think you’ll get here?” he asked.

“Mum said around the same time. I’ll see you soon!” she said as she rang off.

Harry felt around with the earpiece for a bit before he found the hanger.

He left the phone box and took in a deep breath. The rain smelled so good, he didn’t mind the cold drops on his head so much. Gemma tapped his hand and he grabbed her elbow. She was trembling as she led him across the street. He wondered if Mei had left them when he didn’t hear her once they reached the pavement.

He tapped Gemma on the arm, “Is Mei still here?”

She tapped, “No,” on his hand. Then she took his hand and wrote, “L-E-T’S” space “R-U-N.”

“Oh!” he nearly shouted and they broke into a run. Harry stumbled a few times, but managed to catch himself - his staff held higher in the air in front of him.

By the time they reached the gym door, they were soaking and laughing hard. Harry could feel Gemma’s laughter as it shook her torso and through her arm. They collapsed against the door for a minute, catching their breath, before they heaved it open.
The Weasleys visit

Harry was pacing in the reception area. It was a quarter to 10. The Weasleys were due at any moment. So was Hermione. Gemma’s family wasn’t coming until noon, but she was waiting with Harry. Harry really wanted to go out to the street to wait for them outside, but Besel, who was working at the desk today, said that he really shouldn’t do it until he’d had a lesson on how to navigate on a city street filled with people with his staff by himself. He understood, but it didn’t make the waiting any easier.

They had just seen Peter off after meeting his older brother, Ivan, who seemed surprised that Peter had made friends with Gemma and Harry who were nearly half his age, but recovered quickly and was gracious and kind. They also learned that Peter’s name was really Petro. His brother gave him a hard time for trying to go by the more Anglicized version of his name at the Center. Their little group had been jostled around quite a bit as they tried to talk tactiley with the two brothers shoving each other. It reminded Harry of their exploding snap game the night before.

As he paced, he wondered if Ron would be up for trying exploding snap with braille cards.

He had just made his third circuit of the reception area, his silver tip making a pleasing (to him at least) tinging sound that echoed off the walls when he heard the noises from the street explode into the tranquil waiting room. He stopped and turned toward the wall that must have just opened up into a door.

“Harry!” Hermione squealed, her footsteps slapping on the tile as she ran toward him and then she stopped suddenly. He felt her hand lightly touch his hand that he was holding out toward her and then she hugged him and her hair was flying around his face.

“Hermione,” he said sputtering, trying to get the hair out of his mouth when he hugged her back. He was really glad she was here. He heard other footsteps approaching them and pulled away.

“How is she going to communicate with Hermione’s mum? He wondered and then he remembered that she had said that her dad was muggle, too. Has he learned sign language yet?
But something was going on… “Dr. Granger, do you know sign language?” Harry asked.

“I was just telling Gemma that I know a little - mostly related to teeth! I have a couple patients who sign, so I’ve learned a bit over the years of treating them,” she explained.

Gemma’s hand fluttered on his arm. It made her happy.

“That’s great,” Harry smiled.

“The little bits of paper that write out what you’re saying, they are for Gemma, right?” Hermione asked.

“Yes, I can teach the incantation to you, too,” Harry said. “There are other people here, too, who use them. I guess I’d have to fin - er - end the charm if I went out onto Charing Cross Road, though. I keep forgetting that they are there.” He was afraid that he almost ended the charm accidentally. He was holding his staff.

“Hermione, will I be able to find the entrance if you’re not with me when I return?” Dr. Granger had turned to Hermione.

“Oh, I don’t know, mum,” Hermione said.

“We could ask Besel,” Harry suggested and he turned toward the reception desk and started walking toward it, then muttered, “Navigant reception desk.”

Hermione jogged to catch up with him. “Harry, is that the silver tip you were telling me about?”

“Yes, I made it at the workshop here - it is Goblin silver. I formed it out of wax and Figora cast it in silver,” he explained. “Gemma made a really beautiful bracelet.” He caught the paper and handed it to Gemma, remembering that she’d have a hard time following the conversation while they were walking.

His staff tinged against the desk.

“Hi, Besel. Dr. Granger was wondering how to find the Center’s entrance when she returns if she doesn’t have a wand,” Harry asked.

“Oh, that’s a great question. We have a little locator disk that will help you find the entrance, Dr. Granger. Here you go,” Besel said.

“Oh, thank you! How does it work?” Dr. Granger asked.

“Just approach the entrance as you did just now, while holding the disk and it will ask you if you want to enter the Center. You may keep it if you think you’ll be returning on other…” Besel was explaining when the noises of Charing Cross Road invaded the serene quiet of the reception area again; this time accompanied by an uproarious chorus of Weasley voices. Harry wondered how they managed not to violate the International Statute of Secrecy every time they set a foot out of the Burrow as a family unit.

There was a stampede of feet, shouts of “Harry! There you are!” and Harry turned, collapsed his staff and stuck it in his pocket, and braced himself for the onslaught, grinning as he hadn’t done in weeks.

Gemma grabbed onto his arm seconds before they reached him. He heard Hermione running toward the group shrieking “Ron!” and then he lost track of everything - he had no idea who was hugging
him, arms were grabbing him from all directions, they were all asking him questions and their voices were alarmingly similar, he was being jostled around, someone mussed up his hair, Mrs. Weasley kissed his cheek (it could only be her), someone had stuffed a roll of parchment into his hand, hands were squeezing his shoulders and pumping his hand with vigorous handshakes, and he only managed to stay upright as he was enveloped by the group because their hands were holding him up.

They brought the aroma of the Burrow with them and it made him feel as if he were home. As they were starting to break away, he had a slight panic when he realized that he’d lost track of Gemma.

“Gemma, are you okay?” he asked.

“Who’s Gemma?” Ron asked from just by his elbow. Harry turned his head to face Ron, relieved that he could pick out Ron’s voice at least.

“My friend - she was here with me when you came in. Is she still here?” he asked.

“The little pock-marked girl?” Ron said. “Hey, why are those little papers flying around your mouth?” He batted at it like it was a mosquito.

“Uh,” Harry felt like he’d been hit in the gut. He had been so happy to see Ron and suddenly that felt shattered. He turned away from Ron. “Gemma?” he asked again.

“She’s talking to Hermione’s mum, Harry,” Ginny said so softly by his side that he almost didn’t hear her.

“Oh, thanks. She’s okay, then?” he asked.

“Yes,” Ginny said just as quietly.

“Hi, Ginny. Hey - how are you doing? Are you okay?” he asked, reaching out for her and accidentally poking her torso… he’d misjudged where she was and pulled his hand back. “Oops, sorry,” he muttered.

She sniffled.

“Ginny?” he asked, cocking his head. It was hard to hear with everyone still talking - their voices were echoing off the walls in the reception area.

“She’s run over to mum, mate,” Ron said gravely. “Sorry, she’s having a hard time.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” Ron said.

“Hey, Harry!” He was pretty sure it was one of the twins, though he didn’t know which one. “Hey, Forge or is it Gred?” he said.

“Lee’s here, too!” Fred said as he turned away.
“Harry! So you’ve met my Aunt Medea!” Lee said.

“Er… oh, Aunt Medea? - Archimede - yes,” he said, suddenly fearful that she might have told Lee about his face plant in front of everyone or the day he spent trying to disappear into his mattress.

“Harry, I was…” Arthur had clapped a hand onto Harry’s shoulder.

There was a tinkling sound of a bell and the voices died down, “Welcome, families! There is tea set up in the dining hall ready for you and plenty of space for you to catch up and enjoy each other’s company there,” Besel invited diplomatically from the door to the corridor.

“Oh, well, that’s lovely, dear. Thank you so much!” Molly said as she started herding her family toward the door. “Is it just down this corridor, then?”

“Harry.” Dr. Granger had come up to him. Arthur’s hand was still on his shoulder, but he let go when Harry turned to Dr. Granger.

“Yes?”

“I’ve got to go - I’m meeting a friend for tea. It was good to see you. I’ll be back to pick up Hermione around 4 pm,” she said.

“It was good to see you, too,” he said. “Thanks for bringing Hermione today.”

“She’s been thinking a lot about you,” Dr. Granger said. “Bye.”

“Bye,” Harry said.

“Harry,” Arthur put his hand on his shoulder again and seemed to be trying to steer Harry toward the door, to follow the group who was moving that way.

Harry got his staff out his pocket and shook it out and started following them.

“Oh, right. There you go, then,” Arthur said and fell in step.

“Hi, Mr. Weasley. Thanks for coming to visit me,” Harry said.

“We’ve been very worried about you. It looks like you’re getting along, though. Are you doing okay? Is there anything we can do?” Arthur said.

“Thanks, but I’m fine, sir,” Harry said.

What could they do?

“Oh, there you are, Harry, dear!” Molly exclaimed, “I thought we’d gone and left you!”

Harry heard Besel’s chair faintly, by the door and turned to her, “thank you, Besel.”

“No, problem, Harry - enjoy your day,” she responded.

“Thanks, I will,” he said.

“Here’s the door, Harry dear,” Molly said. He stopped though because his staff hit something soft.

“Molly dear, you’re standing in his way,” Arthur said gently.

“Oh, right, sorry, dear.”
She sounded flustered as she hurried on through the door.

_I wonder where Ron’s gone off to?_

He remembered he could ask his staff, but then remembered that he hadn’t had a chance to _Memento_ the Weasleys yet. He’d have to do it while they were at tea. He wondered if his staff would be able to tell Fred and George apart.

_That’d be handy._

“Where’s Ron?” Harry asked.

“Oh, he’s up ahead, you go on and catch up with him,” Molly suggested and then caught her breath.

Harry considered just flat out running as he had that morning with Gemma, just to get away from that strangled sob that she’d uttered.

He swallowed a sigh, “It’s fine.”

“Ron said that the Dursleys wouldn’t bring you here and that you set off on your own!” Molly said, “and that you were at the train station, figuring out how to board when Hermione and Dr. Granger showed up.”

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“Well! Thank goodness for them. I can’t imagine… and you! Why didn’t you owl us? We would have helped you!” Harry cringed when she turned on him.

“Oh, sorry, dear. It’s just… it’s just not right. You are not alone, despite how your _muggles_ treat you. Is anybody doing anything about it?”

“Er,” Harry said.

_What’s there to do?_

He thought about mentioning Professor McGonagall, but that seemed like a bag of flobberworms.

“Harry, I’ve been wanting to talk to someone in charge here. Do you know a Healer Jordan? I understand she’s the Healer-in-Charge,” Arthur asked.

“Yeah, we just passed her office,” he motioned behind him on the left. “You know that she’s Lee Jordan’s aunt, right?”

“Oh, is that right! Well, I’ll just pop over there and see if she’s around. I want to have a word,” Arthur said. “Molly, I’ll be in for tea in just a minute.”

“Oh, alright dear,” Molly said. “Ginny, you’re being very quiet.”

Harry hadn’t even heard Ginny walking alongside Mrs. Weasley, even on the tile floor of the corridor.

“Ginny’s been seeing a Mind Healer since she returned from school and she’s been helping her a lot with the nightmares, but we’ve got a ways to go still, don’t we Ginny, dear,” Molly said, her voice turning away from Harry. Harry imagined that Ginny’s face was as red as her hair with that declaration.
“It’s been very hard. What a monster. And to think that he nearly killed both of you. Harry, we owe you so much,” Molly continued, sniffing. “And you lost so much saving our Ginny.”

Now Harry felt his neck getting warm at the same time that he felt the heaviness of the fog infiltrating his limbs, “You don’t owe me anything. I couldn’t not try to find her.”

“Harry, where did you go?” Ron’s long feet were slapping on the tile floor as he ran toward them, skidding to a stop by Harry. “What are you lot talking about? You all seem dreadful serious.”

“Uh,” Harry said.

Harry heard Hermione’s lighter footsteps coming up behind Ron.

“I should hurry on in there, who knows what the twins and Lee are up to. Terrorizing Percy, no doubt,” Molly said and she rushed off. Harry was pretty sure that he heard Ginny alongside her, but her footsteps were so light that he wasn’t sure.

“Is Gemma with you?” Harry asked.

“Who? The scarred girl?” Ron asked.

“Ron!” “Don’t call her that!” Hermione and Harry shouted at the same time.

“What did I do?” Ron said. Harry imagined that he held up his hands in defense.

“Just, don’t call her that. Her name is Gemma. And I don’t actually know what she looks like… and frankly, I don’t care. She’s my friend. I’ve been wanting you both to meet her, but not if you’re going to do that,” Harry said.


“Ron, can’t you understand that it might be painful to be described that way?” Hermione asked.

“What? She’s not here, and anyway, she can’t hear me, even if she was here,” Ron said. “Don’t get your pants in a twist, okay?”

Hermione let out an exasperated grunt.

Harry sighed, deflated.

“Harry, she said she had to go back to her room. That she’d meet us in the dining hall in a bit for tea,” Hermione said.

“How do you know that’s what she said. She was waving her arms around like… uh,” Ron said. He stopped and Harry guessed that Hermione was giving him a quelling look.

“Well, I don’t know British Sign Language like my mum, but I could read the translation slips of paper, like the ones Harry’s using,” Hermione said.

“Oh,” said Ron. “What’s British Sign Language?”

“It is just what is sounds like - a language of gestures used by people who are hard of hearing or deaf,” Hermione explained.

“I thought that was just for muggles,” Ron said. “Can’t wizards fix that stuff? Grow her new ears or whatever?”
“No, Ron. I’ve been telling you. Magic can’t fix everything,” Hermione said.

“Sure it can!” Ron disagreed.

“Ron, why do you think I’m here?” Harry said slowly.

“To get new eyes, of course,” Ron said. “Like Mad-Eye Moody’s - they’ll be wicked. You’ll be able to see through walls and clothes and stuff!”

“Ron, I told you!” Hermione sounded angry.

“Merlin’s beard,” Harry swore. He felt too tired. He was fighting an urge to go curl up under his covers again.

“What? What did I say?” Ron asked.

“Healer Jordan told me that they’d only work if I had a working optical nerve,” Harry said heavily. “And they’d have to remove my eyes.”

“What! Remove your eyes? That’s barbaric!” Ron sputtered. “What’s an optical nerve?”

“It’s the pathway - it’s how your brain receives images from your eyes. The Basilisk venom mostly destroyed the connection between my brain and my eyes. I can just tell if it is light or dark, nothing else,” Harry explained.

“How can you tell if it is light or dark if the connection between your eyes and your brain is broken?” Ron asked.

“I dunno. I guess it is mostly damaged. The healers said I had some residual vision,” Harry said.

“Does this mean you’re never going to see again?” Ron said.

Harry’s throat felt tight. He hadn’t really thought about it like that. He had been thinking in smaller chunks of time. Just getting through to the end of the day or sometimes thinking ahead to how he would manage at Hogwarts.

“Yeah, I guess,” he said, his vocal cords straining with the effort to utter the words.

“Oh,” Ron said.

Hermione was really quiet.

This was not how Harry imagined this day would begin.

“Come on. Let’s go get tea,” Harry said, turning to blink away the sting of tears in his eyes. The space between his shoulders torqued closer. He started stalking toward the dining hall. After a second, he heard Ron and, then a bit later, Hermione fall in step behind him. He could hear their breaths escaping in frustration as if they were gesturing to each other.

“You know that I know that you’re talking about me, right?” he practically shouted, not bothering to turn in their direction.

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione moaned.

“How can he know that?” Ron muttered.
“I can hear you, Ron!”

He felt as if he were slowly filling with sand, each step heavier than the one before it as he stalked into the dining hall.

“Harry, we’re over here!” Percy shouted from across the dining hall.

Harry ground his teeth together. *Maybe having all the Weasleys visit at once was not a great idea after all…*

Harry squeezed his staff to get a reading on the room. There weren’t any other residents in the hall. He sighed with relief.

“Harry,” Molly had jumped up and was ushering him toward the table, “there’s a seat here for you. We pulled up extra chairs so we could all sit together. That’s right, dear, there you go!”

She was fluttering around him and he fell into his chair jabbing his butt cheek on the arm as she moved it while he was in the act of sitting down. “Oops! Sorry about that! Let me get you a cup of tea. Milk and sugar, dear?”

“Sure,” he said, too tired to refuse.

Hermione and Ron settled into the chairs on either side of him.

“Is there a seat for Gemma?” Harry asked.

Ron groaned.

“Yes, we pulled one over for her,” Fred or George said.

“Great, thanks,” Harry said.

“Here you go, dear,” Molly said, the teacup rattling in the saucer which made it easier for him to find.

“Thank you,” Harry managed and set it down carefully on the table.

He felt like all their eyes were on him. He didn’t know what they wanted.

“The Center is so breathtakingly beautiful with all the underwater blue-green light and delicate white arches, don’t you think? It seems like it would be a very calming atmosphere to learn how to… adapt in,” Molly seemed very nervous as she rattled on, trying to fill the silence.

Harry sighed.

“Mum, he can’t *see* that it’s beautiful, can he?” Percy said in a sharp whisper.

“Oh, right,” Molly said, “I’m sorry, Harry. That was thoughtless. I guess this is going to be an adjustment for all of us, isn’t it.”

“It’s okay,” Harry smiled weakly at her. She really was trying.

She patted his knee, startling him.

Harry listened to Ron munching on a biscuit.
“So, what do you want to do today?” Harry asked.

“Well, we were wondering what you wanted to do today, Harry,” Molly asked.

“I dunno, there’s a lot to do here, if you want to explore the Center,” he said.

He had been thinking about getting some new clothes or a second pair of shoes, but wasn’t sure if he was up to going out into London with everyone now that they were all here. Just getting down the corridor to the dining hall seemed like an ordeal. *Maybe Hermione could help me duplicate my trainers...*

“There’s a room with a portal to a tropical beach that’s pretty lovely. Might be fun to swim in the ocean for a bit,” Harry suggested.

“We don’t have any beach attire, though,” Percy protested.

“What? Aren’t you a wizard, Percy?” Fred or George chided.

“Oh, right,” Percy said. Harry imagined his cheeks flushing.

Harry sipped his tea. Hermione was awfully quiet next to him.

A hand ghosted across his shoulders - waving. “Hi, Gemma,” he said turning toward her.

“Have you met everyone here?” he asked. She stood behind him and tapped once on his shoulder, “no.”

“Oh, I should teach you all the *Scribunt loqui* charm first,” Harry remembered. Around the table, he heard the Weasleys and Lee working on casting the charm until it sounded like they all had it.

He made introductions around the table and they found a spot for Gemma near him.

“Gemma, we were thinking of going to the O&M room, but as the tropical beach - like it was on Monday,” Harry turned to Gemma. She tapped twice on his arm, “okay.”

“Is that the room where…” Hermione asked and before she even finished, Harry said, “Yes, yes it is.”

“What happened?” Lee asked.

“Oh, we got dumped onto the beach by a boardwalk by…” Harry could tell that Hermione didn’t know how to finish.

“Well, it was an accident. Mei didn’t mean it, Hermione. She’s a lot better now,” Harry explained. “She’s one of my roommates.”


“Yeah, we are grouped by age, so Gemma’s one of my roommates, as well as Aminah, Tony, Arig (he’s a little older, but I guess he wanted to be in with us), and Mei,” Harry said.

“Do you mean Aminah Kahn?” Lee asked. “I was wondering what happened to her. I heard her father…”

“Yeah, we’re not supposed to talk about those things,” Harry said quietly.
“Yeah, Aunt Medea won’t say anything. She just gets all serious if I ask her questions. Patient privacy. She wouldn’t tell me anything about you, even though you’re a friend of mine!” Lee said, indignantly.


“Ew. You’re rooming with a Slytherin?” Ron interjected.

“He’s alright,” Harry said.

“Right!” Ron said.

“Gemma, what year are you, dear?” Molly asked.

Harry could feel Gemma signing. He wondered what Ginny was thinking. They were the same year and had had hard first years for different reasons. He couldn’t tell if Ginny was at the table. She was nearly as silent as Gemma. Actually, she might be even more quiet than Gemma.

“Oh, well, you and Ginny are the same age. Were you at Hogwarts this year?” Molly asked. The Weasleys and Lee made sympathetic noises responding to Gemma’s signs.

“Well, I hope next year is a better year for you! Do you know what house you’ll be in?” Molly asked.

“Oh, do you three know Terry?” Molly asked.


“He’s coming in a bit, we’ll get to know him better,” Harry said. “So, do you want to go to the beach?”

“I wonder why Arthur is taking so long,” Molly speculated as the chairs scraped against the tile floor. “I’ll just let him know where to find us.” She muttered a message to Arthur and it seemed to rush by Harry with a gust of air. Harry wondered what she’d done.

Gemma tapped Harry’s hand for sighted guide and he took her arm.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake, stop it George, Fred!” Molly exclaimed, “That’s ridiculous. Lee, I know your Aunt is expecting you to be on your best behavior here.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Weasley,” Lee muttered, laughter in his voice.

Harry was trying to figure out what they were doing. Gemma was laughing. He could feel her shaking as they led the way to the O&M room.

“Stop it!” Percy shrieked.

Harry stifled a laugh. Whatever it was, it was driving Percy mad.
Catching waves

When they arrived at the panel outside of the O&M room, Harry asked Gemma, “Do you know how to change the room so that it is the beach?”

She tapped “no,” on his arm and then shook with giggles.

“What is it?” Harry asked.


Harry laughed, “What’s are Veelas?”

She made a motion in his hand that reminded him of hula dancers he’d seen on the telly. He wondered what Percy had done to deserve that kind of abuse. Probably just being Percy was enough. Poor guy.

“What are you two doing?” Ron asked.

“Gemma was just filling me in,” Harry said.

“Filling you in on what?” Ron asked. “What do you mean?”

“Why your mom was so upset with Fred, George, and Lee,” Harry said.

“Oh! You didn’t know,” Ron said. “So, what was she doing with your hand?”

“She was writing on my hand… that’s how we talk,” Harry explained as patiently as he could.

“Really? There’s no charm that gives her a voice?” Ron asked.

“There’s a complicated one with runes that Healer Jordan does, but we don’t know how to cast it and it only works while she’s around,” Harry said.

“That’s weird,” Ron said and didn’t notice the heavy silence that followed his statement. Harry wondered what Gemma was doing. She was very still. He remembered that Ron’s comments were now visible to Gemma since he’d cast the Scribunt loqui charm. He rubbed his fist on the back of her hand, “I’m sorry,” and she tapped his hand three times, “I understand.”

“What did you just say, then?” Ron asked.

“I was just apologizing,” Harry said, feeling his neck grow warm.

“What were you apologizing for?” Ron asked.

“Nothing,” Harry said.

“Huh?… So, what’s this panel for?” Ron asked.

“Well, it changes depending on how the room is set up,” Harry explained trying to push his annoyance with Ron aside. He reached his hand out to see what the layout was; it looked like it was still set up as a gymnasium. He wondered if it mattered if someone was in it or not.
His afti was reading the layout to him as he ran his fingers over the braille labels and tactile map of the room.

“You can read those bumps?” Ron asked.

“Not yet, I’m still learning braille, but fortunately it is charmed so that I can hear it with my afti,” Harry explained.

“Your what?” Ron asked.

“It’s this piece of charmed metal on my ear,” Harry touched his afti, “that speaks to me when I’m using my staff and with other charmed objects in the Center.”

Harry took it off to show to Ron and then put it back on.

“Oh,” Ron said. “If it reads the braille to you, why do you need to learn how to read it?”

“So, I can read if I’m somewhere where I can’t use magic,” Harry said.

“Where would that be?” Ron said, then paused, “oh, yeah, with the Dursleys, doh!”

Harry wondered if Ron was always this dense and he just never noticed before.

“Hey, Harry,” Hermione had come up beside them, “would you mind if I skipped the beach and spent some time in the library instead?”

“Oh, come on, Hermione,” he said surprising himself with a whine, “I want to spend time with you and everyone. You can come back and we can go to the library together another time. I promise.” He really wanted her to stay. He really didn’t want to have to deal with Ron on his own.

“Oh, alright,” she said. He wondered if she was as annoyed with Ron as he was.

Gemma was also trying to figure out the panel and Harry heard something make a hissing sound from behind it. He wondered if she’d figured out how to change the room, “Did you figure it out?”

She tapped his arm, “yes,” and then went over to the door. When she opened it, he could hear the seagulls calling and a warm breeze brought a smattering of sand out into the corridor.

“Oh, Percy! Time to don your speedo!” George or Fred called out as they raced through the door, Lee hooting with them and skidding on the sand. Ron was right behind them, hollering.

Harry wondered if Percy’s hair was still swaying like little hula dancers.

“Come on, Ginny, it’ll be fun,” Molly was speaking quietly behind them. “You haven’t been outside since you got home except to come here. You need some sun!”

Harry made the wait sign to Gemma and quietly asked his staff to guide him over to Ginny. He had remembered to momento all the Weasleys (except for Arthur) and Lee while they were having tea.

“Hi Ginny,” Harry said.

She made a barely audible gasp. He scrunched his brows together.

“Do you want to walk to the beach with me and Gemma?” he asked and he held out his hand.

“Oh, come on now, Ginny, don’t be shy,” Molly said.
Harry was still holding out his hand.

Finally, she grasped it, her hand was small and her fingers were cold.

He tried to give her a smile, but wasn’t sure if it was an effective one. Mrs. Weasley muttered something encouraging to Ginny as he turned and walked back to Gemma. Ginny followed him stiffly, her hand almost limp in his. He collapsed his staff and stuck it in his pocket and waited for Gemma to tap the back of his hand so he could find her elbow. When she didn’t tap right away, he guessed that Gemma was signing to Ginny, but if Ginny was responding, he couldn’t tell. Finally, Gemma tapped his hand. Mrs. Weasley seemed to be waiting for Arthur, “I’ll be there in a moment,” she called after them, and Harry could feel Ginny pulling on his hand as if she didn’t want to go without her mum.

“Ginny, this beach is really beautiful,” Hermione said from her other side as they walked through the portal onto the sandy boardwalk that had thrown them into the sand the last time they were in the room. Harry shut his eyes against the bright light and felt some of the tension between his shoulders lessen as the heat and humidity eased some of the heaviness he’d been feeling since his flight on the broom.

“Hermione, do you know how to transfigure our clothes into swimsuits?” Harry asked.

“No, maybe Mrs. Weasley does,” she responded. “Oh, Percy just changed his - no wait. He didn’t do it, one of the twins did! Hey, that’s pretty advanced magic, oh, Percy’s not so happy about it!” Hermione was laughing and Harry could feel Gemma shaking again. He felt kind of bad for Percy - but it was making Gemma laugh. Ginny didn’t seem to notice. He was beginning to really worry about her. She seemed really distant, even though he was holding on to her hand. They had stepped off the boardwalk and were now in the sand and he was sinking into it with each step. Gemma was moving through the sand more quickly than he was able to follow comfortably. He pulled on her arm to get her attention, “Go on ahead. I’ll walk with Ginny.” She tapped his hand twice, “okay,” and took off.

“Harry, do you want me to guide you?” Hermione asked, coming around to his other side and tapping his hand with the back of hers.

“Sure,” he said as he grasped her upper arm.

Ginny sniffed.

“What is it, Ginny?” Harry asked.

“Ginny,’ Hermione said gently, “you have to say something otherwise Harry can’t tell that you’re responding.”

Ginny was shaking and let go of his hand. He heard her stumbling over grasses as she ran away.

“Is she headed back to her mum or… ” he tried to listen to the direction of her footsteps, but the sand, surf, and seagulls made it harder to hear.

“No, she’s headed toward the beach, but away from the boys,” Hermione said, sighing.

“Should we follow her?” he asked.

“How about we kind of walk that way,” Hermione suggested.

“Do you know why she was crying?” he asked.
“Isn’t it obvious?” Hermione said. “She feels guilty.”

“What?” Harry said. “Guilty about what?”

“About what happened to you,” Hermione said slowly.

“Oh, no…” Harry said as he felt some of the weight settle back into his gut. “She can’t… it’s not her fault. It just happened…” He turned to Hermione, “she doesn’t think I blame her does she?”

“I don’t know Harry,” Hermione said, “I haven’t really talked to her. Ron said she’s been refusing to come out of her room. He said that the Mind Healer’s been coming to their house to work with her and that’s the only reason they were able to get her to come see you today.”

They had reached the part of the beach where the sand was firmer and easier to walk on. The sound of the boys running into the ocean and splashing each other was getting farther away.

“Is Gemma alright?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, it looks like they helped her transfigure her clothes and she’s running in the water with them,” Hermione said. “It looks like she’s having fun.”

“Oh, good. I thought she might not… when Ron said that about her scars…”

“Gah! Why does he do that?” Hermione interjected.

“I dunno,” Harry muttered.

They walked in silence for a bit, the seagulls calling overhead and the waves breaking on the beach not far from them.

“We’re getting close to Ginny,” Hermione whispered close to his ear. After a few more paces, Hermione slowed, then put her hands on Harry’s shoulders, turned him so he was facing the ocean, and pushed down.

Oh, she wants me to sit down next to Ginny.

He crouched down, felt the sand under him and then sat on it. His arm brushed against Ginny as he sat and he felt her flinch.

Maybe she hadn’t noticed we were here?

He busied himself with taking off his shoes and socks and stowing them in his staff, then he rolled up his trousers. The sun was beating down on his head and a trickle of sweat ran down the side of his face. He dug his toes into the sand until he found seawater seeping in and it cooled his feet.

He reached out to where he had brushed Ginny and found her knee, then her arms tight around her legs. She flinched again, but not away. He followed her arm up to her shoulder, then put his arm around her back and held her. She was shaking with sobs and she leaned into him. He put his other arm around her. He remembered how Gemma had held him that night.

After a bit, she lifted her head, sniffing loudly, “This isn’t right. You shouldn’t be comforting me,” she wailed. “I’m… I’m… I’m… the reason you’re blind!”

“No, Ginny. You’re not. It wasn’t your fault. The only person to blame is Tom Riddle. He made the Basilisk go after me,” Harry said squeezing her shoulders.
“But… but… but… I let him out of the diary,” she sobbed. “I should have known it was da… da… dark magic.” Her sobs grew muffled as she buried her head in her knees again.

“Ginny, how could you know? Please don’t blame yourself. I don’t blame you,” Harry said. “He fooled me, too, you know… when I had the diary. He had me convinced that Hagrid had opened the Chamber of Secrets the first time and caused Myrtle’s death… Hagrid, my friend.”

“You sh… sh… should blame me. I sh . . . should have died. It would have been better if . . if… I had died,” she whispered.

“No, no it wouldn’t have! It wouldn’t have changed the fact that I got Basilisk venom in my eyes. If you had died, then Voldemort would be back and it would be like it was when my mum and dad were killed all over again. He and his followers would be making people do terrible things and killing them for no reason at all. If you had died, then all of this would have been for nothing,” he said as he waved at his eyes. “And I would have probably died, too, because what would there have been to stop him from killing me? He had my wand - he just needed your soul to come back to life all the way.” He went quiet - listening to Ginny’s labored breathing. Hermione was on Ginny’s other side, rubbing her back in circles as Gemma had done for him.

“I very much like your soul in your body, Ginny.”

They sat quietly for a while, listening to the waves breaking on the beach, the distant shouts of the boys as they splashed in the water, the seagulls circling overhead.

“You really don’t blame me, Harry?” she said quietly.

“It has never crossed my mind. I could never blame you. This just happened. I’m lucky to be alive;” he said heavily. “Being here at the Center, I’ve learned that life doesn’t always go the way you planned… you never know when a Jobberknoll is going to drop dead in front of you.” He felt a little like an imposter saying all this when he had, not too long ago, been curled up under his covers wishing he could disappear into a hole, but he couldn’t let Ginny continue thinking that this was somehow her fault.

Ginny shuddered under his hands and raised her head from her knees and wiped her eyes.

“What’s a Jobberknoll?” she asked.

“Well, I’m glad you asked,” and he launched into a greatly embellished description of the tiny bird. It didn’t take too long before a giggle erupted from Ginny and some of the heaviness that Harry had been feeling slid off him into the sand.

The shouts of the boys were moving their way. Harry heard Molly and Arthur yelling at the twins and he wondered how they were tormenting Percy now.

Suddenly, they were being sprayed with warm water and then cold wet hands landed on his arms, trying to haul him up. “Come on you lot, no more of this moping around. Stop being a wet rag. It’s time to get wet. We’re going to transfigure you the most fabulous swimming suits you can imagine!” He had no idea if it was Fred or George.

Harry laughed as he stumbled to his feet and then felt his clothes changing. He bent forward covering his bits until he was sure that he still had clothes on.

“Hey! You could warn a guy!”

He checked the pocket of his trunks (he was so thankful that he didn’t have speedos on) and was
comforted to find his staff was still there in a zippered pocket. Harry hastily stuck his glasses in the other zippered pocket.

By the squeals, it sounded like Hermione and Ginny were also having their clothing transformed. Then they were being pulled toward the pounding surf - water and sand flying around them.

A hand waved across his back and he realized that Gemma was there, too.

“Hi, Gemma! How’s the water?” Harry asked as the warm waves lapped around his ankles.

She scratched his back with the funny sign and he wondered what that meant. “Are you having fun?” he asked.

She tapped twice hard, “yes,” and he smiled at her.

He had dug in his heels a bit and the person who was tugging at his arms stopped pulling so insistently.

“Who’s pulling me into the water?” Harry asked.

“It’s me, you git!” Ron shouted. “Come on! It’s fun!”

Harry could hear Fred or George muttering with Ginny not far behind him. It sounded like they were being very gentle with her. He heard someone run by him and then a neat plunk into the water and he imagined that it was Hermione.

The ocean floor dropped out from under his feet and Harry lurched forward, Ron hauled him back up.

“Whoops!”

He was in chest deep water now and the waves were splashing in his face and the taste of the briny water was making him pucker.

“Ron, stop pulling me. This is deep enough,” Harry said as something brushed against his calves. He was reminded of Mei’s tail.

“Is Mei here, too?” he turned his head and asked Gemma. One quick tap, “no.”

Ron was still pulling him deeper.

“Ron, I said stop!”

Harry was starting to panic as the water was reaching his neck and he was on his tiptoes trying to keep his head above water as the waves came in.

“Oh, come on, Harry! Just a little farther out!”

But Ron stopped and let go of his wrists and Harry turned trying to go back to more shallow water. Gemma’s hand was on his back. He thought Hermione was close by, too. He wondered how Ginny was doing - it sounded like Fred, George, and Lee were trying to make her laugh in ways that involved a lot of splashing.

*That’s good.*

He didn’t hear Percy.
“Harry, here comes a good one! Let’s catch this one!” Ron was shouting.

Harry could feel the water being sucked back into the wave and tried to jump up as it swelled, but jumped too early and the wave hit him on the side of the head and pushed him into Gemma. She held onto him as he sputtered, his mouth flooded with salt water, and tried to regain his footing.

Ron hollered as he rode the wave past them. Farther down the beach, Harry was pretty sure that Hermione was doing the same thing. Around his feet, he could feel seaweed and seashells swirling in the water and sand. He felt another fish brush against his legs. Gemma grabbed his hand as another wave was sucking the water away from them, building momentum. This time she signaled to him to jump by raising their arms and jumping and they moved with the wave, but didn’t get crushed by it.

Ron was whooping and laughing as he ran back to them, and shouted, “Harry, Gemma! You’ve got to try it! It’s so cool! You just hold your arms out like this and when the wave comes you jump and ride on top of it and it carries you all the way back to the beach! It’s so awesome!”

Gemma tapped his arm twice, “yes,” and moved his arms to a superman position. He caught on after a second. This is what Ron was telling him to do. Then, still holding his hand, their arms up in the air and facing the beach, Harry could tell that Gemma was looking back at the wave that was coming - the ocean rushing past his legs as the water was being sucked up into the wave. She tugged on his arm and jumped and he tried to follow and keep his body rigid. The wave caught them and they were carried fast toward the beach.

This is like flying on my broom!

But then the wave pushed him down to the ocean floor and tumbled him around, pulling Gemma’s hand from his. He fought to find his way up to the surface as sand and seashells swirled around him. His trunks filled with sand. Hands grabbed him under his arms and pulled him to his feet. He was surprised to find out he was only in knee-deep water. “Thanks,” he sputtered.

“That was awesome, Harry! Way to catch the wave!” Lee shouted, heartily smacking him on the back.

Someone splashed up to him and hugged him with tiny, wet arms - Gemma. She pulled on his hand, asking him to do it again. He shook water from his ears. They started running back, stumbling on the moving sand, and shaking with laughter.

More splashes approached him and another small hand caught on to his - Ginny. Harry felt Gemma being pulled in another direction and guessed that Ron had caught on to her other hand. He heard hoots and guessed that Fred, Hermione, George, and Lee had made a chain, linking hands. Then there was a whoop and loud splashing as Percy’s joined in next to Ron. They pulled on each other and ran as the ocean was sucked out to fill the next wave, whooping and hollering and laughing. Harry heard Mr. and Mrs. Weasley shouting at them from the beach - “Wait for us!”

Molly and Arthur were breathing heavily and laughing when they caught up with the group. They had all stopped in the chest level water and then Gemma was tugging on his arm and Ginny dropped his hand. He turned around and put his arms out like superman, Gemma still holding on to him and when she tugged on his arm, he jumped again and they rode the wave again. He was tossed around again in a tangle of arms and legs that weren’t all his own. He was nearly on the beach this time and fell back into the water laughing, elbows propping him up as small waves washed over him. His friends tugged him to his feet and they ran out again and again.

After a bit, they were tired of catching the waves, they started bobbing around in the water in a close group, jumping up when the waves came by and letting them pass. Harry felt a big fish move against
his leg and started, “Hey!”

“What?” Fred asked.

“That was a big fish!” Harry said.

There was a big splash right by his head and his mouth was filled with water.

“Shark!” yelled Ron! And there were screams and frantic splashes.

“I’m not a shark, dung-brains!” Mei snapped.

Harry hooted with laughter, his head submerging under water with a big wave. He came back up sputtering and spitting out water and still laughing.

“Hi, Mei!”

“Stop hugging me, Gemma!” Mei protested. “You lot are making a racket!”

“Is that how you found us?” Harry wondered. “You have to meet my friends - the Weasleys - Ginny, Ron, Fred, George, Percy, Molly, Arthur, and Hermione and Lee,” Harry said, sweeping his hands around him, not really sure where they all were. “This is Mei Lee, everybody!” There was a chorus of greetings as they bobbed on the water.

“Hey, you’re that fish girl from Hogwarts!” Ron exclaimed. Harry groaned and wished he was close enough to smack him. Hermione was, apparently, “Hey, what was that for?”

“Yeah, and you’re that slug-hurling Gryffindork, what of it?” Mei shot back.

“Hey!” Ron protested.

“Come on, you two,” Harry said. “Knock it off. Mei, we’re riding the waves, want to join us?”

“I came over to see if you wanted to meet a friend of mine, actually,” Mei said, dropping to a friendlier tone.

“I told you I saw a shark!” Ron said as something slippery and large slid against Harry’s arm and a loud hissing noise erupted with a spray of water.

“He’s a dolphin,” Mei said in a quelling voice. There was a high-pitched squealing sound and Harry guessed that dolphin was laughing.

Gemma’s hand was on Harry’s back, excitedly scratching. Hermione and Ginny were oohing. The rest of them had gathered around in a tight group, trying to get near the dolphin.

Harry held his hand out, hoping to touch that sleek body again as it swam by. Gemma guided his hand farther out into the water and the dolphin’s nose prodded his hand. “Hiya, buddy!” Harry said.

“Oh, he’s so beautiful!” Molly said.

“Don’t everyone crowd around him at once,” Mei said. “Make sure he feels like he can swim away if he gets scared. Let him touch you first.”

“Wow, he’s so cool,” Fred or George said.

“Ginny, why are you crying?” Percy asked quietly right behind Harry.
“I dunno. The dolphin. It’s so beautiful and calm. I don’t know why I’m crying,” she sniffed.

“Hey, it’s alright, Ginny,” Percy said, and it sounded like he was giving her a hug.
Molly and Arthur had transfigured beach towels from palm fronds and everyone had dried off and laid out in the sun on the sand. Molly was fussing over her children who had already started showing signs of sunburns and she was applying essence of dittany to their shoulders and backs. Harry slipped his sunglasses back on so he didn’t have to squeeze his eyes closed so hard against the sunlight - he still kept them closed. He pressed his arms to see if there was a sting of a sunburn and felt a twinge. “Harry, it looks like you’re getting burned, too,” Molly said. “Can I rub some on you, too?”

“Sure, thanks, Mrs. Weasley,” he said.

“Harry, thank you so much for talking with Ginny,” Molly said in a low voice as she rubbed the cooling liquid across his shoulders. “Whatever you said made a world of difference! She has been so sad and down since the Chamber of Secrets. First, you save her and now you bring her back from the depths of despair.”

She squeezed his shoulders for emphasis and Harry was glad for the dittany.

“The Healer said that coming here and talking to you would help her and, goodness, it has been better than I ever imagined. This place is astounding. And everything that you’re learning how to do! You get along so well with that staff of yours… I keep forgetting that you can’t see,” she said, getting quiet.

“Er. Mrs. Weasley? She’s going to keep working with the Mind Healer, right?” he asked quietly.

“Yes, Harry. Why?”

“Just some things she said… made me really worried… for her,” he said. He wasn’t sure he could say what was worrying him. Ginny hadn’t asked him to not say anything… but he didn’t want to betray her trust… but saying that she should have died was bigger than that. It had scared him to hear her talking that way.

“Yes, she’s been having some dark thoughts. It was so good to hear her laughing and playing in the water. And with the dolphin and the mermaid. It was something that only Morgana herself could have imagined.” Molly said.

“Er, Mei doesn’t like to be called a mermaid,” Harry said.

“Oh, so right; I’m sorry. I hope she didn’t hear me say that,” Molly said and it seemed as if she was looking around as she said it.

“I thought she went back out to sea?” Harry questioned.

“She did, but she came back. She’s sitting in the surf talking to Ginny now,” Molly said.

“Oh, that’s good,” Harry said.

“Harry, you’re looking very thin. Are you eating enough here? And getting sleep? There’s something about your pallor that makes me think of Ginny. You’re working with a Mind Healer, too? Right? I mean, goodness, you and Ginny look like you’ve been set on by Dementors,” she said as she rubbed the essence of dittany into his arms and chest. “I imagine you have… in some ways…”
“Yeah, I’m eating and Healer Jordan’s been giving me a nutrition potion. And I’m sleeping okay, I guess. It has just been rough. I am working with a Mind Healer. She’s alright,” he said quietly.

“Yes, it has been rough. Well, I’m glad you’re here and not with those Dursleys,” she said with a venom that made him start. He felt his breath hitch - what if the Weasleys started going after the Dursleys, too? He tried to push the thought away.

She patted him on the back, “You’re all done.”

“Thank you,” Harry said and he hugged his knees. The salt was making his skin feel like it was stretched tautly. He felt too nervous to sit now. He dug his staff out of the pocket of his trunks and stood up and carefully shook it out.

“What are you going, Harry?” Ron said.

“I thought I’d go talk to Mei and Ginny,” Harry said as he started navigating toward them, muttering “Navigant Mei.”

“That’s cool how you can find people with your stick thing,” Ron said, walking along with him. Harry’s staff was helping him navigate around the towels laid out in the sand and everyone’s arms and legs. From the sound of it, he was doing a better job of avoiding stepping on people than Ron was.

“Yeah, it’s called a staff,” Harry corrected.

“It’s so cool - like the wizard’s staff that Merlin had! You should put a ruby or something in the handle,” Ron said, oblivious to Hermione’s indignant cry. “So does it do magic, too?”

“Yeah, though when I use it to repair things, it makes them rainbow colored, I guess,” Harry said.

“What? No way! You’ve got to show me!” Ron said.

“Do you have something that needs to be repaired?” Harry asked.

“Um, no. Maybe we can do it later. Hey wait, there’s a broken bottle,” Ron ran off and came back. Harry stopped and collapsed his staff so it was smaller and held out his hand and waited.

“Oh, right, here you go,” Ron put it in Harry’s hand. “Careful, it’s broken.”

Harry gingerly ran his fingers over the broken glass, flinching at a sharp edge. “What kind of bottle was it before it was broken?” It was such a small fragment, that he had no idea what it should have looked like whole.

“I think it was a coke bottle, see it has the…” Ron stopped himself. “Oh, sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Harry said. “I don’t know if it’ll do it on transparent glass, the other things I repaired were opaque, I think.”

“Harry, are you trying your reparo charm?” Hermione asked as she hurried up to them. “Don’t you have to have all the parts to make it work? I don’t think…”

“Yeah, so here goes nothing,” he said as he touched his staff to the broken glass, saying “Reparo coke bottle.” Suddenly the bottle was heavy in his hand and he struggled to keep it from falling.

Ron hooted and jumped up and down, “That’s brilliant!”
“Did it work? What does it look like?” he asked as he felt the bottle, “Is it filled with coke?”

“Harry, that’s really remarkable!” Hermione said. “How did you do that? It’s supposed to be really hard to get liquid back into a container you’ve broken and that’s when it is freshly broken and you have all the pieces and liquid right in front of you.”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “Will you describe it to me?”

“It is actually beautiful - the glass is iridescent like the sheen inside a seashell. It’s still transparent, but also filled with so many colors. There’s a mosaic of lines all around it - like where it had been broken. The liquid inside has a similar quality - dark amber but with threads of rainbow colors going through it like you’d see on an oil spill,” Hermione said, awe infused in her voice.

“Wow, that’s weird,” Harry said, his fingers trying to find the fault lines that Hermione mentioned.

“What happens when you do the *reparo* charm with your wand?” Hermione asked.

“I haven’t tried,” Harry said. “My wand!” He suddenly remembered that he had noticed that his wand and holster had been removed the night he had shut down, but he didn’t know where they were now. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t thought about it. He handed the bottle back to Hermione and opened the storage part of his staff and tried *accio* -ing the wand and holster. He was relieved when they both hit his outstretched hand.

“What’s that belt thing?” Ron asked.

“It’s a holster for my wand,” he said as he strapped it to his arm.

“Oh, that’s cool. I’ve seen some of the wizards at the Ministry with those,” Ron said. “But why do you need one?”

“So I don’t lose my wand,” Harry said shortly.

Hermione had run off while he was putting the holster on. She came back a little breathless, “Here, Harry here’s another piece of broken glass. Why don’t you try it with your wand now.”

Harry held out his hand and she carefully placed the glass fragment in his palm. The edges weren’t sharp like the other one, it felt like a skipping rock with rounded edges, except it was light.

“Do you think this was a glass bottle, too?” Harry asked.

“Yep, it’s green like a 7-Up bottle,” Hermione explained.

“*Reparo* 7-Up bottle,” Harry said tapping his wand on the piece of glass, then flicked his wand back into his holster as he caught the heavy bottle that materialized in his palm.

“Wow! Wicked!” Ron said.

“What did this one do?” Harry asked; it was heavy in his hand again. He felt the contours. The shape was different than the other bottle.

“Why can’t you just do that on your eyes?” Ron asked.

Harry was stunned.

“I don’t know,” he said slowly. He resisted the urge to lift his wand to his eyes and utter the charm. Surely, if it was possible, then someone would have tried it… Madam Pomfrey, Professor
“Ron, you know full well that that charm only works on non-organic objects!” Hermione said in a huff. “It states clearly in *The Standard Book of Spells* that any attempt to repair damage on organic life forms with the *reparo* charm would spell disaster!”

“D-i-s-a-s-t-e-r?” Ron teased.

Ignoring him, she continued, “It says that it would cause terrible scaring… though I am curious if the book says anything about the color changes in repaired objects. And also, you restored pieces that must have been missing for ages, not to mention the liquid inside.”

“I’ve got it here, if you want to look,” Harry joked, shaking his staff.

“Do you really?” Hermione asked, brightly.

Ron groaned as Harry *accio’d* the book from his staff after handing Hermione the bottle. She must have passed it on to Ron because after a second he heard a bottle top being popped off.

“You’re not drinking that, are you?” Harry asked in amazement.

“Ew! That’s disgusting,” Ron spat it out and Harry recoiled as it hit his legs.

“Ron, you prat!” he shouted.

“Why didn’t you move?” Ron yelled.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it is - because - I - can - not - see - ” Harry seethed. He turned, shook out his staff, and stalked toward the ocean, swinging his staff angrily as Hermione and Ron’s voices rose behind him.

Harry went past Ginny and Mei (his staff told him) and walked into the waves to wash whatever it was in the bottle off his legs. It felt sticky and he couldn’t identify the odor, but it stank. He kicked at the waves. He collapsed his staff and put it in his pocket, zipping it up, and then sank down to sit in the water.

The waves broke over his knees and splashed in his face. He dug his hands into the sand and hung his head.

*Why does it have to be so hard? Why can’t it be like it was?*

His chest ached. He couldn’t hear Mei and Ginny talking anymore or Ron and Hermione shouting and realized that he must be making a spectacle of himself. He got up slowly, trying to regain control of himself.

*I hope that Ginny didn’t hear what I said to Ron.*

He decided to walk along the beach for a bit - alone.

*Maybe I don’t need to use my staff, maybe I can just walk and use the ocean as a guide.*

As he stood there thinking about walking along the beach, the water had created little craters around his feet, so that he was sinking into holes. He wiggled his toes, then started walking with the ocean on his right and the entrance they came in on his left. He kept one foot in the water and one on the more firm sand, but since the waves reaching in and out along the shore, he wasn’t sure he was
walking in a straight line. As he found a rhythm, he wondered what the entrance looked like from inside the beach.

*Is there a visible door? A wall? What if everyone left and I can’t find the way back to the Center?*

He pushed the thought away. They wouldn’t leave him. He’d be lucky to get a few minutes to himself to try to think about why Ron was being such a troll’s bum.

After he slipped on something slimy (seaweed he hoped) he decided to pull out his staff and was able to walk a little faster and keep track of where the ocean met the beach.

He kept mulling over the things that Ron had said and done since he arrived… only a couple hours ago… he had so been looking forward to being with Ron and now he just wanted to get away from him. He felt like he was being crushed by Devil’s Snare again.

He heard someone running up behind him but kept walking. He wasn’t sure he was ready to talk to anyone just yet.

They didn’t say anything, but came alongside him and put their hand on his left arm.

“Hi, Gemma,” Harry said stopping.

*I can talk to Gemma.*


“Yeah,” he sighed. “Just my friend, Ron, he’s…”


He laughed weakly, “Yeah, you can tell, too, can’t you?”


“Yeah, I suppose,” Harry agreed.

Harry had been living with this change for about a month, but even though Ron had known about it for the same amount of time, he wasn’t really living with it until today.

“I’ll try to cut him some slack. I just wish it was more obvious that he was trying to understand.”

She tapped his arm three times, “I understand.”

“Had or have?” Harry interrupted.

She ran two fingers across his palm.

“Yeah, let’s head back. Thanks, Gemma,” he said as he took her arm and stuck his collapsed staff back into his pocket.

She bent down and when she stood up she was pressing something sandy into his hand. He felt it, dusting off the sand, and discovered a seashell that had ridges on the convex side and was pearly smooth on the concave side.

He rubbed his thumb against the smooth interior surface as they walked back to the group, the voices getting louder as they neared.

It sounded like the twins were taking the piss out of someone.

*Ron.*

And it sounded like he wasn’t taking it well.

He slowed. He wasn’t sure he wanted to be nearby when Ron blew up. First Hermione was laying into him and now the twins.

Gemma tugged on his arm. She probably didn’t know what was going on as they were probably too far away for her to be able to read the *Scribunt loqui* papers that were no doubt fluttering by everyone’s lips.

He took his arm off of Gemma’s so that he could unzip his pocket and get his staff out. Gemma impatiently pulled on his wrist.

“Do you need to go?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” she tapped.

“Go ahead. I’ll see you later, right? At lunch? Is your family staying for lunch?” Harry wondered.

“Yes,” she tapped, then pulled two fingers across the back of his hand.

“And then you’re going home?” he asked.

“Yes,” she tapped.

“Okay, I’ll see you at lunch,” Harry said.

She gave him a quick squeeze and ran off, waving across his back as she hugged him.

Harry asked his staff to take him to Mei again; he was pretty sure that she and Ginny were still sitting in the surf, talking.

As he approached, Hermione called out, “Hi, Harry. We’re sitting down here if you want to join us.”

He walked closer to them, glad for his staff’s ability to warn him before he actually hit people with it and then found a spot to sit with them, avoiding a mound of sand, collapsing his staff, and sinking into the wet sand.

“Where’d Gemma run off to?” Mei asked.

“Her family is going to arrive soon,” Harry explained.
“Oh, Fred is helping her transfigure her swimsuit back to clothes,” Ginny supplied. She was making scraping noises in the sand - he cocked his head trying to figure out what she was doing.

“He’s quite the fashion designer - I like the suit he made for her,” Mei said.

He reached out his hand to find the mound of sand that was being shaped into a tower of some sort with teeth-shaped parapets. Small shells had been pressed into the sides at regular intervals.

“Nice sandcastle, Ginny,” Harry said.

“Thanks.”

“Mine’s not bad, either,” Hermione said. Harry thought she was talking about her sandcastle until she went on, “Not too frilly. Just basic navy blue. I was kind of nervous after I saw Percy’s neon green speedo!”

Ginny giggled.

“It was a good color for him, actually,” Mei said. “It looked nice against his red freckles and hair.”

“I bet Penelope Clearwater would have liked it,” Ginny said.

“Isn’t she the Ravenclaw prefect who was petrified, too?” Hermione said.

“Yeah, I saw them kissing in a classroom…” Ginny said and then her voice lowered, “It was the secret that Percy thought I was trying to tell you, Harry, when what I wanted to do was tell you about the Chamber.”

“Oh,” was all Harry could say as he envisioned how knowing about the diary and the Chamber before Ginny was taken could have changed everything… and then it hit him, Ginny had been carrying this burden for so long by herself. She had been wasting away in front of them, literally, while Voldemort was slowly siphoning her soul through the diary throughout that entire year.

*How does someone recover from that?*

He tried to listen carefully - straining to hear any clues about how she was doing.

“What?” Ginny asked.

“What what?” Harry replied.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Ginny asked.

“See, Harry! I’m not the only one who thinks you’re looking at them!” Mei interjected.

“Oh, am I? Sorry,” he dropped his chin, though he was listening just as intently, “I was just thinking… it’s been about a month for me, but for you, it’s been since you found that diary, hasn’t it? That’s a really long time.”

“Yeah,” she sighed.

Harry heard Mrs. Weasley calling to them and feet pounding on the sand. Sand sprayed them as the boys surrounded them and then plopped down in the surf next to them.

“Impressive sandcastle, Gin!”
Harry noticed that this twin’s voice was slightly lower than the other’s voice, though he didn’t know if it was Fred or George. He slipped his hand into his pocket to take out his staff and ask quietly *Reveleo memento*.

“What are you doing, there, Potter?”

“I’m just figuring out who’s who, George,” Harry said, smiling. He could tell them apart.

Lee hooted, “Your staff tells you who is who? Brilliant! How does it do that? Can I do that with my wand? Hey, that’s a neat holster you got for your wand.”

“Thanks, I don’t know. I can try to teach it to you. I know it works with my staff. I haven’t tried it with my wand,” Harry said.

“Hey, can I take a look at your staff?” Fred asked, coming over to them.

The sun’s intensity lessened as the boys crowded around him, blocking the sun. Harry noticed that Ron was hanging back and quiet, though his staff had identified him as part of the group. He silently hoped that Ron wouldn’t say anything that would upset Mei.

“Sure,” Harry held the staff out in Fred’s direction. He really liked being able to tell them apart.

“I saw you putting things into the staff and taking them out,” Fred said.

“Yeah, it has a storage compartment. I have all my things in it,” Harry said.

“You mean like everything that you’d put in your trunk?” George said in amazement.

“Yeah, even Hedwig’s cage,” Harry said.

“How do you get things out?” Lee asked.

“You use the summoning charm, *accio*,” Harry explained.

“That’s a really advanced charm - one that you learn in fourth year, I think,” Hermione said.

“Ginny knows it,” Harry said.

“Well, she’s not supposed to know it!” Percy sniffed, coming up behind them. “Come on, you lot, we’re supposed to be changing and going into lunch.”

“Well, I’m going back to my tank. See you all at lunch,” Mei said.

“Oh, are you going to change back into a human?” Ron asked.

Harry groaned.

“Ron!” Hermione exclaimed.

“What did I do?” he asked defensively.

“No, I’m going to change into a centaur, you git,” Mei huffed and her tail slapped in the shallow water, spraying them all with water. Her tail was thumping rhythmically in the surf and Harry guessed she was headed back to sea.

They started standing up.
“Nice one, Ron,” George muttered, brushing sand off his legs.

“Way to brass off the mer-girl,” Lee said.

“Don’t call Mei that,” Ginny said quietly.

“Right,” Lee said.

“Why is everyone so tetchy?” Ron whined.

“Why are you so daft?” George poked.

“She’s a lot more pleasant today than she was on Monday,” Hermione said in hushed tones. They were quiet and then there was a splash a ways out. Harry wondered if they were watching Mei swim away.

“Here you go, Harry,” Fred said as if coming out of a trance and tapping the side of Harry’s hand with his staff.

“What else does it do?” Lee asked as Harry shook out his staff.

They started walking back to their towels, Harry explaining the other features of his staff as he used it to walk around clumps of grasses and craters in the sand.
Talking with Ron

Walking back to the dining hall with the Weasleys, Harry realized how hungry and tired he felt. He hadn’t been this hungry in a while.

*I suppose it is from all the jumping around in the ocean.*

He was thankful for the magic at the door that removed all the stray sand from their bodies and dried their clothes. Hermione was especially appreciative of it as it emptied copious amounts of sand from her hair. Harry was standing right behind her and felt the sting of it as it was blown off her body. He felt a lot more comfortable than he had after his trunks had been transformed back to his trousers and baggy t-shirt. They were soggy and sand-filled - his pants were especially uncomfortable - until he walked over the threshold.

In the corridor they were greeted by the delicious aroma of curry and cardamom.

“Ugh, Indian food,” Percy whined.


Everyone else seemed excited and the twins and Lee raced toward the dining hall, nearly running into Mei, who must have just left the Montmorency room.

“Hey, you lot, watch where you’re going,” Mei exclaimed as their trainers skidded on the stone floors, but she didn’t sound that put out. Harry wondered how long it took her to swim all the way back to the portal that took her back to the room.

“I thought you were going to transform back into a human?” Ron said, mystified.

Harry reached out, trying to grab Ron before he dug himself in deeper and caught his shirt.

“I am human, you twit,” Mei said.

“Right,” Ron rejoined, shrugging his shirt out of Harry’s grasp.

“Ron,” Harry said with exasperation and stopping in the middle of the corridor.

“What?” Ron asked, turning to face him.

“Come on, can’t you think before you open your mouth?” Harry hissed as the others passed them.

“What? Not you, too, Harry!” Ron whined. “Why’s everyone ganging up on me?”

“Seriously?” Harry questioned, “Can’t you see how hurtful questioning someone’s humanity might be?”

“But what does she expect? She’s part fish!” Ron exclaimed.

“I imagine she expects to be treated respectfully! She still has feelings!” Harry implored.

“I didn’t say she didn’t,” Ron said.

“You’re kind of implying that she doesn’t by the way you’re talking to her. Don’t you get it, Ron? It hurts to have people constantly talking about you, defining you by one part of who you are, seeing
only that aspect of you - like it is the only thing about you,” Harry said.

“Well, it is kind of hard to ignore,” Ron said.

“You don’t have to ignore it, just don’t say anything,” Harry ground out.


He didn’t mean don’t ever talk…

*Just think about it first.*

He stood in the corridor for a while listening to Ron’s feet slapping on the stone until they were absorbed into the sounds of the dining hall. The weight of it was seeping into his limbs again and he felt as though he were walking through muck again.

He couldn’t stand the chatter of his staff, so quieted it so that all he had to do was listen to the silver tip ting against the stone and slowly made his way to the dining hall. He hoped that Ron cleared off for a while so that he wouldn’t have to talk to him for a bit. He didn’t know if he could face him again and that thought made his gut clench.

“Hey, Harry,” Hermione said from just inside the dining hall entryway, “we’ve saved a seat for you at our table.”

“Oh, thanks… er, is Ron there?” he asked.

“No, he ran through. I’m not sure where he went,” Hermione said.

“Good,” Harry said, though it hurt to say it.

Hermione put her hand on Harry’s arm and sighed, “Yeah.”

He slipped his hand under her arm and followed it to her upper arm and fell in step as she led him to the table.

“We have three tables, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley are sitting at the far one with Mr. and Mrs. Boot, and Mr. and Mrs. Lee. Gemma and her brother are sitting with Ginny, Percy, and me - there’s a seat for you, too. Fred, George, Lee, Mei, and her brother, Bing, are at the third table. There’s room there for Ron if he comes back.” Hermione explained as they walked over to the table.

“Are there other families here?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, a few, not many,” Hermione said. “I imagine most folks went home for the weekend.”

“Yeah,” Harry sighed, and for a moment he was aware of how relieved he was that he could stay here and didn’t have to go to the Dursleys over the weekend.

Harry heard a chair scrape against the stone floor of the dining hall and light footsteps that he recognized as Gemma’s approaching them.

“Hi, Gemma,” Hermione greeted. “She’s excited to introduce you to her family, Harry. She wants you to meet her father and then her brother. She says that you already met her mother.”

“Sure, Gemma, let’s meet them,” Harry said, turning to Hermione, “Thanks for telling me what Gemma is saying. Come meet Gemma’s folks, okay?”
“Okay,” Hermione said and she led Harry, following Gemma’s footsteps.

Hermione interpreted again, “Harry, this is Gemma’s father, Webster Boot.”

Harry stuck out his hand and waited for Mr. Boot to grasp it, “Hi, Mr. Boot, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Harry Potter, I’ve heard a lot about you!” Mr. Boot boomed. “It’s so good to meet you. Gemma thinks the world of you, and that’s all that I need!”

“It’s nice to meet you, too, sir,” Harry said as his hand was being pumped up and down vigorously.

“This is my friend, Hermione Granger,” Harry turned to Hermione.

“Are you a resident here, too, Hermione?” Mr. Boot said, “Another one of Gemma’s roommates?”

Harry could hear in Mr. Boot’s voice that he was pumping Hermione’s arm as enthusiastically as he had shaken Harry’s.

“No, sir, I’m just a friend of Harry’s visiting today,” Hermione said quickly.

“Oh, right,” Mr. Boot responded. “Well, it’s good to meet you, too. So, Harry, it sounds like you’ve been put through the wringer - I was so sorry to hear it. After all, you’ve already been through… Well, no one said life was fair. Look at our sweet Gemma,” he sighed heavily.

“Er,” Harry said.

“Well, of course, you can’t look at her, but you know what I mean. Seems like you two have figured out how to communicate very well despite the obstacles… she not able to hear or speak, you not able to see and yet you get along. There’s the hope for humanity if you ask me. Of course, I know what challenges are like… a squib like me born into one of the most powerful wizarding families in Ireland. That wasn’t easy - being a huge disappointment to my family and unable to do magic for myself. But then I met Clodagh and I’m blessed that she loves me the way I am. Sure, her family wasn’t too happy, but they came around in the end. Of course, we were so thankful that both our children had magic, but of course, now with Gemma… well, we’ll see how it all turns out. Maybe she’ll be able to do nonverbal spells, but if not, she’ll be in good company with her dear old pop. But that’s neither here nor there. What Gemma? Oh yes, I imagine you want to have some lunch. Sounds like you were having a ball on the beach,” he patted Harry on the shoulder heavily.

Harry’s gut seized up again as his thoughts lingered on the possibility of not being able to do magic and he had flashes of the scurrying beetle on his desk as he tried to turn it into a button and waiting for his sleeping draught to change to the right shade of purple…

“Hi, Harry, dear,” Mrs. Boot greeted, “It’s good to see you again. Gemma has written the most amazing letters about her first week at training and all she’s learned and of course, you figured prominently in them!”

“It’s nice to meet you, sir,” Harry said to Mr. Boot, and turning to Mrs. Boot, “Good to see you again, Mrs. Boot.”

“Right, dear!” Mrs. Boot said, then returned to her conversation with Mrs. Lee.

Gemma, Hermione, and Harry walked over their table and found their seats - Harry found himself between Gemma and Hermione.

Before he sat down, he was greeted, “Hiya, Harry. I’m Terry, Gemma’s brother. I’ve seen you at
Hogwarts, of course.”

“Hi Terry,” Harry said. He had a vague feeling he’d met Terry before, but couldn’t remember what he looked like. “Do you know Hermione Granger? We’re both in Gryffindor. We’ll be third years in September.”

“Yes, actually, Ravenclaw was pretty put out that you were sorted into Gryffindor!” Terry exclaimed as he turned to Hermione.

“Oh, well, the sorting hat was deliberating quite a bit between the two houses,” Hermione confessed. Harry could tell that she was blushing by the tone of her voice - it was a little higher than normal.

“Harry, I’m really glad you’re here with Gemma. Well, not glad that you were blinded by that Basilisk, of course. That was terrible, but glad that if you had to be here, it was with Gemma. We’ve all been really worried about her and it’s been a relief to know that she’s made some really good friends and right off the bat,” Terry said.

“Well, she’s been a really good friend to me,” Harry said. Gemma’s hand scratched across his back - her happy sign. “She’s helped me get through some really rough days. I don’t know what I would have done without her, actually.”

“Yeah, she’s like that. I’m sure my mom told you. She’s always going on about it,” Terry said.

Harry nodded in agreement.

“Harry, are you ready to eat? It looks like our table already went through the line, shall we get our food,” Hermione urged.

“Yes, I’m starving and it smells heavenly,” he said.

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Though he struggled with the rice until he figured out how to stick it to the aloo saag and scoop it up with the naan bread, Harry had eaten until even Mrs. Weasley was satisfied when she came over to their table to check on Ginny and tell the twins off for their antics with the floating trays. Harry felt like he had a Quaffle lodged in his gut and was thinking about napping in the treehouse with a cool breeze tickling his neck. The fantasy had another appealing aspect… it would be far away from Ron.

Ron had come back in about halfway through the meal, banging his chair around and slamming down his dishes at a table by himself. It didn’t take long for the boys to descend on him.

“Hey, Ron, here comes my Aunt Medea!” said Lee.

“She’s going to help you extract your foot from your mouth,” said George.

“But I doubt if she can do anything about your other condition,” said Fred.

“You might just have to stay here for some training,” said Lee.

“And learn how to adapt to your life-changing event,” said George.

“You know, the one where your head is irrevocably lodged up your bum,” said Fred.

Harry couldn’t help but snort - though he tried to pass it off as a cough. He felt a little guilty.

Harry turned to listen - trying to discern if Healer Jordan was really approaching them - he couldn’t
hear her. He expected that Ron would storm off again, but he must have been pretty hungry because all Harry could hear was Ron shoveling food into his mouth and his usual meal time noises of grunting and masticating. He could imagine the glower Ron was directing toward his brothers. He almost felt sorry for Ron.

“Hey, Harry, can you show us the workshop where you made the tip for your staff?” Fred asked coming over to his table.

“Sure, it’s right around the corner,” Harry said as he stood up and shook out his staff.

Gemma pushed back her chair and hopped up. She waved across his forearm.

“Oh, are you leaving now?” Harry asked her.

“Yes,” she tapped.

“You’ll be back tomorrow night?” he asked.

“Yes,” she responded.

“Have fun with your family, okay?” he said.

“Okay,” she tapped and she gave him a quick hug around his middle, wisps of her hair brushing his chin. He waved across her back.

“Bye, Harry - it was good to see you again,” Terry said.

“Yeah, see ya,” Harry said as a chorus of Weasleys joined him in saying goodbye to the Boot family.

Gemma waved across his arm again and then was walking away with Terry.

“So, that workshop?” George said.

“Right, it’s this way,” Harry said as he muttered, “Navigant workshop,” to his staff.

“Where are you all going?” Percy asked.

“Fred, George, and Lee wanted to see the workshop where I made the silver tip on my staff,” Harry answered. “Do you all want to come, too? Mei and Bing? Hermione, Ginny?” Harry asked, then added reluctantly, “Ron?”

“No, thank you. I’m going to have some tea and biscuits,” said Percy.

“I was going to show Ginny the library,” Hermione said, “we’ll meet you over at the workshop, okay?”

Ron grunted and Harry took it as a no.

“Harry, we’re actually leaving, too,” said Bing. “We’ll see you later.”

“Have a good visit with your family, Mei,” Harry said.

“Yeah, I will,” Mei said as she moved closer to Harry. He was surprised when she grabbed his hand and pulled him down close, putting her hand on his shoulder so that she could whisper in his ear, “Hey, I heard you laying into your friend Ron for what he said to me. Thank you.”
She let go of him and he straightened up a bit, “Er, I’m sorry he’s being such a git. He’s not usually like this. I don’t know what’s got into him,” he said quietly.

“Well, I don’t know if he’s worth the trouble,” she said.

“He’ll come around,” Harry said.

“Good luck with that! Hey, come on, Bing, let’s go!” she said, pivoting away from Harry.

“I can’t wait to get home. I’m looking forward to some good food. I can’t believe that my mum made us eat here for lunch,” Mei said. “They even ruined the rice. Stinking saffron!” There was another chorus of goodbyes as they left.

Harry smiled, he thought the saffron rice was delicious.

Hermione and Ginny’s footsteps were headed east through the dining hall, making Harry wonder if there was another way to get to the library. He thought that they’d be walking with them through the main corridor. *I’ll have to explore that later.*

“So, do you think the workshop will be open today?” Lee asked as they headed out of the dining hall.

“Oh, I don’t know. It seems like the Healers are always here. I don’t know when they take breaks,” Harry said.

“Yeah, my aunt says that it is really long hours while the Center is in training, but then they have time off in-between sessions,” Lee said.

“Oh, okay, that makes sense,” Harry said as he turned toward the entryway, “here it is.” Today the smells filtering out through the door were kind of like burnt wood and wood shavings. He wondered what Figora was working on. The sounds of his silver-tipped staff tinged off the stone floor and bounced back off the walls in a pleasing way, giving him a sense of the space. He walked up to the workbench that he had worked at earlier with Peter and Gemma and found the edge of the grooved wood with his hand.

“Harry! How are you?” Figora greeted from the far side of the workshop, her footsteps approaching the group, “How’d it go on your broom? Did you try it out?”

He leaned into the table.

“Yeah - it was… so amazing. Thank you. I can’t wait to up again,” he said.

“Hey, Harry,” Fred slapped him on the shoulder, “you didn’t tell us you tried out your broom!”

“What? How’d you do that?” Lee asked, settling onto a stool at the bench.

“Did you crash?” George asked, concerned.

“Oh, well, yes and that was kind of a disaster,” Harry said. “Because it was right in front of Professor McGonagall.”

“What, you flew?” Ron said from the doorway. He had followed them, apparently. “Are you nutters?”

“It was so great… so much better than I thought it would be - Arig flew my broom and I rode with him,” Harry said, remembering the sensation.
“Then what happened? And who’s Arig?” asked George.

“It was great until we were landing and then I tripped us up and we hit the ground hard and Professor McGonagall said that she forbade me from flying again.” There was a long silence.

“It is the one thing that I am good at,” he said in barely a whisper.

“Hey, mate, that’s… well, blimey. That’s the pits,” George said.

“Harry, don’t give up on it yet,” Figora said, “Godric went through something similar with Professor McGonagall and they figured out how to make it work.”

“Yeah?” Harry said as a little bubble of hope grew in his gut. “He flew at Hogwarts?”

“Well, there’s no way you’ll be on the Quidditch team, though,” Ron said bluntly and the little bubble burst. “I mean, there’s no such thing as a blind seeker. Hey, Ow!” Ron shouted as it sounded like he had been smacked across the back of his head.

“Thanks, Ron, for stating the obvious, that’s helpful,” Harry said through his teeth. “I just want to fly again, that’s all.”

“Sorry,” Ron muttered.

Fred breathed out heavily.

“Has anyone told Oliver yet?” Lee said.

“Yeah, no,” George said. “That’s not going to go well, is it?… Well, why don’t you show us around the workshop, Harry? This place looks amazing! What kinds of things do you make here?”

His last question was directed at Figora and she was happy to show them the different workstations and explain the various projects that residents worked on - both for adapting tools to suit their specific needs as well as just the therapeutic outlet of working with their hands (or by whatever means they had). The twins and Lee were excitedly bouncing from one station to the next asking questions about how the tools and materials worked. Figora was just as excited as they were. Harry hung back, finding it hard to muster any kind of enthusiasm. Ron seemed to be shadowing him.

Ginny and Hermione showed up a bit later with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Percy and they got caught up in the twins' excitement. Arthur was especially intrigued with the liberal attitude the Center had for adapting muggle technologies with magic and not just wixen magic, but also goblin magic.

Harry made a feeble excuse about needing to go to the toilet and went out into the corridor and was irritated to hear that Ron had followed him. He pretended he hadn’t heard and asked his staff to direct him to the loo and then went and sat in a stall for a while, hoping that Ron would leave him alone.

When he was pretty sure he was alone, he cast the *Reveleo memento* charm to be sure and then exited the toilet and then cast the *Navigant* spell asking for the courtyard and learned that there was a way through the dining hall. He had to open the big doors to the dining hall using the panel. He felt bad for sneaking away from everyone when they had made a special trip to see him, but he needed to be alone. He’d go back in a bit and maybe they wouldn’t even notice that he’d been missing.

From the dining hall, the door to the courtyard went out to a balcony. Harry squeezed his staff to get a description and learned that the balcony was made from the same smooth white stones that made the ribs in the interior of the dining hall and went all around the courtyard, looking down onto it.
They weren’t as high up as the owlery, Harry could hear the branches from the tree brushed against the railing. He sucked in a deep breath - the odors of the city were intermingled here with the herb garden in the courtyard. He found the stairs down to the courtyard and was perplexed to find that it was a longer staircase from the balcony than from the owlery.

*This place is wacky.*

He thought he heard some whispering and wondered if there were other people in the courtyard, so cast the *Reveleo memento* charm again, but no one was there.

*Are there ghosts here? Would the Reveleo charm reveal them? Maybe there are other levels to the courtyard?*

He found the bench and sat down, running his hands over the fragrant herbs - the rosemary - was the other one sage? He was trying to remember from when he and Besel had been planting their little herb garden during his mind healing session.

He laid down on his stomach on the bench and broke off small leaves from the herbs to crush and bring up to his nose while listening to the birds hop around and twitter in the tree above him, hoping that they wouldn’t crap on him. He heard something and lifted his head in the direction of the sound and then someone coughed as if they were trying to let him know that they were there.

He sat up, “hello?” he asked.

“Hiya, Harry,” Ron said in a low voice, his feet dragging on the gravel. “Can I sit with you?”

Harry felt anger flash cross his chest and then his shoulders sagged. He didn’t know if he was up to talking to Ron just then, but he forced a “sure,” from his throat.

Ron walked slowly over to the bench and sat down heavily next to him.

They sat in a tense silence for a bit. Harry was taking shallow breaths.

“Har… Harry…” Ron started, his name catching in his throat.

“Mate. It’s just not bloody fair. You have the worst luck… except that really, you should have died down there. We all should have died. And so maybe you have brilliant luck. I don’t know. I mean that was like the third time you face You-Know-Who and you didn’t die. So, is that good luck or bad luck? I don’t know what it is. But it kills me that it happened to you… you know the whole venom in the eyes thing. I mean, you’re my best mate. And you’re the one who is bloody brilliant at Quidditch. And Ginny’s my sister, so it should have been me, but I would have died for sure and then mum and dad would have two dead kids… I mean they’d be gutted if they lost Ginny, their only girl, they’ve got lots of boys… so it’s good you saved her… but still, it just isn’t fair. And I’m sorry that I’m such a git and I keep saying stupid stuff. I’ll… I’ll try not to say stupid stuff. It just comes out before… well, before I think about it. I don’t know if I can stop it. But I’ll try, okay?”

“Yeah? Trying is good. That’s all you can do, right?… And I don’t know, either,” Harry said, “if it is good luck or bad luck. Maybe luck has nothing to do with it. Maybe it just is.”

“Yeah,” Ron agreed. “I don’t know how you do it, though, walking around in the dark all the time. It would scare the bejeezus out of me.”

“Well, it’s not really dark. Sometimes it is light - like so bright it hurts. But really it’s just nothing - except that it’s not nothing either. The sounds and smells and feel of things start to make pictures,”
Harry tried to explain. “Well, not pictures like I saw them before, but something different. It’s not
dark. It’s not the same as being in a room and seeing everything and then suddenly the lights go out
and you can’t see anything. It’s just a different way of seeing.”

“So it’s not scary?” Ron asked.

“I don’t know. I guess I hadn’t really thought of it like that. When I was up on the broom, it was like
it didn’t matter anymore - I could fly without worrying about anything - it was actually better than
before in some ways,” Harry said.

“Yeah, I don’t know if I would have had the guts to even get on a broom without being able to see
where I was going,” Ron said.

“I don’t think it was guts. It was just wanting to try to do things that I like to do… that make me
happy,” Harry sighed.

“Maybe we can talk to Professor McGonagall and get her to understand,” Ron said. “I mean, how is
it any more dangerous than sending firsties into the Forbidden Forest to track dying unicorns?”

“Yeah,” said Harry smiling weakly in Ron’s direction and he let out a breath.
"Harry, can I ask you something? Um, how do you get dressed? Does someone come and help you in the morning?" Ron asked.

"What? No, that would be awful! I just get dressed. I don't know. It's not that hard," Harry snorted. "Just one leg at a time, you know. I mean, I guess I feel for tags and seams to make sure I'm not putting something on inside out or backward. Seriously, Ron, you've gotten dressed in the dark before, haven't you?"

"Uh, I guess so. I hadn't really thought about it," Ron said.

"Yeah, well. You don't really think about it until you have to, I guess," Harry said.

"Yeah, I guess. But how do you tell what color shirt you're putting on?" Ron asked.

"I never really thought about what colors my shirts were, did I? I mean they are all grungy worn out things from Dudley. It doesn't really matter what they look like. And I guess I know what color they are by the feel of them," Harry said.

"You can tell color by the way things feel?" Ron said, mystified.

"No, I mean I remember my shirts and trousers from before when I could see and I can tell them apart by the way they feel. Like my grey trousers feel different from my tan ones," Harry said, running his fingers over the fabric on his knee. "And my staff will tell me what color things are if I cast the Indica color charm."

Harry took his collapsed staff out of his pocket and reached out for Ron, guessing where his shoulder was. He found his sleeve and touched the staff to the fabric and said, "Indica color."

The afīt in his ear said, "cornflower blue."

"See, your shirt is cornflower blue," Harry said.

"It is not!" Ron said indignantly. "It's just a light blue. Matches my eyes, doesn't it."

"Hey, I'll be able to use my staff to tell what color my potions are! I didn't think about that!" Harry said.

"Yeah, like Snape's going to let you do that," Ron muttered.

"Right… 'What do you think you're doing, Potter? You and your inflated ego! Always looking for a way to stand out! Using your staff to determine potion colors gives you an unfair advantage! You think that this nonsense of being blind means you deserve special accommodations! Insufferable attention-seeking boy! You're just like your father!'" Harry mimicked Snape's distaining sneer and put his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands. "Potions is going to be a nightmare."

"Yeah, but at least you won't have to look at the git's greasy hair anymore," Ron said.

"True," Harry said, "… but I bet I'll be able to smell it."

"Ew!" said Ron and they dissolved into laughter.

"There you two are! Everyone's looking for you," Hermione burst into the courtyard from the library.
"Hey, Mione!" Ron gasped, his laughter making him fall against Harry.

"Your dad was wondering if you wanted to go out to Charing Cross Road and get a muggle ice cream cone. Apparently, he's always wanted to try one." Hermione's smile was evident in her voice. "He said that Healer Jordan said it was okay for you to go, Harry but that we need to remember to finite the *Scribunt loqui* charms before we're around muggles."

"What makes muggle ice cream different than wixen ice cream?" Harry asked.

"Um, nothing. I think Mr. Weasley just wants to mingle with the muggles," Hermione said.

"That's my dad!" Ron groaned. "He's got a bit of a thing for muggles."

"Aren't we going to stand out?" Harry asked, wondering what the Weasleys were wearing.

"It's London - we're not going to stand out more than anyone else," Hermione assured.

"Yeah, I guess so," Harry conceded and he stood up and shook out his staff.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione found the rest of the Weasleys and Lee in the corridor outside of the dining hall speaking animatedly about going out for ice cream and figuring out if they had enough muggle money between them to buy it. Once they had that sorted out, they started heading toward the reception area. Molly was talking about asking Besel for recommendations for where to go. Harry was holding Hermione's arm when he heard someone come up to them.

"Harry, I wonder if I could have a word?" Arthur said quietly.

"Um, sure," Harry said slowing down. Hermione stopped and Harry gathered that Ron did, too, while the rest of the group moved on around them.

"Yes, you, two as well might as well hear this," Arthur said, discreetly casting a silencing charm that cut off the noises in the corridor. "It's just that earlier I spoke to Healer Jordan about some concerns I have about your safety."

"Oh?" Harry said, surprised. "My safety?"

"Yes, well. It seems that I'm not alone with these concerns and I learned that the Center, Hogwarts, and the Ministry of Magic are working together to try to keep the details about what happened in the Chamber of Secrets and your injury out of the news for as long as possible. Healer Jordan asked if we could disguise your identity today when we go out into London."

"What? Why would it be in the news?" Harry asked.

"Harry," Hermione said almost patiently, "you know that you are mentioned in all sorts of books. I'm actually surprised that the Daily Prophet hasn't had anything yet about the Basilisk attacks at Hogwarts since every student had to be talking about it when they got home from term, not to mention the fact that Dumbledore was removed from the school."

"You think they'd want to write about what happened to me?" Harry asked - his gut seizing.

"Well, it would be pretty big news if it got out. Fortunately, it hasn't yet. But we need to do our part to keep you safe, too," Arthur said.
"Safe from what exactly?" asked Harry slowly.

"Well, I'm sure that Dumbledore has explained to you how you're kept safe while you are at your Aunt's house because of the blood ward protections that he cast," Arthur said but stopped suddenly. Harry imagined it was because of the surprised expression he must have had on his face. "Oh, maybe he didn't explain that… "

"Is that why I have to stay with them?" Harry asked, heat rising in his chest and neck.

"Um, yes. Hmmm. Well, this is hard," Arthur seemed to be doubting himself.

"Who am I being kept safe from exactly?" Harry asked, keeping his voice as level as he was able.

"Well, I don't want to scare you… " Arthur hedged.

"Scare me? Is there another murderer trying to hunt me down, other than Voldemort?" Harry asked and then jumped when Arthur and Ron both yelped at the use of the name.

"Well, there are his followers, Harry. The ministry rounded up a bunch of them and they are rotting in prison, but still, we're fairly certain that not all of them were caught. While you're at your Aunt's house and Hogwarts and the Center, there are magical protections that keep you safe, but when you leave those safe places, you have to take extra precautions," Arthur explained.

"But I never did before, when we'd leave Privet drive or travel to Hogwarts, why is it different now? And why did no one ever tell me before?" Harry said, his voice rising.

"I'm sure that they didn't want to scare you. You're getting older now… and you are going to be perceived as more vulnerable because you're… blind," Arthur stammered. "Maybe this is a bad idea… to leave the Center… I just thought that it would be better to do it now when you'd be surrounded by a whole lot of wizards and witches who love you and want to protect you. You know, get used to being cautious when traveling about London and other places."

Harry's breath caught in his throat. "Are you all going to be in danger if you're seen with me?" Harry asked quietly.

"Oh, well, it's not that bad. It's not like there are dark witches and wizards waiting on every street corner for a chance to hex you… we're just trying to be safe. We're not in danger, no more than anyone else, right?" Arthur said, back-pedaling a bit.

"But you just said I was in more danger now because I'm blind," Harry said confused.

"That's why I'm going to teach you how to cast this disillusionment charm that will make you stand out less. People will be less likely to notice you," Arthur explained.

"Won't it make it hard for me to order ice cream?" Harry wondered.

"Well, you can end it and then recast it. That's why it is important that you know how to do it for yourself," Arthur said.

"Okay, what's the charm?" Harry asked.

"It's the Calamitatis charm. In addition to pronouncing the charm carefully, you also need to be thinking about not drawing attention to yourself. You won't be invisible, just not as noticeable," Arthur explained.
"Will you all notice me?" Harry asked, thinking about being stranded alone in London without knowing his way back to the center.

"Yes, just keep ahold of us and you'll be fine," Arthur assured. "It probably wouldn't hurt for all three of you to learn this spell. Let's all work on it."

Ron, Hermione, and Harry all tried to cast it until Arthur felt like they had done well.

"Okay, let's catch up with the group," Arthur hurried them along.

They walked into the reception area with Mr. Weasley.

"Oh, no, don't tell me those three have run off again! Arthur, I thought they were with you!" Molly exclaimed.

"No, Molly, they're here. I just was teaching them the disillusionment charm. It looks like it is working!" Arthur seemed delighted.

Harry felt a little nervous.

As they had walked to the reception area, Hermione had been working on convincing Ron to learn how to be Harry's sighted guide. Harry wasn't sure this was the best idea. He felt as though he'd be safer with Hermione, but he didn't interfere; Hermione's voice didn't allow any room for argument. Reluctantly, Ron had given in. Hermione taught him how to tap the back of Harry's hand as a signal that he was ready to guide him and Harry had followed the contour of Ron's arm up to his bicep and grasped it lightly. Hermione instructed Ron on how to go through doors using the door to the reception area as an example. Harry realized that Hermione must have done some research since he saw her on Monday because she offered a lot more information on the subject than she'd been taught from Healer Jordan on Monday. He wondered how many hours she'd spent at the library this week researching.

Harry was also very aware of how uncomfortable Ron felt as his sighted guide. Harry could feel Ron's nervousness in his tensed muscles on his upper arm and hear it in his shallow breaths.

"People are going to think we're a couple of poofs, Hermione!" Ron moaned as they made their way across the reception area.

"Then you'll fit right in, Ron! We're in London," Hermione blithely said. "Anyway, who cares if they do. Nothing wrong with it, Ron."

Harry leaned over and whispered, "We're disillusioned right now mate, no one is supposed to be noticing us anyway."

"Oh, right," Ron sighed and relaxed a bit as the wall opened and the sounds and smells of Charing Cross Road exploded into the quiet of the reception area.

Harry had extended his staff anyway - he didn't entirely trust Ron to guide him around obstacles in his path and felt a little better with his staff in his hand.

It proved to be a good move as right off the bat, Ron almost walked Harry right into a rubbish bin, but the silver tip on Harry's staff tugged against it before Harry ran into it.

"Um, Ron," Harry said stopping.

"Oh, right! Sorry mate! I didn't see it," Ron said.
"Yeah, me neither!" Harry said.

"Oh, Harry, I see what you did just there!" said Fred as he jumped next to Harry, grasping him around the shoulders and steering him around the bin.

"A great little joke of opportunity! And while that wasn't so bad, you could use a little illumination from some of the brightest," George said as he stuck his head between Harry and Ron, patting Harry on the back.

"Don't you bat an eye, we'll make sure they are in-sight-ful," Fred assured.

"You'll see, we won't leave you in the dark!" George chortled.

Harry groaned, shaking his head at their antics.

"Hurry up you lot, we've got to cross the street together or we'll get separated!" Molly called.

Ron sped up suddenly and Harry stumbled as he tried to keep up. "Hey, Ron, come on, warn a guy!" Harry called.

"Oh, sorry!" Ron said and slowed down to a slug's pace. "I'm rotten at this. Here, Hermione, you do it!" Ron held up his elbow as if he were offering Harry to Hermione. But she and Ginny were talking animatedly about a book Hermione had spotted in a bookstore window display and didn't respond. Ron harrumphed.

"Guess you're stuck with me," Harry said feeling a little like unwanted luggage. "You can go faster than that… it's just that you need to let me know."

He was really tempted to just go on his own.

"What street are we crossing?" Harry asked as Ron guided him jerkily around something in their path.

"Oh watch it, there are traffic cones… um we're crossing Great Newport Street," Ron said.

Molly was ushering them again as it seemed that now they were crossing another street.

"What street is this?" Harry asked.

"Now we're crossing Charing Cross Road and it looks like we're going on Newport Court; we had to jog a bit because of the construction." Harry could tell that Ron was looking around by the way his arm moved. For a bit, Ron was focused on guiding Harry and not talking and Harry didn't want to distract him. He could hear Fred and George and Lee behind him commenting on the shops and gathered that they were moving into a street that had a lot of stores that sold items from Asia. The aromas confirmed it - he could smell egg rolls and stir fry along with ginger. Outside of one store, he was pretty sure that they had walked through a cloud of chili powder as it stung his nose and made his eyes water.

_They must sell spices in there._

He could also hear people speaking in rapid Mandarin (he assumed - not that he could even name the other languages spoken in China). He was pretty sure that he'd heard snatches of French and Russian being spoken as well.

Discordant music was being piped out onto the street from a few establishments and seemed to be
battling with each other. The way the sounds echoed made him feel like they were on a really narrow street with buildings that towered over them - there were no cars though - so maybe it was just an alley. Harry kept getting knocked into by people (the Weasleys or other passersby) and he kept his staff close to his body and stuck his elbow out to act as a bit of a bumper. He wondered what they thought since clearly, they couldn't see him; did they even notice that they were running into him? He figured that Ron and Hermione were dodging people, but he couldn't see the people coming and he felt like he was the ball in a pinball machine.

"Sorry, mate, this is really tough - so many people here and it is so narrow," Ron apologized as Harry was knocked into again.

"No worries, Ron. You're doing fine," Harry fibbed. He was surprised that Ron hadn't given up yet and that he was taking the job so seriously.

Arthur was ahead of them now talking with Percy about all the clever muggle adaptations they were seeing - he was particularly captivated with a row of coin-operated parking meters.

"Where are we now?" Harry asked trying to keep a mental map of the area in his head - he was pretty sure that they had gone south for a little bit, but then angled west and north for a while. Occasionally, Harry got a whiff of rank urine odors rising up from stairwells or alleys (he guessed by the echoes as well as the way the air changed as they passed by) and at least once his cane struck something soft and he worried that he'd accidentally struck someone sleeping in a doorway. He remembered seeing people huddled in sleeping bags when he and Hagrid traveled to Diagon Alley through London.

"We're on Gerard Street. No, wait, Gerard Place; we're about to cross another street, but I can't see the street name," Ron said. A busker was playing a flute and the notes bounced off the buildings in an eerie way so that Harry couldn't pinpoint where the busker was standing.

Now they were on a busy street and the petrol fumes were strong. They seemed to be moving into an area with more bakeries and the smell of bread baking mingled with the spices. Harry could tell that the pavement was wider here and the buildings farther apart.

"Oh, this is Shaftesbury Avenue," Ron supplied.

They crossed another street with Molly urging them to stay together, then immediately crossed again at the corner. Harry was losing track of where they were and what direction they were headed. They passed flower vendor selling heavily scented flowers - the spiky leaves brushing against Harry's knees, "Hyacinth's - just 5 pounds a bunch!" a gravelly voice called.

"Where are we now, Ron?" Harry asked again.

"We're nearly there. I think this is Rupert Street," Ron said.

Harry's hand was getting sweaty on Ron's arm, even though it was a cool day. He wanted to wipe it on his trousers to get a better grip, but also didn't want to let go. A fetid odor nearly made him gag and Ron commented about the overflowing rubbish bin as he led Harry around it.

"We're turning on Archer Street now!" Molly informed the group. "It's just up here… the little Gelato shop that Besel recommended." Her voice was nearly drowned out by a passing lorry.

They were in another narrow alley and then Ron was guiding Harry through a very narrow door and his staff tinged against something metal and Harry guessed that ice cream shop had rickety metal chairs and tables by the sounds he was hearing inside the crowded shop.
"Harry, you can end the Calamitatis charm now so that you can order. Just remember to cast it again as we leave," Arthur said in his ear as they crowded together in the shop.

Harry flicked his wand into his hand and muttered, "Finite calamitatis" and then flicked his hand again to return his wand to his holster, though he wondered if his holster stood out now that he was no longer disillusioned.

"Ron, what kind of gelato do they have?" Harry asked.

"Well, let's see, there's Avocado -ew!-, a milk chocolate with hazelnut that I can't pronounce… ba-see-o?… "

"That's ba-cho!" said an unfamiliar voice with an Italian accent. "Say, does that young man need a menu in braille? We've got them here."

Harry heard the sound of a large piece of paper flapping near him and reached up until he found it, muttering "thank you," while he felt heat creeping up his neck. He ran his fingers over the incomprehensible braille and felt his cheeks glowing.

"Thanks, but I haven't learned how to read this yet… I'm still learning… " He tried handing it back and held it out for a while, but the man seemed to have moved on to taking orders.

"Here, I'll set it down over here," Ron offered, taking it from Harry's hands.

"Do they have other chocolate flavors?" Harry asked quietly.

"Yeah, they have a dark chocolate with sour cherry called Black Forest and then a Dark Chocolate with Earl Grey and Biscuit - that sounds weird - and a White Chocolate with Thyme. All the flavors sound pretty odd, if you ask me," Ron whispered.

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

"Hey, what does the blind kid want?" the man asked.

Harry felt his neck get hot again as Hermione exclaimed indignantly, "He can talk, you know!"

"Um, I'd like the bacio," Harry stammered.

"Here you go, Harry," Ron said. Harry held out his hand and Ron gingerly placed the cone in it. It took them a bit to transfer the top-heavy cone and Harry was worried he was going to drop it.

Harry took a tentative lick - the creamy chocolaty flavor with a hint of hazelnut was heavenly. He smiled and then began working his way around the cone to try to catch the drips that were oozing down his fingers.

I'm going to need a napkin.
Hermione was still muttering about the way the shop clerk talked to Harry as the group made their way out to the street, eating their cones and thanking Mr. and Mrs. Weasley for the treat. Harry might have participated in abusing him, too, if he hadn’t been so worried about how he was going to manage eating an ice cream cone while walking and trying to navigate the busy street. A large vehicle roared by and it sounded so close that Harry was certain it must be up on the pavement. He clutched at Hermione’s arm and froze until it went past. He let out a breath.

“It’s just a lorry, Harry,” Hermione spoke into his ear. They hadn’t yet recast the *Calamitatis* charm.

“Harry, there’s a step down here,” Hermione said. Harry remembered tripping up it on their way in.

“Hey, do you think we can find a place to sit down and eat?” Harry murmured to Hermione. “I’m not sure I can manage all this while walking.” He gestured toward his cone.

“Oh, right. They do have an outdoor seating area,” Hermione said.

“Hey, let’s sit down and eat here,” Hermione called to the Weasleys who were wandering down the pavement.

She led Harry through a metal gate that clanged to a rickety little chair that wobbled when she put his hand on the back of it. He sat down gingerly as he heard the others filing in and finding chairs around them. He reached out and found the small table between them. It shifted under his hand and he found that there was a pile of papers on it. He touched the paper tentatively and decided it must be a newspaper. It made him think about what Hermione had said about the events in the Chamber of Secrets not appearing in the Daily Prophet yet.

“Hermione, have you been reading the Daily Prophet?” he asked.

“Yes, I’ve been picking it up when we come into London. You can read it at the Center’s library, did you know? I caught up on this week’s news when Ginny and I went to the library. They haven’t printed anything about what happened at Hogwarts. It’s very odd,” she said thoughtfully.

Harry ran his fingers over the newsprint while he listened. Reading the paper sounded like drudgery.

“Good idea to sit down, Hermione,” Molly approved as she sat down at the neighboring table. “Here are some napkins… Harry, your ice cream is dripping into your lap, dear. *Scourgify.* ”

Harry felt a strange, fleeting warmth on his thigh. He reached for a napkin and held it under his dripping cone while he tried to track down the errant rivulets with his tongue.

Ron sat down at the table with them and let out a moan.

“That good, is it?” Harry asked. “What flavor did you get?”

“Blood orange,” Ron said, “it’s bloody brill… ” the rest of the word was lost in his slurping.

“What did you get, Hermione?” Harry asked.

“Roasted plum,” Hermione said. “It’s quite good.”

“Ew, that sounds awful, Mione,” Ron muttered through a mouthful of ice cream.
“Ginny, what did you get?” Harry asked.

There was a squeak and a chair rattled against the pavement and Molly shrieked. Harry felt people brushing by him. He sat still trying to figure out what was going on.

“Did Ginny fall down?” he asked Hermione. “Is she okay?”

“Come on, Ginny,” Fred said.

“Here you go,” said Fred.

“Oh, that’s a shame!” Molly lamented. “Oh, dear. Let’s get you a new one, okay? No, don’t cry dear. It happens, Gin. Please don’t worry.”

“Ginny, I’m sorry. Did I scare you?” Harry asked.

“No, Harry, don’t you fret yourself. It wasn’t your fault,” Molly admonished. “Now, let me clean up this mess before someone steps in it… scourgify.”

“Let me get you a new one, Ginny,” Harry said standing up and holding his cone out to Ron who took it. He shook out his staff and held his hand out to Ginny.

After waiting for a few long minutes, she put her small hand in his - it was cold and trembling. “Oh, wait a sec, Harry, you have ice cream dribbled on your shirt,” Fred said as he passed by and Harry heard him mutter something, and then felt his T-shirt warm up slightly and then cool down. “Oh, thanks!” Harry said.

He had started walking toward the gate, and then he remembered that his muggle money was in his staff and that he’d have to use magic to get it out. He stopped and touched the raised dots on the staff handle and muttered “accio five-pound note,” and slipped the note into his pocket when it flew into his hand.

“Can I take your elbow, Ginny?” Harry asked.

She took his hand and placed it on her arm, but didn’t say anything. She was trembling.

“Did you get hurt when you fell, Ginny?” he asked softly.

He felt a slight movement that traveled down her arm to his hand.

“Did you shake your head?” he asked.

“Yes, sorry,” she muttered.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?” Ginny bemoaned.

“Because we care about you. Everyone keeps asking me, too,” he commiserated.


“You were hurt, too, Ginny… maybe in ways worse than me…”

“What do you mean worse than yours!” Ginny asked
“No one can see your injuries; mine are more obvious,” Harry responded.

She sniffled.

“What kind of gelato do you want?” Harry asked, remembering the step as they went through the door. A bell tinkled as they passed through. There were customers ahead of them ordering.

“Fresh mint stracciatella,” Ginny said.

“Straw-che-tella? How do you know how to pronounce it?” Harry asked.

“The guy told me when I ordered it the first time. It’s just a fancy name for mint chocolate chip. It’s yummy,” she said and Harry noticed that she wasn’t trembling anymore.

Harry heard the bells ring again and it sounded like Fred, George, and Lee had come into the shop, too. Their feet were sliding around on the tile floor as if they were pushing each other; their voices sounded conspiratorial.

“Can I help you,” the man behind the counter asked.

“One scoop of fresh mint stracciatella in a sugar cone, please,” Ginny said.

“Didn’t you just order?” the man asked.

“Yes, but I dropped it,” Ginny said quietly.

“Did he drop his, too?” the man questioned.

“No, I didn’t,” Harry said tersely.

Why was this person still talking about me as if I can’t answer for myself?

“Did you want another one, then?” he asked loudly.

“No, thanks, just the one,” Harry said cringing and stepping up to the counter while holding out the five-pound note.

The note was snatched from his hand. Harry held out his hand waiting for the change as he heard the cash register ring open and coins being pushed around. Ginny nudged his hand forward a bit and the man grunted then dropped the coins into his palm.

Harry felt them briefly, trying to determine how much change he’d received before he put them in his pocket. He needed more time to figure out what the coins were.

“Need any help, Harry?” Fred asked, coming up behind them.

“No, we’re fine. Ginny’s got her ice cream again, right Gin?” Harry asked, but he was confused as it sounded like Ginny was sniffling again.

“What’s wrong, Ginny?” Harry asked, wondering what he had missed.

“Nothing,” she muttered.

“Don’t you worry a bit, Ginny,” George said. Harry felt George wrap his arm around Ginny and pull her away from him, leaving Harry standing in the middle of the ice cream shop.
“You shouldn’t have done that, Fred and George,” Ginny admonished, it sounded like they were going through the door.

Harry shook out his staff and started following them.

“It’s just a little bit of fun, Gin. And did you see that guy’s expression?” Fred cajoled.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked perplexed, coming up behind them.

“His expression was priceless!” Lee hooted.

“What expression?” Harry asked.

“The guy at the counter - ,” George explained as he held the door for Harry. “Mind the step, Harry.”

“ - when he read your shirt, Harry.” Lee said.

“What?!” Harry exclaimed as he ran his hand over his shirt. It felt different than it had that morning when he put it on.

“What does my shirt say?” he asked slowly, realizing that he could feel the imprint of ink on his shirt, though he was pretty sure he had just put on a dingy grey one that morning - one that didn’t have any logos on it.

“I was blinded while slaying a Basilisk - what’s your excuse?” George read theatrically, then pivoted him around.

Ginny gasped a sound that was half laugh, half sob.

“What’s on the back?” Harry said with a bit of panic in his voice.

“And there’s an image of a gigantic dead serpent and you’re standing on it holding up the sword, with blood gushing out of your eyes!” Lee nearly shouted.

Ginny was crying more audibly.

“What?!” Harry said as he tried to cover the shirt with his hands, his staff held awkwardly in his elbow, while twisting it to pull the back to the front in a failed attempt to cover the back as well.

“Do you like it, Harry?” George asked.

“We thought you should blow your own trumpet a little,” Fred said.

“Fred, you need to change that back. Harry can’t wear that while we’re walking around London,” Arthur said, fuming. “I thought I told you about the need to keep this quiet! It’s not a time to blow trumpets!”

“Aah, dad, where’s the fun in that?” George moaned.

“Come on, it’s the most wicked thing ever and no one even knows he did it!” Lee said.

“Yes, that’s the whole point, we’re trying to keep it under wraps, not announce it to the world at large! Harry’s safety is a stake here!” Arthur said exasperatedly.

“Well, when you put it like that…” Fred said glumly.
“Oh, let me see!” Ron said, laughing and pushing Harry’s hands away while turning Harry again so he could look at the back of his shirt. He hooted in delight. “That’s bloody brilliant!”

“Oh, boys, that’s terrible! I can’t believe you did that!” Molly scolded.

“Really, I can’t imagine that Harry wants to announce to the world that he’s blind,” Percy said. “and it’s terribly gory.”

Ginny sniffed loudly. “Ginny, dear, your ice cream is dripping. Come on, now. Why are you crying?” Molly was speaking softly to Ginny.

“How did you do it?” Hermione asked with a bit of awe in her voice.

“We don’t reveal our secrets, dear Hermione,” Fred said sweetly.

“Well, change it back, now, while there are no muggles around,” Arthur hissed.

“Okay, but I still think that Harry should get some credit for what he did,” George said.

Fred muttered a spell under his breath and Harry felt his shirt warm again and then cool suddenly. He moved his hands over his torso, trying to discern if it had been restored completely. It wasn’t the same, but he couldn’t feel the imprint of words this time.

“That’s not what his shirt looked like before, Fred,” Molly reproached.

“Well, he should at least get a decent shirt out of the deal, don’t you think, Mum?” George said.

“Sure, I suppose. That color does look nice on you, Harry. Brings out the green of your eyes,” she said softly.

Harry kind of hated that everyone was looking at him and discussing things he couldn’t see.

“Here’s your gelato, Harry,” Hermione said as if she understood, grabbing his hand and placing the cone in it. “I cast a freezing charm on it so that it would stop melting. I’ll take it off now. Finite glacius.”

“Oh, it’s cold,” he said, shivering and he moved his other hand through the air trying to find the back of his chair, which he finally found and sat down. He didn’t like having to grope for things.

His tongue nearly stuck to the gelato, it was so cold. He wasn’t sure he could finish it. It had been so heavenly just moments before.

*Why am I being such a stick in the mud? They were just having a bit of fun.*

“Alright, Harry?” George asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Harry said, trying to get the corners of his mouth to go up.

George slapped him on the back.

“It’s just that it kind of…” Harry was saying when Hermione interrupted him. “Harry, he’s gone. He went over to sit with Fred and Lee.”

“Oh, yeah. Right,” he said. “No problem.”

“They shouldn’t have done that without telling you, Harry,” Hermione said softly. “It was
insensitive. You don’t have to pretend that you’re okay with it.”

“Oh, come on, Hermione. They weren’t taking the mickey out of Harry, they were poking at that
guy - you were just laying into him, too,” Ron chided. “Harry thought it was funny, didn’t you,
mate?”

“Didn’t you see his face, Ron. He didn’t think it was funny - he was just confused,” Hermione
insisted.

“It’s alright, really,” Harry said, wishing they’d drop it.

He tried his cone again and it was getting soft enough to eat. He didn’t want to throw it away after
the Weasleys had spent so much money on the treat, so he made himself take a bite. Pretty soon he
was focused on trying to keep the ice cream from melting all over him again.

Ginny was still sniffling near Molly and Harry suspected that she wasn’t enjoying her gelato, either.

“Well, we better head back to the center,” Arthur announced to the group. Metal scraped against the
concrete as they stood up and started going out the little gate onto the pavement. Despite his best
efforts, Harry felt like he had gelato everywhere. He held his staff in its collapsed form and muttered
scourgify while tapping his shirt and trousers and then each of his hands.

“Wait a sec, Harry. There are people walking by. Okay, do it now. You have some on your chin,
too,” Hermione told him, so he tapped his chin. He liked the warm feeling of the spell - it made him
think of a hot washcloth.

“Ron, you better do it, too,” Hermione chided. “I think you got more on you than Harry did. You
look like a 5-year-old.”

“Do not!” Ron huffed, but it sounded like he was scourgifying himself.

He shook out his staff and grasped Hermione’s arm at her cue.

“Better cast the Dissolutionment spell again,” Hermione reminded and he felt her body twisting as
she looked around. “There aren’t any muggles nearby, this is a good time.”

“Right,” Harry said as he held the tip of his staff to his forehead and muttered the incantation.

“But don’t you cast it - I think people kept running into me and Ron because we’re both under the
spell,” Harry said.

“Maybe it was because Ron’s not a very careful guide,” Hermione muttered as she led him out to the
pavement and they started following the hoard of Weasleys back to the Center. Harry could hear
Ron and Lee laughing about something they saw in a shop window up ahead of them.

“Well, it was his first time,” Harry said quietly. “And it was through the heart of London. You could
cut him some slack.”

“Hmmm. I didn’t really think that through, did I?” Hermione reflected.

“Well, it might have been better to try it out around the Center first,” Harry admitted.

“You could have said something,” Hermione pointed out. “Step up here - the pavement’s uneven.”
“Yeah, well,” Harry sighed.

“My mum mentioned that we could go to Diagon Alley when she comes to pick me up - get you a quick quotes quill. Do you want to do that?” Hermione asked.

Harry was quiet. He did want to get some new clothes and trainers and a quick quotes quill would be handy for writing letters and he was tired.

“We don’t have to do it today,” Hermione said hurriedly.

“I do need to get some new clothes and I’d really like to have a second pair of shoes. My trainers were wet for nearly two days and it would have been nice to have a second pair to wear,” Harry said.

“Couldn’t you just perform a drying charm on them?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah, I need to learn that one,” Harry said.

“Or what about duplicating your shoes?” Hermione suggested.

“How do you do that?” Harry asked.

“Well, I’ve only read about it… but the incantation is Geminio and I guess it allows you to make copies of things… though it doesn’t work on food or money and many items are protected from the charm so that people can’t duplicate copyrighted material such as books… though it might work on muggle books. And I understand that the copies may not be as good as the originals… so if you duplicate your trainers, they may not hold up to wear as long,” Hermione explained.

Harry started when something splashed on his neck. “Is it raining?” he asked. “Or did a pigeon just poop on me?”

“Yes, it’s raining,” Hermione said as she started to walk faster. There were shrieks from the group ahead of them. The smell of ozone was sharp in his nostrils.

“Can’t we just conjure an umbrella or something?” Harry asked as the rain started to pelt him - making him shiver.

“Not in the middle of muggle London, we can’t,” Hermione said. “Here. We’re going into a store.” She led him through a narrow doorway and the air was instantly warmer and smelled of dust and mildew- Harry could also smell the wet clothes and sweat from the crowd of Weasleys that he had been pressed against as they entered the tight confines of the shop.

“Is this a bookstore?” Harry asked, pushing against someone’s back trying to make some space for himself. Percy, he determined by his height and grumbling.

“Yes, it’s a used-book store,” Hermione confirmed - sounding distracted as she led him down a narrow aisle to the left and giving them more space. “Oh, I wonder if they have a braille section.”

“I doubt they would - why do you want a braille section?” Harry asked surprised.

“I’ve been trying to learn, remember? I told you,” Hermione said.

“Me, too,” said Harry remembering his one lesson with Madam Flamel.

That had been ages ago.
“Oh, they have a large print section… oh, yes, here we go. Just four books in braille, but that’s something,” Hermione said sounding thrilled.

“What are the books?” Harry asked.

“Here,” she said as she tapped the back of his hand holding his staff with a book. “You look at it.”

He let go of her arm and took the book. It was heavy.

“Hermione, I can’t read braille yet,” he said.

“I thought you were having lessons,” Hermione said distractedly.

“Yeah, I just had one this week. I missed the others…” he admitted.

“Why did you miss them?” she paused while flipping through another book.

“I… it was a hard week,” Harry said quietly.

“Yeah? What happened?” she asked her attention on him fully now.

“I . . I was sad,” he said quietly.

“Sad?” she asked.

“Really sad. I guess I kind of shut down,” he hated to admit it, yet he knew from talking to Besel that it did help to talk about it.

“Oh,” Hermione said quietly. “Well, I guess that makes sense. I mean, you’ve been through so much.” Her breath caught in her throat.

Oh, no, don’t start crying! Harry thought. He started feeling the cover of the book, his staff caught in the crook of his arm.

“I guess it is good that I have access to the books at the Center’s library, huh?” Harry said as they
walked down the narrow aisle, the silver tip of Harry’s staff tingling against the base of the book stacks.

The bell on the door tinkled as they passed through it and the shop owner called out a farewell in a fragile voice. “There’s a step down here, Harry,” Hermione informed him and he found it with his staff. The pavement was wet under his trainers and all the aromas of the city were damp.

“Hmmm. I smell a garden,” Harry said, breathing in deeply.

“There isn’t anything green in sight, but I smell it, too. Maybe it is a rooftop garden,” Hermione said.

“Did I tell you about Little Friend?” Harry asked.

“Little friend? No, who’s that?” Hermione responded.

“My little snake friend at Privet Drive. He helped me weed and mow the lawn,” Harry said wistfully.

“They made you mow the lawn?” Hermione cried out.

“Just my normal chores,” Harry said.

“But you could have been seriously injured!” Hermione objected.

“Yeah, if I didn’t do the chores…” Harry said under his breath, then, “Little friend helped me. The smell of plants reminds me of him. He really likes fat worms.”

“Why didn’t you bring him with you?” Hermione asked.

“He wanted to stay with his family,” Harry said.

“Oh, I guess that makes sense. Why don’t we go to the Magical Menagerie in Diagon Alley and see if they have a snake for you… it could guide you,” Hermione said.

“What? A guide snake?” Ron hooted. “But then everyone would definitely think you’re Slytherin’s heir!”

“Oh, Ron, that’s so last year,” Hermione stated.
“Oh, I don’t know, Hermione. I wish I could convince Little Friend to come with me. It would be weird to just get a different snake,” Harry said. “It wouldn’t feel right somehow.”

“And everyone would be freaking out!” Ron added.

“They are going to be freaking out anyway… might as well be about something worthwhile,” Harry said.

“Yeah, right!” Ron said, laughing.

Up ahead, Harry could hear bits and pieces of a stern lecture that Molly was giving the twins about doing underage magic around muggles and how they could get Arthur in trouble with the ministry and he could lose his job.

Ron and Hermione were quiet, too, and Harry figured they were also listening to it.

“Oh wait, there’s a big puddle here, Harry,” Hermione stopped.

“Can we walk around it?” Harry asked.

“Not really - can you jump over it?” Hermione asked. Harry heard Ron jumping.

“Here, I’ll reach with my staff - tell me when it is past the puddle,” Harry suggested.

“Okay, that’s the edge of it,” Hermione said.

“That’s a big puddle,” Harry said.

“Yeah - want to jump together?” Hermione said.

“I guess so,” Harry said.

“Okay, on three! One, two, three!” Hermione squealed as they launched themselves across the puddle. Harry stumbled when he landed and pulled on Hermione’s arm, causing her to fall against him. Their feet splashed in a puddle. He steadied her, laughing.

“Did we jump into another puddle?” he asked.

“Yeah, we overshot it a bit,” Hermione said.

“Come on, you two, stay with us, we’re crossing the street,” Percy said in an officious voice.

It sounded like a busy street and at the curb, Harry stepped back when the air from a lorry rushing by felt too close.

“Okay, let’s go, Harry,” Hermione said stepping out into the street.

Harry’s staff tinged against the pavement as he hurried alongside Hermione. She yelped and pulled him close to her as his staff struck something metal and bounced out of his grasp. He felt as if there was a pillow of air pushing him back.

Someone yelled at them, “Hey, watch it!”
He launched himself at the street, trying to grab his staff as it fell and let go of Hermione’s arm. There was a blare of a hooter and the squealing of brakes.

Hermione was screaming, “Harry, where are you?” and her hand brushed his back and then was grabbing his arm. Fear gripped his gut.

*I can’t lose my staff!*

His hands scrambled against the street’s wet, rough surface and he couldn’t find his staff - then remembered his wand and flicked it into his hand and yelled, “Accio staff” and the staff snapped into his outstretched hand at the same time that Hermione was hauling him up and pulling him across the street. He was stumbling and tripping as he tried to right himself.

The Weasleys were yelling, “Where’d Harry go? Did he get hit by that Lorry?”

Then suddenly, several hands grabbed him by the arms and shoulders and hauled him back onto the pavement of the other side of the street and he was colliding with bodies. In the melee, he managed to flick his wand back into the holster, run his hand over his staff to make sure it was all there, then collapse it to stick in his pocket.

Ginny was screaming a high, piercing wail. He tried to find her in all the bodies pressed against him, his hands feeling over shoulders and torsos, faces and hands. He couldn’t reach her.

“Ginny, Ginny, we’re okay,” he tried to assure her.

Finally, he found her shoulder and grasped it. She was clinging to Percy. At his touch, her wailing stopped.

Harry realized that his arm hurt.

“Hermione, are you okay?” Harry asked, breathless.

She was still holding onto his arm, her fingers digging deep into his bicep. Her whole body was trembling.

“That cycle courier! He came out of nowhere and… Oh, Harry! Are you okay? I’m so sorry!” she moaned.

He felt as though they were being hugged by the entire Weasley family. Perhaps they were.

“Hey, I can’t breathe!” he shouted and they let go, except for Molly who is still clinging to both Harry and Hermione.

“Harry, end that blasted disillusionment charm right now,” she demanded, “so that I can see for myself that you are okay.”

Harry muttered, “Finite calamitatis.”

She held him at arm’s length for a bit and, finally, she let go straightening Harry’s glasses.

“Don’t. Do. That. Again.” Molly demanded grasping him by the shoulders and shaking him with each word.

“What were you doing out there?” Arthur shouted. “Your staff is not worth your life!”

“It’s how I get around now! It’s how I see. And it’s got everything I own in it… my Nimbus 2000,”
Harry shouted back, his heart pounding.

“It is not worth your life, Harry,” Arthur said again. “All that stuff can be replaced, but you can’t be. That lorry missed you by a hair’s breadth.”

He sounded really shaken.

“I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t know,” Harry said hanging his head.

Arthur drew him into a rough hug, pressing Harry’s face against his tweed jacket, “I was just scared, that’s all. It was very close.”

“Who cast the Protection spell?” Harry asked.

“What? Did any of you cast a Protection spell? We couldn’t see where you were exactly,” Arthur said.

There was a chorus of “no” and “not me” and “What? Who cast Protego?”

Arthur moved away from Harry.

“I don’t think there are any other wizards here,” Arthur muttered. “But we should get back to the Center. We shouldn’t be having this conversation in the middle of London.”

“Arthur, he shouldn’t be disillusioned. He can’t see and people can’t see him. It has to be polyjuice or some other disguising charm. It’s not safe if no one can see him,” Molly said.

Someone had their hand on Harry’s back - patting it and squeezing. He finally figured out it was Ron. “You scared me, mate,” Ron said quietly.

“Okay, we’ll do something else other than a disillusionment charm. We’ll figure something else out,” Arthur agreed. “Let’s go back to the Center. That was a little too much excitement. I’ll feel better when we’re back inside.”

The group was much more somber as they made their way back to 56 Charing Cross Road. Harry could hear Percy muttering soothing things to Ginny as they walked. As his heart began to beat at a more normal pace, Harry realized that his trousers were soaking and his palms scraped up from his time on the ground trying to find his staff. He was suddenly feeling really tired again and ached to be back at the Center. Hermione tapped his hand for sighted guide and he grasped her upper arm - wincing when his stinging palms came in contact with her shirt. She was still trembling.

“Sorry, I think I might be getting blood on your shirt,” he said.

“Oh, are you cut?” Hermione said, pausing.

“My palms,” he said showing her his palm and the motion made him think about talking with Gemma.

She drew in a sharp breath, “oh, ow! That looks like it stings.”

“Yeah. We can get it sorted out when we’re at the Center. How many more streets do we have to cross?” Harry asked.

“I think we’re almost there,” she said, starting again.

Harry got a whiff of chili powder and realized that they were closer than he thought. “Yeah, I think
we just have to go across Charing Cross Road and then Great Newport Road,” he said.

“Oh, did your staff tell you that?” Hermione asked.

“No, I just remember that spice shop we just passed,” Harry said. “The one that smells like chili powder. I quieted the *Navigant* spell - sometimes it is just too much to have it always talking to me - especially with everyone talking around us and the street sounds.”

They were quiet for a while - listening to the sounds of the city and their footsteps on the pavement.

“I don’t think I’m up to going to Diagon Alley tonight,” Harry said.

“Yeah, me neither,” Hermione agreed. “Maybe Mum will let me come tomorrow and we can try shopping then. Do you think that Healer Jordan will let you go to Diagon Alley - what with all the concerns about your safety? Maybe you can wear a disguise or something.”

Harry had a mental image of himself with a mustache, a trench coat with the collar pulled high around his ears, and a bowler hat low on his brow.

“I don’t know. Isn’t it a hassle for you to come over here?” Harry asked.

“It’s not that far, really. And I want to,” she said. “You did promise to go to the library with me!”

Harry felt the tightness in his shoulders lessen as he crossed the threshold back into the reception area of the Center - especially when the entryway closed, suddenly eclipsing the honking horns, discordant voices, and petrol fumes of Charing Cross Road.

“Harry, we are going to head home now. It has been so good to spend the day with you and to see you getting along so well despite… well, everything,” Molly said with tears in her voice as she touched his face gently before pulling him into a firm embrace. He held onto her for a moment, inhaling her comforting aroma before he started to feel a bit smothered and pulled back.

She whispered, “Thank you so much for everything you’ve done for Ginny. She really is so much better; I’ve been so worried about you both. It did her a world of good to talk to you.”

Harry didn’t know what to say, so he thanked Molly for coming to visit him and for the ice cream.

She held his hands in hers and squeezed. He yelped.

“Oh, Harry, look at your palms. Let me…” she said and then she was tapping one palm with her wand and muttering, “*Scourgify*.”

“Ow!” he cried out while she did the same thing to the other palm.

“Oh, sorry, I had to clean it. This one won’t hurt,” she said as she murmured, “*Episkey*,” the other and he felt a warming sensation move across his hands as the cuts knit themselves up and soothed the stinging. He ran his thumbs over his palms and couldn’t find any scrapes.

Fred and George and Lee thumped him on the back and mussed his hair as they said goodbye. Harry felt his shirt warm up again and felt it trying to figure out if there was another logo on it. “What did you do this time?” he asked, half afraid, half amused.

His fingertips tracing across his shirt didn’t find any imprint of a logo. He reached over his back, trying to tell if there was something there.
“Nothing! What makes you think we did anything?” Fred said with an air of innocence that made Harry even more worried.

When Ginny came to say goodbye to him, Harry took her by the hand and asked his staff to guide him to an empty corner.

“Ginny,” he said gently. “Will you write to me and tell me how things are going and how you’re doing? I don’t mean just telling me that you’re alright, but the other things, too?”


“I dunno. It’s just that, well, we were the only ones in that Chamber. You’re the only one who really understands what it was like… and I think we need to talk about it. You know? Would that be okay?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Ginny said quietly. “How do I write to you?”

“Just write normally on a scroll - you can send it with Errol, right? Or with Hedwig when I send her to you with letters,” Harry said. “I’ve got this thing that Dumbledore gave me that helps me read. It’ll read the letter out loud to me in my ear, but no one else can hear it.” He touched the afitó on his ear.

“Okay,” Ginny said and she squeezed his hand. “Hermione and Ron are watching us. I think they want to talk to you.”

“Hey, Harry,” Ginny said tentatively, “Did you read the scroll I gave you when we arrived?”

“Oh, yeah, no. I haven’t read it yet,” he said, remembering that he’d stuck it in his staff. “Accio Ginny’s scroll” he said, holding his hand to the window in his staff.

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t read that one. Can I have it back?” Ginny asked.

“Sure,” he said and handed it to her.

“It’s just that I’m feeling better now… than I was when I wrote it. I’ll write you another one… right away,” she said and she tugged at his hand, leading him to where Ron and Hermione were waiting.

“You alright, Ginny?” Ron asked.

“Yeah,” she sighed.

“Well, I guess I’ll see you later,” Ron said uncomfortably. “Maybe you can spend next weekend at the Burrow?”

“Yeah, I’ll ask. That’d be nice,” Harry said, though he had some doubts.

“Harry, I just spoke to Healer Jordan again about using the disillusionment charm and how disastrous that was. She’s going to look into other ways you can disguise yourself when you go out into London,” Arthur informed him.

Hermione came and held onto Harry’s hand while the Weasleys called out their goodbyes and the entrance opened up letting in all the noise and fumes of the street outside. Harry could smell the wet pavement and guessed that it had started raining again. Then before he was ready, the noises were cut off and the Weasleys were gone. Harry was glad Hermione was still there. Even so, he felt really lonely.

“My mum’s going to be here soon,” Hermione said. “Want to just wait here on the benches?”
“Sure,” he said and they walked over and sat down.

“Do you think Ginny’s going to be okay?” Harry asked.

“Yeah. She’s strong, you know,” Hermione said.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed.

“Still, I know what you mean. I think she’s having a hard time,” Hermione said.

Harry nodded, wrapping his arms around himself. He remembered his shirt and asked, “Hey, did the twins change my shirt again?”

“Um, no, it looks the same. Why?” Hermione asked.

“I just felt it heat up again like it did when they changed it at the gelato shop,” Harry said.

“That wasn’t very ni…” she broke off in mid-sentence as the entrance opened again.

Hermione jumped up and ran toward the entrance. Harry stood up and shook out his staff and walked toward Hermione and her mum.

“How was your day, Harry?” Emma asked.

“It was good, Dr. Granger,” Harry said, taking a step nearer.

“Mum, can I come back tomorrow and help Harry get some new clothes and trainers and maybe a Quick Quotes Quill at Diagon Alley?” Hermione asked.

“Would we be able to go to Gringotts and get more money from my vault, too?” Harry asked.

“Oh, sure, they don’t have the same banking hours as muggle banks, they are open on Sundays,” Hermione said.

“Well, I’m pretty sure that Dan could come with you,” Emma said. “Is there a phone here? We could call him.”

“It looks like there is one at the reception desk,” Hermione said and she ran off, leaving Harry standing awkwardly by her mom.

“It looks like you got some sun today,” Emma said.

“Yes, we went to the beach,” Harry said.

“Really? How’d you do that? Did you get there by magic?” Emma asked.

“Well, there are rooms here that are like entrances to other parts of the world and one of them is a Caribbean beach,” Harry explained.

“Wow, that’s amazing,” Emma said as Hermione came running back to them, a bit breathless.

“Dad says it’s okay, mum. We’ll be back here tomorrow at 9 am, okay?” Hermione said.

“Okay, that’ll be great. Thanks, Hermione,” Harry said.

“Well, that beach sounds heavenly. I’m glad you had a chance to do that. I imagine it was relaxing,” Emma said.
“Yeah, it was fun to ride the waves,” Harry agreed.

“See you tomorrow, Harry,” Hermione said, giving him a tight squeeze that surprised him.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow,” Harry said. The entrance opened, noises and odors exploding into the space once again, and then they were gone and the reception area was quiet except for the scratching of a quill coming from the reception desk.

Harry started walking back to his room - the tip of his staff and his footsteps echoing in the empty space. He took a detour to visit Hedwig for a bit. She was a bit grumpy since he hadn’t saved any snacks for her and the visit was short.

Harry was wiping his feet carefully on the mat at the entrance to the owlery when he heard footsteps approaching him.

“Harry?” Healer Jordan said, “Do you have a moment? Can I talk with you?”

“Sure,” he said, his stomach flip-flopping.

She tapped the back of his hand and led him to her office across the hall.

“Did something happen?” Harry asked apprehensively.

“Oh, I just wanted to check in with you about your visit with the Weasleys,” she replied as they settled into chairs in her office.

He could hear what sounded like a dog whining and scratching against a door.

“Is that Arig?” Harry asked. “Is he okay?”

“Yes. He’s doing well. It’s just hard for pack animals to be separated from others… he doesn’t like being alone… especially when he can hear us over here,” Healer Jordan explained.

“He’s transformed into a werewolf now, right?”

“Yes, but a perfectly benign one. He’s more like a wolf cub. He’ll mostly sleep tomorrow. We’ll see how he’s doing tomorrow… if he’s ready to be back in the dorm or wants to rest here more,” Healer Jordan said. “He asked me to share this information with you or any of his roommates if you asked, by the way. He wants you to know that he’s safe to be around.”

“Oh, okay,” Harry said, then turned his head as he heard another dog whining and scratching, but at another door on the other side of the room. This dog started howling.

“Wait, why are there two?” Harry asked perplexed.

“Er, yes. It is a matter of privacy. You’ll have to excuse me for not explaining in more detail. But tell me about what happened out there. Arthur said that you were nearly hit by a Lorry as you were crossing the street under the disillusionment charm,” she returned to the point of the visit.

“Oh, yeah, I guess there was a cycle courier who didn’t see me. But someone cast a Protection charm. I felt it,” Harry said.

“One of the Weasleys?” Healer Jordan asked.

“No, they said they didn’t,” Harry said.
“Then it was probably your staff. It has a protective feature,” Healer Jordan said.

“But it got knocked out of my hand,” Harry said.

“It is connected to you, even when it is out of your hand and it will protect you if the threat is significant,” Healer Jordan explained.

“Oh,” said Harry.

“And Arthur explained about why he had you cast the dissolution charm?” Healer Jordan asked.

“He said that we have to keep what happened in the Chamber of Secrets out of the news if we can because Volde- er - You-know-Who’s followers might try to hurt me…” Harry replied. “Can I go out tomorrow with Hermione and her mum? They are going to take me shopping for some clothes and shoes and things.”

“Hermione Granger’s parents are muggles, right?” Healer Jordan asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“Would you go to Diagon Alley or just around here?” she asked.

“Both, I think. I’ll need to get some more money from my vault,” Harry said.

“And the Grangers are accustomed to going to Diagon Alley?” she asked.

“Yes, we met them there last year at the start of term,” Harry said.

“Okay, but we’ll have to come up with another way to change your appearance,” Healer Jordan said.

“If I use polyjuice potion, would I be able to see again?” Harry asked suddenly remembering how when he transformed into Goyle the year before he didn’t need his glasses.

Healer Jordan was quiet for a little bit. Harry’s heart raced as he remembered the sensation… he had been wearing his glasses when he transformed into Goyle and when he tried to look through them, everything was blurry until he took them off and then for that hour he had blissfully perfect vision. Of course, he’d been stumbling around in that gorilla’s body.

“First of all, polyjuice potion is an illegal substance. How do you even know about it?” Healer Jordan asked.

“Um,” Harry felt the heat rising in his neck. “Mrs. Weasley mentioned it. She was really upset about the disillusionment charm.”

“Well, yes, it is true that you’d be able to see if you transformed into a sighted person,” Healer Jordan said, “but the emotional trauma of having your vision restored temporarily is so severe. We can’t do that… especially with your injury so recent.”

“Could we use my own hair from before… like from my brush?” he wasn’t listening to Healer Jordan, he was galloping ahead to being able to see again. “Maybe I could just attend Hogwarts using polyjuice potion. No one would ever have to know that I was blinded!” Harry was shaking he was so excited at the thought.

“Harry,” Healer Jordan said in a steely voice. “Harry, first of all you can’t live your entire life in the body of a 12-year-old. And there is evidence that the long term effects of using polyjuice potion are
dangerous. There is a reason it is illegal. Even so, it is true that some Wixen have been investigating
the use of polyjuice potion in restoring limbs and senses after accidents, but so far they haven’t been
able to come up with anything viable. Also, there is the matter of your hair… chances are you only
have a few strands. Duplicating the hair negates the effects of the potion - so that’s not possible.
Listen, polyjuice potion is not an option right now.”

There was a finality in her voice that stoppered the thoughts that were bubbling over in Harry’s
mind. He felt as if the floor had dropped out from beneath his feet.
“No, we’ll have to go with transfiguration,” Healer Jordan continued, unaware that Harry’s world was spinning. “What time are you leaving tomorrow?”

“Uh,” Harry said.

“Are you alright, Harry?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he said almost automatically, planting his feet squarely on the floor in an attempt to stop the tilting.

“Um, Hermione and her dad are coming at 9 am to pick me up,” he stammered.

“Okay, well, stop by my office on your way to meet them and I’ll do a bit of transfiguration so that you’re not recognizable. You should still be able to access your vault at Gringotts, though, as the goblin magic will be able to see beyond the transfiguration to verify your identity,” Healer Jordan explained.

“Does that mean that goblins will be able to recognize me?” Harry asked.

“Yes, but just in the context of proving your right to access your vault. The goblins who work at Gringotts have a vested interest in protecting their customers. You should be as safe as you can be without locking you away from the world. Even then, there are no guarantees,” she said heavily.

Harry was quiet, listening to Arig’s plaintiful whining and scratching on the other side of the door.

Safe. When have I ever felt safe? When have I ever been safe?

It had always been a fleeting feeling for him. Sometimes, when he had hidden away in his cupboard he had felt safe for a little bit, until Vernon’s footsteps had thundered down the hall… sometimes he’d felt safe in his bed at Hogwarts surrounded by the snores and mutterings of his dorm mates… he had even had some moments here in the Center… in the courtyard or in the owlery.

Harry awoke in the morning to the gentle chiming of bells and groaned… then remembered he was the one who had set the alarm. It had taken him a while to figure out how to do it. In fact, he was the only one in the dorm. Everyone else had gone home for the weekend - except for Arig, of course, who was still being held captive for his own safety and others.

He tried to bury his head in his pillow, but the chiming persisted. Finally, he slid out of bed and grabbed his staff to find the panel and shut off the alarm. He made his way to the toilet to get ready for the day.

Last night when he realized that it was just him and Gordon at the center for dinner, the heaviness that he had felt on Friday started seeping back into his limbs. Dinner with Gordon had been a slog and he was glad for the excuse to escape to his room. He tried working on braille for a bit, but couldn’t focus and didn’t get very far. Finally, he’d just gone to bed early and then ended up laying in bed for a long time, keenly aware of how eerily quiet it was without his friends making their little noises.

He still felt a little weighed down, even though he was looking forward to spending the day with
Hermione and her dad. He had spent a lot of time last night wondering if he and Ron would ever be friends again like they had been before this happened. Those thoughts returned as he was dressing… remembering Ron’s question about if he needed help when he dressed. At the time, it seemed kind of ridiculous, but as he was feeling his shirt to find the tag and seams to make sure he put it on frontwards and right-side-out, he wondered if he would have thought the same thing before all this happened.

It’s definitely a little harder, but not impossible. It’s different.

He thought about Lieutenant James Holman traveling all over the world to get away from people who tried to confine him to a life of dependency and boredom.

He had a flash of horror that almost made him fall over while he was putting on his trousers…

What if the reason Aunt Petunia was so nice to me was because she thought that I’d be stuck living with her and without magic for the rest of my life, cleaning, cooking, and doing yard work?

Harry visited the owlery with scraps from breakfast and a short scroll he’d written to Ginny that morning. Her tremulous voice was stuck in his head; there was something about it that was niggling at him.

“Hedwig, can you give Ginny some nuzzles when you deliver this? I think she really needs it,” he murmured as he rubbed his face against her feathery form. Hedwig nibbled at his hair in response.

Harry left the owlery feeling a little lighter than when he entered. I wish Hedwig could stay with me in my room… that’s the one good thing about Privet Drive… sharing my room with Hedwig. And Little Friend.

He navigated across the hallway to knock on Healer Jordan’s office door. He heard her calling, “come in” and opened the door slowly. He caught a whiff of coffee and heard the tinkle of a spoon against china. It also sounded like a window was open and he could smell rain coming into the room on a cool breeze. He listened for Arig’s whining, but didn’t hear him this time.

Maybe he’s asleap.

“Is Arig okay?”

“Yes, he is. Just sleeping, and good morning,” Healer Jordan chuckled.

“Oh, Sorry… Good morning, Healer Jordan,” Harry responded, chagrined. “Hey, have there always been windows in here?”

“Yes, but today I opened them - I love the smell of rain - especially in the summer,” she said.

“The light isn’t so bright as it is in the library or the dining hall - are they small windows?” Harry asked.

He was trying to look around the room to see if he could tell where the light was coming from, but he could just tell that there was some light, but couldn’t pinpoint it. It didn’t hurt his eyes.

“Yes, and they have curtains over them,” she said as she tapped his hand and led him to the window. He felt the light fabric that was fluttering in the breeze.
“Is it overlooking a garden?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s the garden where you and Besel were planting herbs the other day,” she said.

“Oh, it smells nice,” he said. “Do you have any garden snakes?”

“I haven’t come across any yet, but I’ll let you know,” she said and he could hear the smile in her voice. “So, I’m going to do a slight transfiguration to your appearance… and I think the easiest thing is to change the color of your skin and eyes… I’ll also disguise your scar. You’re going to appear Asian for all intents and purposes. I’m also going to make your hair shorter.”

“Okay, how long will it last?” Harry asked.

“Until I remove it,” she said. “Okay, are you ready?”

“Yes,” Harry said, standing still as he felt the air moving near him, presumably Healer Jordan’s wand.

He felt a subtle warmth move from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet and tips of his fingers, then he felt his forehead warm and cool and his eyes felt scratchy as if he had sand in them.

“Okay, you can breathe again, Harry,” Healer Jordan said gently.

He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes which were now watering.

“How do I look?” he asked.

“Like you, just more brown,” Healer Jordan said. “It should throw off the casual observer.”

He felt the skin on his arms, but it felt the same to him. He reached up and touched his forehead tentatively. The lightning bolt scar was gone - his forehead was smooth.

He grinned, “Thank you!”

He ran his hands through his hair - it was shorter and thicker and curly. He pulled at a curl and it sprang back.

“It’s about 9 am,” Healer Jordan said.

“Okay, I’ll head out to the reception area. We’ll see if they recognize me!” he smiled impishly as he ran his fingers over his smooth forehead again.

“Thank you,” he said. “See you when we get back.”

“Yep, see you,” she said. “Oh, Harry, before you and the Grangers leave this morning, will you ask Dr. Granger if he can stop by to see me before you head out?”

“Sure,” Harry said.

Harry entered the reception area and listened, trying to determine if anyone was there. He could hear someone at the desk banging away with an impossibly loud machine that made the typically serene room cacophonous.

“Hi, may I help you with something?” Godric asked.

“Hi, Godric, it’s just me, Harry. I’m waiting for some friends to arrive,” Harry said.
“Oh, Harry, I’ve been meaning to catch up with you. I heard that Professor McGonagall is trying to forbid you from flying,” Godric said.

Harry was quiet for a moment, “yeah.”

“Don’t take it too hard. She did the same thing to me when I was at Hogwarts. I would have thought that she’d have gotten over it by now - she can be overprotective. But Healer Jordan’s working with it on her. I’m sure they’ll have it figured out by the time you go back. Just know that it has a lot more to do with her and her history than with you or your abilities, okay?” Godric suggested.

“Yeah, I guess. Thanks,” Harry said.

“No, problem,” Godric said and then after a moment, he started banging away again.

Harry approached the desk.

“Um, Godric, what are you doing?” Harry asked.

“Oh, I’m just typing up some notes,” Godric said.


“Ah, no! Ha! Sounds like it, though! It’s a brailler. I could put a muffling charm on it but I guess I like it. Come over here and I’ll show you,” Godric said.

Harry moved around to the side of the desk, tapping the edge with the tip of his staff.

“Give me your hand,” Godric said.

Harry extended his hand and found Godric’s arm. He guided Harry’s hand to a smooth metal surface. Harry ran his hand over it and found that it had a piece of paper with braille on it and lower discovered three oblong keys on each side with a larger bicycle seat shaped key between them and two smaller round keys on either side.

“A brailler?” Harry asked.

“It’s a faster way to write braille. See, these three keys type cells one through three and these three on the right side type four through six. This one in the center is the space bar. This little round one on the right side is a back-space, and this round one on the left advances the paper up,” Godric said as he moved Harry’s hand to the keys that he was describing.

“Do you write from right to left like you do with the slate and stylus?” Harry asked.

“That’s a good question. No, the brailler punches from the bottom up, so you can read it right here without having to turn it over,” Godric said guiding Harry’s hand to the text he’d written on the paper.

“Oh, wow, that’s cool,” Harry said as he heard the entryway open up and the sounds of Charing Cross Road flood into the quiet reception area.

Harry heard footsteps clattering across the tile in the reception area and was pretty certain it was Hermione and her dad as he had heard a hushed whisper as they entered that sounded like Hermione, but then she was quiet, so he wasn’t sure. He could hear them shaking umbrellas and wondered how hard it was raining. He still had his hand on the braille that Godric had been writing and found two letters he recognized.
“Hi, we’re here to visit Harry Potter,” Hermione said.

“Hi, Hermione, I guess my disguise works,” Harry said.

“Harry?” Hermione said. She sounded genuinely shocked.

Harry walked around to the front of the reception desk with his knuckles lightly touching the side.

“Healer Jordan did a bit of transfiguration so that I could go out without being recognized,” Harry explained.

“Your scar is gone,” Hermione said. “And your hair is curly!” She touched it, surprising him.

“Oh, sorry, I should have told you I was going to touch your hair,” she said.

“It’s okay,” Harry said.

“Hi, Harry, you certainly look different from the last time I saw you!” Dr. Granger said.

“Hi, Dr. Granger. Thanks for coming to visit me again, I really appreciate it,” Harry held out his hand and Dr. Granger took it in his. “Healer Jordan said she wanted to talk to you before we left.”

“Oh, okay,” Dr. Granger said. “Where should I go to see Healer Jordan.”

“I can take you to her office, Dr. Granger,” Godric said.

“We should probably come up with a new name for you while you’re disguised,” Hermione said thoughtfully as Godric led Dr. Granger out of the room, his staff tapping ahead of him.

“Oh, right. Any ideas?” Harry asked.

“Well, you look like you’re from India… so how about Haripreet? There was a boy at my Primary named that and if I accidentally start calling you Harry, I can just pretend I was trying to say Haripreet…”

“I guess that could work…” Harry said.

“We can just say that you’re my friend from Primary…” Hermione said.

“And that I never went to Hogwarts because… ?” Harry asked.

“Well, maybe your just starting this year? You do look like a first year…” Hermione said.

“Hey!” Harry said.

“Well, you do,” Hermione said.

“Okay, I guess we could go with that. That could be why you’re taking me to Diagon Alley,” Harry agreed.

“Do you need to get anything before we head out?” Hermione asked.

“No, I’m ready to go,” Harry said.

“Where do you want to go first?” Hermione asked.

“How about Gringotts?” Harry asked.
“Sure, I thought that’s where you’d want to go. Maybe we can find the shop that sells Quick Quotes Quills after,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, that’d be good. I bet Godric knows where it is,” Harry said.

“Hey, Harry,” Hermione said and her tone changed to something more serious. “I wanted to tell you that I told my parents last night about the Chamber of Secrets and what went on with you and Tom Riddle and the Basilisk and how I spent a good portion of the semester petrified. After spending the day with the Weasleys and talking about it so freely, I just couldn’t lie to them anymore. They were really upset, of course. And I’ve been grounded, but they are still letting me come and visit you; mostly because they are really worried about you.”

“Oh, wow. And you can still go to Hogwarts?” Harry nervously.

“Well, they are pretty upset that I spent so much time petrified in the hospital wing and no one told them… They are going to request a meeting with Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall,” she replied.

“Yeah, that was weird,” Harry said.

He heard Godric returning through the door and then settling back behind the desk.

“Um, Godric, do you know a good place to get Quick Quotes Quills?” Harry asked.

“Sure, Scribulus Writing Instruments is next door to Florish & Blotts, but you might also want to take a look at Wiseacre’s Wizarding Equipment in Diagon Alley, too. They have a line of adaptive magical instruments,” Godric explained. “Here’s a map of Diagon Alley. I’ll mark the shops on it.”

“Oh, can you mark Gringotts on it, too?” Hermione asked.

“Yep, no problem,” said Godric.

Harry listened as Godric unfurled a scroll and wondered how he was going to mark it. Harry heard Godric running his hands over the parchment and guessed that it was a tactile map.

“Here you go,” Godric said, rolling the scroll back up.

Dr. Granger joined them at the desk.

“So are you ready to head out?” he asked.

“Yes,” Hermione answered. “Mr. Burbage, how do we get to Diagon Alley from here?”

“Push the large red button and tell the panel on the south wall that you want to travel to Diagon Alley and then walk across the threshold and you’ll be at the entrance near Gringotts,” Godric said.


“Yes, it is actually something unique about the Center. Madam Flamel has always wondered why the Ministry of Magic is so resistant to Egress magic… it really makes travel between frequent destinations so much easier. Since this is a private, nonprofit institution she’s been able to implement it throughout the Center. She hopes to prove by example to the British wixen community that it is safe and reliable. I guess the wider use of it has been stalled in the Department of Mysteries for generations. Even so, there are places where Egress magic is used, though minimally - Diagon Alley, St. Mungo's, and Hogwarts to name a few,” Godric explained.
He went on, his voice rising with emotion: “For those of us who are living with disabilities that impact our mobility, Egresses can really make our daily lives so much easier. Sometimes we expend so much of our resources and energy just getting places, that we don’t have the capacity to fully engage once we reach our destination. And Egresses are also really helpful for those of us who can’t use other forms of magical transportation such as apparition, brooms, or traveling by the floo network… Sorry! I should get off my soapbox! I just get so passionate about this topic…”

“It’s really fascinating, actually. Thank you for explaining,” Hermione said. “I’ll have to look into it when I have a chance to go to the library.”

“So, are you ready to go?” Harry asked impatiently.

“Yes, let’s try out this Egress thing,” Dr. Granger agreed.

“Dad, we decided that to call Harry ‘Haripreet’ while we’re in Diagon Alley and say that he’s a friend of mine from Primary who is just starting at Hogwarts this year,” Hermione explained as she tapped the back of Harry’s hand and they walked across the reception area.

“Haripreet? Okay. That sounds familiar…” Dr. Granger said.

“You remember Haripreet, right dad? He and his family moved back to New Delhi,” Hermione explained.

“Right, Haripreet Batra,” Dr. Granger confirmed.

Harry said the full name under his breath a few times, hoping that he wouldn’t stumble if he had to tell someone that was his name while they were in Diagon Alley.

Harry heard Hermione pressing a button that dinged like an elevator button, then she said, “We wish to travel to Diagon Alley,” and stepped forward. Harry felt the familiar pull of magic on his navel as they passed through the entryway that opened up allowing the noises and aromas of Diagon Alley to spill into the reception area. Dr. Granger had a hand on Harry’s shoulder as they passed through and he squeezed it.

“It’s kind of hard to get used to this, no matter how many times we do it,” he said.

Harry felt the familiar cobblestones under his feet (they were slick from rain) and the peculiar aromas of Diagon Alley - the mixture of potion ingredients (something smelled distinctively fishy) and butterbeer mixed up with the aroma of pumpkin pasties as well as the absence of petrol fumes. The odors were all made stronger by the recent rain. He could hear owls hooting and the sounds of the Wizarding Wireless Network emitting a tune sung by some warbling witches.

From behind him, he heard gleeful laughter and something brushed by Harry’s trousers. He held his staff firmly, afraid that it was going to get knocked out of his hand again.

“Whoa, what was that?” Harry exclaimed.

“Oh, some kids on toy brooms,” Hermione explained. “They passed by us really closely. Oh, there are their parents running behind them trying to catch up.”

“Can’t they just cast a summoning charm?” Harry wondered.

“Yeah, you can’t Accio people! That could be disastrous!” Hermione said as the parents lumbered past them, feet splashing in puddles.
“And I guess *Accio* -ing the brooms would send the children flying,” Harry mused.

“The brooms probably have protections on them to prevent that,” Hermione said. “Okay, we’re about to go up the steps to Gringotts, Harry -er Haripreet - it’s about twenty steps up.”

Harry pushed his staff forward to find the first step and liked the sound of the metal tip against the stone step.

Harry remembered climbing these steps with Hagrid and the towering white building. He could almost feel its oppressive presence - maybe it was the way the wind moved around it. Or maybe it was more than that - the marble beneath his feet seemed to be almost thrumming with life. When they reached the top, Harry wondered if the doors were still flanked by two goblin guards in red robes. He listened for clues, but couldn’t hear anyone.

They passed through the enormous outer doors and then the smaller inner doors and were inside a huge echoing cavern of a hall. As they crossed each threshold, Harry felt the pull of magic on his navel.

“I don’t remember feeling that before,” Harry muttered to himself.

“What’s that Harry -preet?” Hermione asked.

“Just the magic when we cross the threshold - did you feel that?” Harry asked.

“What do you mean?” Hermione questioned.

“I can feel the magic tug on my navel when we cross through, can’t you?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Hermione said. “Here, this window is open.” She took Harry’s hand and placed it on the cool marble counter in front of him - it was tall - just below his chin and Harry felt rather insignificant standing there.

“Hello, I’d like to make a withdrawal from my account,” he said nervously. “Oh, and could I also change some of it to pounds … er … muggle money?”

“Certainly, do you have your key?” the bank clerk behind the counter replied. Harry assumed that it was a goblin from the growly voice, but remembered Figora and didn’t want to assume that he was talking to a male or female goblin.

“Um, yes, just a second,” Harry said and he opened the storage of his staff and *Accio*’d his vault key from the depths.

“Interesting, usually vault keys have protections against the summoning charm,” the clerk said.

“Oh, well that would make it difficult to retrieve from my staff, then,” Harry muttered as he placed the key on the counter and slid it forward.

“Certainly, Mr. Harry James Potter. All seems to be in order here. Your friends can wait here while Gargnuk takes you to your vault,” the clerk said.

“Oh, well, I’d like them to come with me, please,” Harry said.

“As you wish,” was the clerk’s reply. “When you’ve fetched your gold, then return here and we can convert it to muggle money.”

“Thank you,” Harry said.
Harry stepped back and Hermione tapped his hand and he held onto her arm while they waited for Gargnuk. Dr. Granger stood behind them, nervously shifting his weight from foot to foot. Harry heard him mutter, “This place gives me the creeps.”

“Dr. Granger have you been to the vaults before?” Harry wondered.

“No, Harry er -preet. We don’t have an account here. We just convert our pounds to galleons when it is time to buy things,” Dan answered.

“I haven’t either,” said Hermione.

“Oh, well, it’s kind of like a big dipper,” Harry warned them. “My first time, I thought it was pretty fun, but Hagrid didn’t like it at all.” Harry wasn’t sure where he’d fall this time.

The footsteps that approached them were quick and sharp, but short.

“This way,” a gruff voice instructed them.

They were through to a door that made Hermione gasp and again Harry felt the pull on his navel at the threshold.

“There, did you feel that?” Harry leaned over and whispered to Hermione.

“Kind of,” Hermione said hesitantly as they made their way down a steep slope. Harry felt the temperature drop dramatically at the same time that the air felt damp. As he listened to the echoes of his staff’s tip against the rocky floor and could tell that the walls were close, he wondered what they’d would feel like. He suspected that they’d be coated in a mossy wetness. It certainly smelled like it. He could also smell something smokey that cut across the mildew-y odors.

There was a shrill whistle and a rattle and screech of metal on metal that clattered to a stop not far from where they were standing that made Harry want to cover his ears.

Hermione let her dad get in first and then put Harry’s hand on the side of the little metal cart. Harry used his staff to find the step up and Dan grasped his elbow and guided him to a seat next to him. Hermione squeezed in next to Harry. Gargnuk came in last and then they were off.

Hermione was gasping and exclaiming as they went along. Dan seemed to be bracing himself against the twists and turns and it helped Harry gauge when they’d be turning or dropping as they traveled at a breakneck speed through the tunnels. Harry realized that the ride was just as thrilling, if not more so, this time as it had been the first time and it gave him a jolt of joy. Though, at one point there was a blinding flash of light that made Harry gasp and shut his eyes in pain, but it was over as soon as he felt it.

Finally, the cart came to a sudden, lurching stop and they tumbled out of the cart. Harry and Hermione were laughing from exhilaration, but Dr. Granger seemed to be glad to be on solid ground again.

Harry had forgotten about the pungent smokey fog - green - he remembered - that came billowing out when his vault was opened. “What’s the smoke for?” Harry asked.

He heard Hermione gasp and he felt the heat rise in his neck, realizing that she was looking at his piles of gold.

“It’s just a potion that keeps the coins from tarnishing,” Gargnuk explained as he pushed a plush cloth into Harry’s hand.
He felt the cloth and realized that it was a velvety bag with a drawstring bag with tassels. “How much should I take out, Hermione?” Harry asked, realizing he hadn’t really thought it through. How much would he need for new clothes? He’d never bought any before… except wizarding clothes. He remembered that his ten galleons had been converted to nearly fifty pounds.

“Well, have you spent any of the fifty I converted for you last week?” Hermione asked.

“Just a couple pounds for ice cream yesterday - when I bought the cone for Ginny,” he said.

“Well, I don’t know - you probably need about a hundred pounds or more to buy new clothes, so twenty or thirty galleons? It looks like you’ve got plenty here,” Hermione said.

“Okay, they are in stacks of galleons, sickles, and knuts, right?” Harry said.

“Yes, do you…” but before she finished asking he had cast a navigant spell to find the pile of galleons. He knelt down and started counting out galleons and dropping them into his bag.

“Harry, did you know that there are old books in your vault?” Hermione said in hushed tones.

“What?” Harry lifted his head up. “Really? I don’t remember seeing them before… but I might have been distracted by the piles of money.”

“Yeah. They look really old. I wonder what’s in them,” Hermione said, the desire strong in her voice.

“Can I take the books?” Harry asked in the direction where he thought Gargnuk was standing.

“It is your vault. You can take what you like,” Gargnuk answered.

“Why don’t you look at them Hermione and decide if there is something we should take out to look at later. We can put it in my staff. It keeps things safe. Even after I dropped it yesterday, everything inside was fine - even my potions vials and stuff. I checked,” Harry said.

“Really, Harry?” Hermione asked, her voice rising with anticipation and she was already clambering past him to crawl over the piles of gold which cascaded a bit to reach the books.

He could hear her carefully handling the tomes and smelled the dust that rose from their pages as she opened them.

“Oh, Harry. These are amazing. Such old books - potion recipes and histories. There are even illustrations of magical animals… And it looks like some of them are about your family! There are photographs, too… Oh, Harry,” she choked back a sob.

“What is it?” Harry asked.

“There’s a photo album from your first year when you were a baby,” Hermione said, tears evident in her voice. He could hear her turning crinkling pages, “They look so happy. You look so happy.”
Harry’s hand paused in mid-air as he was filling the bag with coins.

“Hermione…” Dan said, his voice a steady warning.

“Oh, Harry!” she gasped and he heard a thunk as she set down the album and smelled dust rising in the air.

Harry tried to fill his lungs with air again… but was only able to take a shallow breath. He set down the bag and rocked back, grasping his knees. Hermione scrambled over to him and threw her arms around him, hugging him tight.

“I’m so sorry, Harry - I was thoughtless,” she said.

They rocked together for a little bit and then Harry lessened the hold on his knees and Hermione let him go. He patted her hand. He tried to compose himself and felt around on the floor for the bag and resumed counting, though he had forgotten where he was. He figured he had enough for a while and stood up slowly.

Gargnuk grumbled impatiently.

He drew in a deeper breath and tried to speak, but his voice wasn’t back yet. He closed his mouth and eyes, then tried again.

“Did you want to take some of them with us, Hermione? The books?” he asked - his voice cracking and his lungs burning with the effort to breathe and talk when what he really wanted to do was cry.

“Um, only if you want to, Harry,” she said quietly.

“Why don’t you choose a couple that you think might be interesting,” Harry said.

He heard Hermione going slowly back over to the books and then coming back to him.

“Here, let’s take these,” she said tapping his hand with the edge of a book.

He shook out his staff and opened the storage window and then grasped the top one and put it inside, then grabbed the second one. They both felt as if they were bound in aged leather. The first one was smaller and lighter, the second one more substantial. He pushed them into his staff. He put about twenty galleons in his pocket to convert to pounds and put the rest of the bag in his staff for later.

Hermione was quiet as she offered her arm to lead him back to the track and the clanking cart. He listened as Gargnuk sealed the vault again.

“Here is your key, Mr. Potter,” Gargnuk said.

“Thank you,” Harry said and placed it back in his staff.

Harry felt as though his brain were being rattled as they rode back up the track to the surface - the lurching cart seemed intent on making his head hurt.

Why hadn’t he thought to look around his vault more the first time he visited? What if he’d found those books and albums earlier? When he could see?
He tried to push away the desire to see the images. It was just like the Mirror of Erised - tempting him with what could have been not what was.

When they had converted his galleons to pounds and he had stored them safely in his staff, they went back outside. The sun had come out for a bit and though Harry had to close his eyes to the painful brightness of the sun, he did enjoy the warmth on his face.

Hermione had brought out the map that Godric had made for them and was unrolling it.

“Haripreet, it’s a tactile map - do you want to see where we are and where we’re headed?” Hermione asked. “Hmmm. I wonder how…”

“How what?” Harry asked.

“How Godric marked the map so that you could read it… I should have paid closer attention. I think it was his quill - I don’t think he was casting a spell,” Hermione pondered.

Harry reached for the map and asked, “are we out of the way?”

“Yeah, we’re fine here,” she assured. “Here’s a ledge, you can put the map on it and spread it out so you can… look at it.”

“Where are we headed next, kids?” Dan asked.

Harry ran his fingers over the map and listened as the afit in his ear read the braille labels to him.

“I guess it makes most sense to go to the quill shop first - it is right next to Flourish & Blotts… oh, the Magical Menagerie is just two doors down from Gringotts. We could go look at the snakes…” Harry said. “This map is pretty cool.”

“Snakes? Really?” Dan said, a shudder evident in his voice.

“Oh, come on, Dad. They aren’t that bad,” Hermione said.

“Slimy, awful things,” Dan said.

“They aren’t slimy - they are silky smooth,” said Harry remembering Little Friend.

“Hari-preet, if we go look at snakes, aren’t you going to want to talk to them?” Hermione said.

“Um, yeah?” Harry responded.

“Well, aren’t you the only known Parselmouth in the United Kingdom?” Hermione said.

“What? Really?” Harry said. “I can’t be the only one!”

“I think so,” Hermione said.

“Oh, well maybe I can be sneaky about it,” Harry said.

“I don’t know… ” Hermione said.

“They might not even have snakes for all we know,” Harry said.

“Oh, alright. But let’s be careful,” Hermione said.

“Always,” Harry said, smiling wistfully in her direction.
She nudged him in response and he rolled up the scroll and tucked it in his pocket.

Harry smelled the Magical Menagerie before they entered. It smelled like hay, oats, and pee. The sounds the animals made also echoed out into the street and he wondered how well they were being cared for. He thought of Hagrid and what he’d do for these animals. Hermione led him to a corner in the back and explained that there was just one snake in a glass aquarium next to tanks with toads and salamanders.

“No one is about if you want to try to talk to it - er them,” Hermione whispered. Dr. Granger had let them go on their own, content to look at the dancing rats at the front of the shop.

It took Harry a second to figure out what the odd rumbling sound was, but then he figured out that a cat was winding his way around Hermione’s legs and purring.

“I thought you said there was just one snake,” Harry said, confused.

“It’s a runespoor,” Hermione said. “It has three heads - so I guess it is a ‘they.’”

“Three heads?” Harry said.

“Yes, the label says that the left head is the planner, the middle head is the dreamer, and the right head is the critic,” Hermione informed him.

Harry cocked his head toward the glass case where he could hear three distinct voices speaking in Parseltongue.

“Why are you nudging me? I was just about to eat the juiciest, most luscious… and now it’s gone. Poof!” said a soft snaky voice.

“Focus, you two! Listen here’s a chance. Some humans are looking at us. Maybe they’ll reach in and we’ll be able to escape!” said one sibilant voice.

“They’d never do that! What human in their right mind would stick their hand in our tank! We’re stuck in here until we bite off each other’s heads or until that Kneazle decides to play with us for a while and then eat us,” said a third, sharper voice.

Harry started to chuckle.

“What is it?” Hermione said.

“Yep, three heads and three opinions. I think they’d drive me nuts. They’d never be able to guide me. They’d be too busy arguing. But I feel sorry for them, stuck in a tank waiting for a Kneazle to torment them to death,” Harry said. “What’s a Kneazle?”

Harry started to chuckle.

“What is it?” Hermione said.

“I think it is a cat-like creature - like a miniature lion,” Hermione said, “Aren’t you a beauty! Yes, you are!”

She was down on the floor making these exclamations and rumbling noise got so loud that Harry was sure that he could feel through the wooden floorboards.

Harry could feel someone approaching them through the floorboards as well and turned his face toward them expectantly.

“How are you two getting on back here? Is there anything you’d like to look at more closely?” asked
the store clerk who greeted them when they came in. “Oh, are you getting on with Crookshanks? Well, that’s lovely! Let me know if you need anything or if you have any questions!” And she ambled off, back to the front of the store.

“Oh, Haripreet, he’s the most beautiful creature! Oh, I wish I could keep him!” Hermione said. “Come on, don’t you want to pet him?”

“Why can’t you?” Harry asked as he tried to find Hermione’s shoulder, found the back of her head, then her shoulder and then crouched down next to her, leaning a bit on his staff. He followed her arm to the mass of rumbling fur that was nuzzling her hands. The cat twitched when he ran his fingers down its back and up the tail.

“I don’t think it likes me as much as it likes you,” he murmured.

“I can’t ask right now. I’m grounded,” Hermione said heavily as she stood up.

“Are you ready to head out?” Harry asked following her up.

“Yes, let’s go check out the quills,” Hermione said, though it was clear she was having trouble tearing her attention away from Crookshanks.

The cat followed them back to the front of the store, making little mews as it trailed behind them.

“Crookshanks, I’ll come back later… if you’re still here when I’m not grounded anymore, I’ll take you home with me. Okay? I promise,” Hermione solemnly informed the cat.

“What’s that?” Dan asked.

“Dad, I know I can’t get him now because, well, I’m grounded. But if he’s still here when we’re back in August getting school supplies, then I’d really like to take him home with me,” Hermione explained in her maddeningly grown-up voice.

“Okay, we’ll talk to your mum about it. The snake didn’t suit you, Haripreet?” Dan asked.

“It was argumentative… I didn’t think that’d be a good quality in a guide snake,” Harry explained.

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right. So, we’re off, then?” Dan asked.

“Thank you, come again!” the clerk called as they left through the door. Crookshanks meowed piteously and it wasn’t until they were several shops away that Harry couldn’t hear the cat anymore. Hermione’s arm under his hand was very tense until they were finally out of earshot of the caterwauling cat.

As they passed under the shadow of Gringotts again, Harry was certain he could feel the magic humming through the cobblestones.

The bells on the door into Scribulus Writing Instruments reminded Harry of the bells that Agatha Midgeon had used to charm the mats they used in self-defense.

The store had a woody citrus aroma and sounded small. Harry’s staff tinged on a bookcase or countertop.

“How may I help you?” A clerk asked from nearby as they entered, making Harry start.

“I’d like to look at your Quick Quotes Quills,” Harry said, speaking over Hermione who had also started to answer. He squeezed her arm.
“Oh, certainly, come this way… our selection is over here,” he said as his footsteps sounded on a hardwood floor, muffled behind a counter that seemed to stretch the length of the small shop.

“So what are you looking for in your QQQ?” the clerk asked.

“Um, well, Haripreet - what do you need?” Hermione asked sounding flustered. Harry wondered why.

“Uh, well, I suppose accuracy would be good. It might be handy if it can also write in braille, once I learn braille…” Harry said.

“So he’s still learning braille?” the clerk asked.

“Um, yes, I am,” Harry said, irked.

“Please, can you speak directly to Haripreet?” Hermione asked, “He’s the one getting the quill.”

“Oh, right,” the clerk said and then in a much louder, slower voice asked, “ARE YOU AT HOGWARTS?”

And without waiting for an answer, turned back to Hermione and asked in his normal voice, “So what year is he?”

“I’m a thir- um I’ll be a first year…” Harry responded; his ears burned.

“Hmmmm. Well, they aren’t usually allowed at Hogwarts for first years. But I imagine he’ll have special permissions,” said the clerk as he slid open a door to a small case and started placing boxes (by the sound of it) on a glass countertop.

Harry stopped and Hermione was brought up short.

“Let’s just go, Hermione,” he said dropping her arm and turning abruptly, swinging his staff in a half arc that caught Dr. Granger in the leg.

“Oh, sorry, sir,” Harry fumbled, but then kept going when he stepped out of the way until he was out on the street.

He could hear Hermione giving the clerk advice on how to talk to customers as he left… respectfully, but in her high-pitched righteous-indignation voice. He could hear the clerk’s resentful tones following Hermione out the door.

Harry kept walking, swinging his staff in a wide arch and listening with satisfaction as it tinged off lampposts and storefronts. The wet cobblestones were slippery and he slid and stumbled a bit in his haste. If there were other people on the pavement, they were steering well clear of Harry. Hermione’s footsteps splashed behind him, catching up.

“That was awful, Harry. I’m so sorry,” she apologized.

“Don’t you apologize. You weren’t the git who thought I wasn’t capable of shopping for my own quill,” Harry said heatedly.

“Yeah. Maybe the other shop will be better… since they sell adaptive magical objects,” Hermione said, panting as she tried to keep up with Harry. “Oh, Harry - I think we passed it. It’s on the other side of the street.”

He slowed but wasn’t willing to stop yet. Finally, he stopped and turned toward Hermione. She
pulled him to the side of the pavement as people passed by them.

“I guess I was pretty rude to that bloke… but he wasn’t taking any hints or even you telling him not to do that!” Harry sputtered. “And I just couldn’t be in there any longer. Is it going to be like this everywhere I go?”

He stomped his foot and wildly gestured with his hand that wasn’t holding his staff until he accidentally hit Hermione.

“Sorry,” he said chagrined.

“I get it, Harry! It’s awful. And the way he was looking at you… well, yeah,” Hermione agreed. “How was he looking at me?” Harry asked.

“Well, I don’t know. It made me uncomfortable… like Malfoy looking down his nose at me,” Hermione said quietly as some more people walked by.

“Oh, well, it's good we’re well shot of him, then,” said Harry still feeling pretty heated about it.

“I mean, not everyone is going to be like that. Okay, there was the lady at the menagerie - she didn’t do it, did she? And the bank clerk and Gargnuk were fine,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, that’s true. I guess it just depends on the people,” Harry sighed.

Dr. Granger’s solid footsteps joined them where they had stopped on the pavement. The potion ingredient aromas here were strong, making Harry wonder if they were outside the apothecary. He remembered it being down at this end of the alley - not far from the Leaky Cauldron Egress.

“You alright, Harry?” Dan asked.

“Yeah, sorry about hitting you in the leg with my staff. I didn’t hurt you, did I?” Harry asked, mortified.

“No, it was just a tap,” Dan assured. “So, where was the other place that carried these fancy quills?”

“It’s just across the street,” Hermione said.

“I guess we can head over there,” Harry sighed, taking Hermione’s arm.

“There’s a step down here,” Hermione said as they headed across the street. “Oh, there’s a puddle, let’s go this way.” She tugged him to her right and he stumbled a bit at the abruptness.

Harry was trying to remember what was on this side of the street when his staff struck something metal that had a hollow bell sound.

“Was that a cauldron?” he asked Hermione.

“Yeah, sorry, I should have moved over more,” she said. “There was someone passing us at the same time.”

It seemed like the street was getting busier - more footsteps were splashing through the occasional puddles.

They were passing a shop that must have been the source of the pumpkin pastie smell when they heard someone call, “Hi, Hermione!” and Hermione seemed to twist and then stop as footsteps approached them.
“Oh, hi, Hannah. How’re you?” Hermione said.

“I didn’t expect to see you here today,” Hannah said.

Harry was trying to place her voice and name. He was sure he had heard it before. And then he remembered the conversation in the library when he was trying to track down Justin Finch-Fletchley after the disastrous dueling match. He almost said something, and then he remembered that he wasn’t supposed to know her. He was Haripreet Batra.

“Oh, yes, we are just getting my friend here, Haripreet Batra, some supplies,” Hermione said a bit nervously. “Haripreet - this is Hannah Abbott,” Hermione said with an emphasis that made Harry squirm a bit.

“Hi, nice to meet you,” Harry said, sticking his hand out and finding that Hannah already had hers out, so they fumbled a bit until they were actually shaking hands.

“And this is my dad, Dr. Granger,” Hermione said.

“Nice to meet you, sir,” Hannah said, then her voice was directed toward Harry. “Do you also go to Hogwarts, Haripreet? You seem familiar… have I met you before?… but…” Hannah seemed like she was trying to puzzle something out. Harry felt the back of his neck get hot, realizing that she was scrutinizing him.

“No, I . . . I’m going to be a first year… if we stay in Britain. We… we might go back to New Delhi,” Harry stumbled.

“Oh, that sounds neat. I imagine it is beautiful there,” Hannah said.

“Um, well, I’ve never seen it,” Harry said, smiling weakly.

“What? You’ve never been there? Or are you…” Hannah squeaked.

“I mean, I was born here,” Harry said, deciding on the truth.

“Hey, Hermione, when I saw you I thought that maybe you’d know… you know, you’re such a good friend of his… I was wondering… have you heard from Harry Potter? - Hey, that’s funny that your name is so similar!”

Both Harry and Hermione laughed nervously at that, but Hannah continued.

“Is he okay? Last I heard everyone was talking about him having fought a Basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets, that he was seriously injured and had to go to St. Mungo’s. I keep checking the paper, I mean, I thought they’d at least write about it, but nothing. Can you believe that? I mean the school had a gigantic serpent living in the dungeons and not a thing in the Daily Prophet! I have half a mind to write to them and ask, but then I thought that maybe they’d close the school… and I would hate that. Anyway, I’ve been really worried. He was always so nice to me, and well, I’d hate it if he got hurt,” Hannah said gulping air.

“Oh, well, yes, he’s doing okay. He’s been busy this summer… with his studies… he’s going to a school in London,” Hermione said.

“Huh? That’s funny. I never thought he was much of a studier. Extra school during the summer. It’s not remedial, though, he seems pretty smart,” Hannah said and Harry harrumphed and aimed a little kick at Hermione’s ankle. “But I’m glad that he’s okay. I thought… well, the way people were talking… it just sounded so bad and him being an orphan and everything… I wondered,” Hannah
Harry was holding tight onto Hermione’s arm wishing for Hannah to stop talking.

“Yeah, he’s okay,” Hermione said again as she balanced on one foot and Harry thought that by the way she was moving that she must be rubbing her ankle on her other leg.

“Sorry,” Harry muttered out of the corner of his mouth and heard her hair swish over her shoulder like she was shooting him a glare.

“Well, I better catch up with me mum. I really am so glad. Thank you! Good to see you, nice to meet you, Haripreet, Dr. Granger.”

“Ni . . . nice to meet you, too,” Harry stammered as her footsteps clattered off across the wet cobblestones.

“Well, your disguise held up… that’s good, right?” said Dr. Granger from behind Harry and Hermione while they both let out sighs.

“Sure, but she was really staring at you, Harry,” Hermione said as they started walking again.

“I know!” Harry said. “I could almost feel it - it was so intense - do you think she figured out who I was?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Hermione said. “Okay, here we are - we’re going to turn. There’s a bit of a step.”

Harry made a small sweep with his staff to find out how high “a bit of a step” was and took in a deep breath as they crossed the threshold into the shop. This shop sounded bigger than the Scribulus shop - but full of more things. There were a lot of aromas, but underneath them all there was an oily citrus smell - like a furniture oil and he imagined that there were a lot of bookshelves in here. There were also more people talking in here… which made his heart speed up a bit. It had been more nerve-wracking than he cared to admit to run into someone from Hogwarts who didn’t know his story.

Thank goodness for Healer Jordan’s disguise. Maybe I could just go to Hogwarts as Haripreet - the blind kid from India… leave all the Harry Potter crap behind.

He lifted his hand to his forehead and ran his fingers over the smoothed skin - where his scar had been.

“Haripreet, I think we’re going to have to ask a clerk to help us find the adaptive magical items. Let’s hope they aren’t gits,” Hermione said under her breath. Harry felt comforted by the presence of Dr. Granger behind them, though he was clearly interested in the items in this shop. He could hear him stopping to pick things up and set them down again as they made their way in.

“Excuse me,” Hermione said to someone who was walking by, “I was wondering if you could tell us where to find your adaptive magical items? We’re looking for a Quick Quotes Quill and other things.”

“Oh, yes. Certainly. Let me just set this down and then I can take to that area of the shop,” responded someone with a friendly voice. They stood waiting - Dan was wandering close by picking up things and exclaiming over them, then setting them down again. It reminded Harry of Arthur.

“Okay, thanks for waiting. We’ve got some really cool things right over here,” the clerk said.
Hermione started following the footsteps of the clerk. The store seemed pretty crowded with things and people - Harry held his staff almost parallel to his body as a bit of a buffer and it kept tingling into things as they walked as if not everything was neatly contained. He stayed as close to Hermione as he could, afraid that he’d accidentally knock something off a shelf.

“So, here are the Quick Quotes Quills - these ones are just the standard ones that will transcribe what is being spoken in an area - they will write down everything that everyone is saying or you can modify the spell so that it just picks up the voices of your professors, for instance. So, they are handy for taking notes at school and in other situations, interviews, etc. That’s what we find most people use them for,” the clerk said. “Um, do you want to hold this one?”

It took a moment for Harry to realize that the question was directed at him.

“Sure,” he responded and collapsed his staff and stuck it in his pocket and held out his hand, palm up. The clerk placed the feathery item in Harry’s hand. Harry let go of Hermione so he could feel it with his right hand. He felt a bit self-conscious as it seemed like both Hermione and the clerk were watching him explore the quill with his fingers. It felt like a standard quill to him.

“Oh, yes, it is a very quick-drying ink. Do you use a reader? If you do, you don’t have to wait to read what the quill has written down. It won’t smear,” the clerk offered.

“How do you know if you’re going to run out of parchment?” Harry asked.

“Well, what I’ve seen some people do is keep a hand on the parchment and track where the quill is writing by touch and then switch out parchment when needed. Or you can get a quill that is specially designed for people with low vision and it’ll let you know when you need to provide more parchment. They also will write in braille,” the clerk explained. “Here’s one of those quills, if you’d like to check it out.” He took the standard quill from Harry’s hands and replaced it with the more specialized quill. Harry felt it to see if he could tell the difference between them and found that this quill had three braille letters where the feathers met the quill, just above the nib. He puzzled over them for a second and then it hit him - “b-r-l” - the contraction for braille. He took in a sharp breath.

“What is it?” Hermione asked.

“I read it. It says ‘braille,’” Harry said.
“So you’re just learning braille?” asked the clerk.

“Yes, I’ve really only had one lesson,” Harry said, still running his finger over the three letters and finding comfort in it. *A word I can read with my fingertips.*

“Well, that’s pretty impressive then. So, any chance you’re working with my friend Godric at the Perenelle Flamel Center?” he asked.

“Um, yes… he’s one of my teachers actually,” Harry raised his head in the direction of the clerk, paying more attention to him. “He recommended we come here.” Harry then stilled… he realized that while Godric was there when they were discussing his disguise, he probably didn’t hear them talking about his fake name and that maybe by revealing that he was at the Center, he was blowing his cover. Hermione seemed to think the same thing because she nudged his arm.

“Well, that’s good. He did help us choose our line of adaptive magical items and also sends us new ideas constantly,” the clerk said. “I’m Chester Davies, by the way, and I’m holding my hand out if you’d like to shake hands.”

Harry reached out finding Chester’s hand easily, “it’s nice to meet you. I’m Haripreet Batra and this is my friend, Hermione Granger and her father is near here somewhere, he’s Dr. Granger.” He cocked his ear, listening for Dr. Granger, but wasn’t sure where he was.

“So, you two go to Hogwarts, don’t you?” Chester said. “My brother, Roger, is going to be a fifth year… I’ll be starting my seventh year. We’re both in Ravenclaw. What years and houses are you?”

“I’ll be a third year at start of term,” Hermione said. “I’m in Gryffindor. Haripreet will start next year… that is if his family doesn’t return to New Delhi.”

Harry was a bit put out that Hermione answered for him and tried to direct a look at her, though he wasn’t sure she received it.

*Is she afraid that I’m going to mess this up?*

“So, how does this quill work? Can I try it out?” Harry asked.

“Sure, *Accio* parchment,” Chester said and Harry felt a slight breeze as the paper flew by his face. It reminded him of Gemma’s papers.

*I’ll have to remember to cast the spell again before Gemma returns.*

“The quill’s charmed to start transcribing as soon as you touch the tip to a piece of parchment on a flat surface (that’s to protect it from starting to transcribe randomly in your book bag). So, let’s move over to this counter - and roll out the parchment,” Chester instructed.

Harry shook out his staff, following Chester’s voice and footsteps to the counter. Hermione hovered behind him. Harry reached out and found the countertop expecting glass, but was surprised by a well-worn and oiled wood. He leaned his staff against his shoulder, in the crook of his arm, and transferred the quill to his left hand, then found the parchment by following the sounds of the paper being smoothed out on the wood.
“That’s right, now put the tip of the quill near the top left-hand corner,” Chester instructed. “Oh, wait, do you want it to write in braille or cursive?”

“Let’s try braille first,” Harry said.

“Okay, so press gently against the word braille on the quill - you’ll notice that the nib will turn to a stylus point - then set it down,” Chester said.

Harry felt the tip - it had transformed into a thick, blunt needle shape.

“Near the top left-hand corner?” Harry asked.

“No, actually - it’ll be like a slate and stylus - so you’ll want to put it in the top right-hand corner, and then you’ll read it from the other side from left to right,” Chester said.

Harry placed the quill on the parchment.

“I’m not sure what to write,” he said and then listened as the quill set to work. It wasn’t as loud as the brailler, but it did make little punching noises.

“Why would Godric use a brailler instead of this? This is a lot quieter and it has to be much more portable,” Harry wondered aloud.

“Oh, I think he loves muggle tools… something about his dad…” Chester said quietly. “Also, it is a different process to say what you’re going to write and have a tool write it down, than to write it yourself - compose in your head and then write it without speaking. I think he uses a QQQ for taking notes at lectures and such and a brailler for composing letters or other works.”

“Right,” Harry said as he listened to the quill punch out Chester’s words. “How do you stop it?”

“Simply lift it off the parchment,” Chester said.

Harry found the quill easily and removed it from the paper, then flipped the paper over to read what had been written. He puzzled over it for a while and then realized that it was writing in contracted braille and the only word he knew in contracted braille was ‘brl’. He actually felt pretty skilled to have figured out that it was writing in grade 2 braille.

“Can I set it to write in uncontracted braille until I learn all the contractions and how to read them?” Harry asked.

“Oh, that’s a good question. Probably, but I don’t actually know,” Chester said.

“Does it come with instructions?” Hermione asked.

“Oh, yes, you can ask it to transcribe the instructions. Let’s see, press the braille again to change it to the quill neb, then set it on the paper, and say, “Ex grafo instructions”.

Harry had set the quill on the paper before Chester said the spell and he heard the quill start to scratch across the parchment.

“Oh, Harripreet, it can be set to write in grade 1 braille!” Hermione exclaimed after a little bit.

“Do you need a reader, Harripreet?” Chester asked as he moved over to another shelf and shifted around some boxes.

“No, actually…”
“Excuse me, do you work here? I’m looking for a crystal ball…” someone asked Chester, Harry assumed.

“Oh, yes, just a moment and I can show you where they are,” Chester said, then turning back to Harry said, “Here’s a reader if you’d like to try it out and I’ll come back… we have some other items you might want to explore.” He pressed a box into Harry’s hand and turned back to the other customer and led them away.

Harry could still hear the quill scratching at the parchment. Hermione’s arm was pressed up against his as she was leaning over the counter reading the instructions as the quill wrote them out. Harry felt the box and found that it had a top that he could lift off. Inside he found a pencil-like reader that was slender and cool, though a little wider and lighter than the one Dumbledore had given him.

He took it out and felt it to determine which end should be set on the paper.

“Hermione, does the quill have much more to write for the instructions?” he asked.

“I think it is about done… it is going to run out of parchment soon. I’m curious about how it will notify you that it needs another piece,” Hermione said. “It says that you can also set it up to transcribe what is on the blackboard and that if a teacher is talking while they are writing, it’ll sort it out so that you can tell what was on the board and what was spoken… that’s pretty amazing. It was specially designed for blind students.”

“That actually makes me feel a lot better about going back to Hogwarts…” Harry said in a low voice.

“Yeah, I’ve been worried about that, too,” Hermione sighed.

He heard the quill stop and heard a tiny bell ringing.

He followed the sound to the quill and lifted it off the paper, then turned it over and placed it below the braille that it had written earlier so that it could continue writing the instructions.

It didn’t take long before it stopped and the bells rang again.

Harry laid aside the quill and turned the parchment over to read the instructions. The reader did a fine job of reading the text - but it was a very impersonal voice, not at all like the anagnóstis and it didn’t have the ability to define words - or if it did, it wasn’t automatic. He put it back in the box.

“What other things do they have, Hermione? Anything else that would make school easier?” Harry asked.

“Oh, here’s a quill like the one Godric used this morning to make the tactile map for us. It says that it will turn paper maps into tactile maps and… Harry… it does the same thing for images - it creates a tactile form that you can feel. Your photo album… it could make the images visible to you…” Hermione said in hushed tones.

Harry felt his gut seize at the thought. “But it wouldn’t be like looking at a photograph - I mean wixen photos move. How would it capture that?”

“Let’s try it - the box says there are examples inside,” Hermione said as she lifted the top off a box that she had placed on the countertop. He heard her unfolding a piece of paper.

“Here’s the tool - it says when you lay it on its side, you can move it over a photograph to turn it into a tactile form of the image - a three-dimensional representation. And when you use the point, it’ll
draw lines - that’s what Godric was doing this morning when he marked the shops for us on the map,” Hermione explained.

Harry had the tool in his hand - it was about as wide as knife, but uniform in size, and flat with edges all the way around that were tapered, and it narrowed to a blunt point on one end. Hermione nudged the paper she was reading toward him.

“There’s a wixen photo here that you can try it on - it is moving. It says that it will convert the text around the image to braille. When you’re done, you can restore it to print and images by saying ‘Non tangere’,” Hermione said.

Harry placed the tool on its side and pulled it over the paper. Hermione gasped. Harry felt the paper and found the braille text then a narrow ridge - he ran his fingers over it and found that the ridge was in the shape of a box - like a frame. He moved into the space it defined, his brows knitted together as he tried to figure out what it was. He could tell that Hermione was dying to tell him - she was emitting the same nervous energy she gave off when she knew the answer in class. He was glad she was resisting the urge. He wanted to do this on his own.

Harry noticed that Dr. Granger had circled back to them and was watching as well - he had recognized his footsteps and he could smell his faint aftershave.

He tried to focus again on the image under his fingertips - it was larger than he thought it would be. It was like a little sculpture - except warm and moving. He figured out that the most prominent shape was a person standing holding something. A man - he was pretty sure. He felt the heat on his neck. It was like a little miniature version of a person - warm body, fabric, hair, and moving slightly. It was a little weird and embarrassing to feel the contours of a person’s body rather than looked at them, but how else was he going to know? He moved over the image and discovered trees that seemed to jump up and out of the frame in their prickliness and feather-like branches and as he moved around the image, he found a pathway through the trees - the texture was like sand. He went back to the man and carefully found that he was holding a piece of paper and a staff. He named each thing as he identified it and Hermione affirmed each item.

“So is it an image of a blind man feeling a tactile map at the head of a trail that goes through a forest?” Harry asked.

“Yes, that’s exactly it, Har-ri-preet!” Hermione exclaimed, catching herself as footsteps approached.

“Oh, good, I was hoping you’d find that tool,” Chester said. “Sorry, that took longer than I thought.”

“That’s pretty nifty!” Dr. Granger said, “You could look at that photo album that Hermione put in your staff.”

“What?” Harry said, turning his face quickly in Hermione’s direction.

“Um, yeah. I put it in your staff. I was hoping we’d find something like this,” she said and he could hear her discomfort in her confession.

His insides were playing tug-of-war with him. On one hand, he felt like she had tricked him - using his inability to see against him, on the other hand, he really wanted to look at those images… any way that he could.

“Oh, I would like that,” Harry said quietly. He resisted the temptation to take it out and do it right then.
Harry stashed his new quill and *digitus* in his staff as he thanked Chester and they headed back out onto the street where it was raining. Hermione quickly cast a shielding charm over the three of them that acted as an umbrella. It sounded like an umbrella to Harry, at any rate.

He was itching to look at the photographs that Hermione had found in his vault with the *digitus* … and he almost wanted to cancel the trip to Charing Cross Road to shop for clothes and trainers, but he bit that desire down… it would be a lot harder for him to shop on his own in muggle shops.

They were headed back to the Egress by Gringotts. They had decided that they’d have more tasty options for lunch on Charing Cross Road. Harry remembered some of the aromas that had tempted his nose on their outing yesterday and was hoping for something savory. He had convinced Dr. Granger and Hermione to let him buy lunch… arguing that they had seen his vault, they bought the train tickets last week, that he wouldn’t have many opportunities to eat outside of the Center, and that they had done so much for him this week. They finally gave in.

“Oh, Hermione, is the apothecary shop nearby?” Harry asked, knowing that they had walked by it earlier.

“It’s not too far away… why?” Hermione asked.

“I was just thinking that it would be nice to have my own bottle of essence of dittany. I keep getting little cuts on my fingertips and they get in the way of me seeing,” Harry explained. “It would be nice to have something to heal them in my staff. You know, this extendable storage is really amazing. You should get something like it for all the books you’re always carrying.”

“I know. Ever since you showed me yours I’ve been thinking about it. Is it undetectable, too?”

“What do you mean, undetectable?”

“I was reading up on it at the library, and I guess a lot of extendable storage units are also undetectable so that people can hide things without other wixen being able to cast spells that allow them to locate the hidden items,” Hermione explained.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Harry said. “I can ask Godric about that. So, the apothecary?”

“Sure, let’s go there,” Hermione said as she changed direction. “You don’t mind? Do you, dad?”

“No that’s fine, though I am starting to get hungry,” Dan said.

“We can be quick,” Harry assured.

“Er, do you mind, then, if I duck into this shop here?” Dan asked. “There’s something that I want to take a closer look at.”

“Are you sure, Dad?” Hermione asked. “We can go in with you.”

“No, I’ll be okay, Hermione. It’s right next door. You can get your dittany stuff and then we can go have lunch,” Dan assured.

Harry was really curious about what would attract Dan’s attention in Diagon Alley, but Hermione seemed more worried about her dad going off on his own. Dan ducked out of the shield that was keeping the rain off them and headed toward the store. “I’ll be fine, Hermione. Really,” he said as his footsteps splashed through puddles.

“Oh, here’s the shop - there are two steps up,” Hermione said. “*Finite*. Oh.”
A very familiar voice was echoing throughout the shop - one which made Harry’s stomach seize up.

“So that…?” Harry asked as Hermione nearly froze on the second step.

“It’s okay… it’s just Professor Snape is at the counter,” Hermione hissed in his ear. Harry was thinking they should just turn around and leave and then he remembered that he wasn’t Harry Potter today.

“Uh - he won’t want to talk to us,” Harry reminded her. “Maybe he’s finished and is about to go?”

As they stood there stalled in the entry, it became clear that their Potions professor was having an argument with the apothecary.

“… specified in my letter… dated June 4th… the moonseed must have a pearlescent sheen. I clearly stated that I would not accept moonseed that had any tinge of grey… This order is of the utmost importance and I will not brook any delay…”

It sounded as if the apothecary was doing her best to appease the professor, but it didn’t seem to be making a difference.

“Hurry, Haripreet, we better get out of the way,” Hermione urged tugging him along through the door so that they pressed against a barrel of what could only be peeled and pickled garlic. The fumes were almost more than Harry could bear. His eyes began to water. He wondered if the apothecary was trying to fend off vampires.

“So how was it that Snape was able to tolerate it, then?”

“Um, can we move to a spot that isn’t so garlic-y?” Harry whispered as he wiped the tears from the corners of his eyes.

“Er, yeah… it’s just that it is a very tiny shop and there are a lot of barrels and things,” Hermione replied in a very low voice. She started to edge around the garlic barrel. Harry’s staff tinged against another barrel and something inside of it moved suddenly in the watery depths as if startled.

Hermione squeaked.

“What was that?” Harry whispered.

“Live eels, I’m pretty sure,” Hermione moaned.

Harry pulled his staff closer to his body.

The argument ended abruptly with a sharp noise that Harry guessed was Snape slamming his hand on the counter for emphasis. Harry listened for his footsteps, but only heard the rustling of a cloak as it swooped by… pausing for a breath near them and then continuing on. He could feel the weight of Snape moving the floorboards, though, even though he couldn’t hear his steps.

Hermione let out a relieved sigh when the door slammed shut.

“He looked at us, didn’t he?” Harry said.

“Yep,” Hermione confirmed.

“Let’s get the dittany and get out of here,” Harry urged.

“Okay,” she agreed and led him carefully around the barrels and through the narrow aisles to the
counter in the back where the apothecary seemed to be angrily sorting small glass jars and muttering to herself about pearlescent sheens and tinges of grey.

It wasn’t too long before they had a small potion vial stoppered with a cork stashed in Harry’s staff and were out on the pavement again under Hermione’s shield charm and waiting for Dr. Granger who didn’t seem to be in the shop he said he’d be in.

“Where’d my dad go?” Hermione asked.

“I don’t know. Are you sure he’s not in there?” Harry asked.

“I’ll just run inside and check, okay? You don’t mind waiting here, do you?” Hermione asked, but was running up the stairs of the shop and wrenching the door open before Harry could answer.

Harry shifted from foot to foot as he waited, tapping the silver tip of his staff against the cobblestones lightly. Pretty soon he heard hurried footsteps approaching him.

“Oh, Harry… er… Haripreet,” Dr. Granger said from a bit of a distance.

Harry turned toward him.

“I didn’t mean to be gone so long. Where’s Hermione?” he asked, grasping Harry’s shoulder.

“She went inside looking for you,” Harry said.

The door creaked and Hermione clattered across the cobblestones toward them.

“Dad! Where were you!” Hermione interrogated. “I thought you were going to be in this shop!”

Dr. Granger wouldn’t reveal where he’d been or what he’d been up to… and after she ranted a bit, Hermione seemed oddly pleased. Harry wondered if this was something that parents often did with their children… he had figured out a while ago that the Dursleys weren’t necessarily an example of a typical family. Everything they did was for show.

“How about we go through the Leaky Caldron to get back to Charing Cross Road - isn’t it pretty close to the Center?” Dan suggested. “I think there’s a Thai place near there that’s supposed to be pretty good.”

“Really? It’s near the Center?” Harry asked, trying to remember how he and Hagrid had traveled to the Leaky Cauldron. There was so much about that trip that was seared into his memory - Hagrid getting stuck in the turnstile and pointing out the parking meters - but he didn’t remember what station they traveled to or what streets they took to get to the Leaky Cauldron. He had been so caught up in the magic that he had forgotten to pay attention to everything else.

“I’ve been wanting some Phad Thai - what do you think?” Dan asked.

“Hmmm. Aren’t those noodles?” Harry asked a little worried.

“I thought you liked noodles,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, I do - I just haven’t tried them since” and he waved at his face. “I think they’ll be kind of hard to manage.”

“Don’t worry about that stuff with us, okay? We don’t care,” Hermione assured.

“Yeah, sure, I know,” Harry said, “It’s just frustrating sometimes to have to learn how to do
everything again.”

“I bet,” Hermione sighed.

As they walked to the Leaky Cauldron, the rain started to abate. Harry liked the sound of it on the trees and rooftops - it gave him a sense of where things were. He could hear it gurgling down drain pipes and dripping off rooftops. He knew when he was passing potted plants because he could smell the wet soil and leaves. The trees were the best part and though there weren’t many on Diagon Alley, the small ones that they passed were alive with sounds and fragrances. He paused under one, letting go of Hermione’s arm.

“What are you doing, Harry?” she asked.

“Just listening to the tree… and smelling it,” he reached out and found the trunk - tracing the raised lattice-like lines of the bark. He had stepped outside of Hermione’s shield charm and drops of water fell on his face as he stood under the tree, trying to inhale it.

“It’s on the verge of blooming - it’ll be amazing,” Dan said. “A sweet lemony-orange smell.”

“It smells good now,” Harry said.

“Yeah, it does,” Hermione agreed.

As they passed through the Egress to the Leaky Cauldron, Harry felt the familiar tug of the magic on his navel. He wondered why he hadn’t felt it before. He heard Hermione utter a small ‘oh!’ and knew that she felt it, too.

The bar was bustling with people and Harry worried that they’d run into other people that they knew. At least the Malfoys wouldn’t be caught dead here!

Dr. Granger hissed to Hermione about something that someone was carrying, but Harry couldn’t quite hear what it was and Hermione whispered that she’d tell him later. There was something about the smell of spilt butterbeer and sour dishrags that made Harry remember meeting Quirrell here and how clammy and cold his hand had felt - like he had pressed a limp fish into his. He shivered.

“What is it?”

“Just remembering Quirrell,” Harry said. “This is where I met him with Hagrid. My first year.”

“Oh, right,” Hermione said heavily as she led him through the maze of tables and chairs and he wondered if she’d had gone so far as to confess to her parents about what had happened at the end of term her first year.

Finally, they were going through the door and the light outside pierced his brain.

“I guess the sun came out finally!” Harry said gasping in pain and squeezing his eyes closed.

“Are you alright, Harry?” Hermione turned toward him.

“Yeah, just forgot to close my eyes before we went through the door,” Harry said.

“Hey, Harry, can you ask your staff for directions to the Thai restaurant?” Dan asked softly.

“Navigant Thai restaurant,” Harry muttered. “It’s saying to turn left, Hermione and walk about 50 yards. It says there is a street to cross in six yards.”
“Oh, yes, I see it,” Hermione said. “Ha! It’s called ‘Thai’s that Bind.’ Your staff is really handy. I wonder if we can use that same with our wands? I can’t wait to try when I’m back at school.”

“Why not try now?”

“What? We’re not supposed to magic outside of school!”

The restaurant was small and crowded, which Dr. Granger took as a good sign. The aromas were heavenly, which helped Harry overcome his nervousness about eating sloppily. It wasn’t long before they had a seat and had ordered. Harry had taken out the map that Godric had given them to see if the area around the center was also marked on the map - not just Diagon Alley and was pleased to find that it was. He was exploring the street they were on when their steaming bowls of noodles arrived and he rolled up the map and stuck it in his pocket.

“There’s a department store a couple of streets away,” Harry told Dr. Granger and Hermione as he felt the table trying to find utensils. He was relieved to find a fork and a spoon and while it wasn’t the neatest meal he’d eaten since losing his sight, he was able to manage the noodles fairly well by twirling them around his fork in the spoon. He was also thankful for the large cloth napkin.
Harry was glad to exit the department store - the piped in music was driving him mad. Dr. Granger had graciously offered to carry the large plastic bag that contained his new trousers, t-shirts, shirts, pants, and socks since they couldn’t stuff it into his staff in a store teeming with muggles. He was wearing his new trainers and really liked how they felt. He was thankful that Hermione had graciously excused herself and allowed her dad to take Harry shopping for underpants alone. It didn’t take them long. Dr. Granger was thankfully very efficient and understanding about the whole process. They had found Hermione not too far away in the very small section of books and magazines that the department store housed.

“Just coffee table books, really - nothing with any substance,” Hermione complained.

They were walking along Rose Street on their way back to the Center. Harry was very much aware that their day was coming to an end. He was mulling over a comment a store clerk had made about Harry being Dr. Granger’s adopted son. It had surprised both of them… but it made a warmth erupt in Harry’s chest that he’d never felt when people had made the assumption that Uncle Vernon was his dad. He’d always been quick to correct them… ‘No, he’s my uncle,’ and even that level of familiarity had been too close for comfort.

The sun had come out and Harry could smell the water burning off the pavement now. The puddles were few and far between.

“Dad, you said I could spend some time in the library at the Center, remember? And it’s only 3:30 pm,” Hermione was pleading with her dad who had advocated for leaving when they had reached 56 Charing Cross Road.

“Okay, Hermione. I’m going to come back and get you at 5 pm. I’ll go see if I can find that French Provencal cookbook Emma’s been wanting. Her birthday is coming up,” Dr. Granger acquiesced.

“Thanks, Dad!” Hermione squeaked, jumping up to hug him.

“Thank you, Dr. Granger. It was a good day,” Harry said.

“Yes, it was, Harry. Thank you. It was good to spend the day with you,” Dr. Granger grasped his shoulder and squeezed and then headed out the Egress.

“Wouldn’t it be cool if I could just be Haripreet Batra?” Harry said, turning back to Hermione. “You said that he went back to India, right? Maybe I could just be a new kid at Hogwarts. No one special. Well, except for… yeah. And Snape wouldn’t pay any attention to me - just like at the apothecary. No one knew who I was at Diagon Alley - not Hannah, not Snape, not Chester…”

Harry ran his fingers over his forehead, where a scar should have been. It was pretty nice.

“I wonder how many wixen do this all the time? Seems like it would be so easy to just be someone else,” Harry mused.

“Um, Harry, did you notice how people treated you today?” Hermione said.

“Er, what do you mean?” Harry asked.

“Oh, well. Maybe… um…” Hermione hedged.
“What did they do? I mean I noticed how the guy in the quill shop ignored me and then shouted like he thought I was deaf, too. Yeah. Was there other stuff that I missed?” Harry asked, his heart speeding up.

“Well, it was just the way some people looked at you,” Hermione said.

“How’d they look at me?” Harry asked, his shoulders slumping.

“Er. Forget I said it, okay? It doesn’t matter,” Hermione said.

“Well, obviously it does since you brought it up. Were they looking at me weird because I’m… you know, blind?” he said.

“No, I think it was because of your appearance - your dark skin. It was different from when we were out yesterday,” Hermione said.

“Really? Well, yesterday I was essentially invisible,” Harry shrugged.

“Yeah, well. I guess it just seemed like people were treating you differently today. Anyway, wouldn’t a charm like what you have on your staff just reveal who you are?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah, I guess so, if they already had identified me,” Harry sighed. “I don’t think it is based on visuals… it knows when Adam is in a room, after all, and most people can’t see him. I imagine there are other ways to tell who people are.”

“Who’s Adam?” Hermione asked.

“He’s a resident - he’s invisible, I guess - from vanishing sickness,” Harry explained.

“Oh, that’d be hard,” Hermione said. “And, anyway, everyone would be in an uproar if Harry Potter just up and disappeared.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Harry said trying hard not to reveal how disappointed he was.

“Maybe Healer Jordan can just keep my scar transfigured, then,” Harry said as Hermione slowed. He guessed that they were in front of Healer Jordan’s office now.

“You can always ask,” Hermione said as she knocked on the door.

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“Enter,” someone called from the other side of the door and Hermione pushed it open.

“Come on in, Harry and Hermione. How was your outing today? Did the Transfiguration do the trick?” Healer Jordan asked.

“Yes, thank you, Healer Jordan. It was a lot better than that disillusionment charm we used yesterday. No one bumped into me and no one recognized me, even though we ran into some people we knew from Hogwarts,” Harry said.

“I’m glad to hear that it worked. And you were still able to access your vault, yes?” Healer Jordan said.

“Yes, thank you,” Harry said. “I was wondering… would it be okay for me to keep my scar transfigured like this? Hidden?”
“Oh, well, I certainly understand the temptation, Harry, but I’m afraid I’ll have to restore all of your appearance while you’re at the Center, otherwise, people might catch on that we’re altering your appearance when you go out,” Healer Jordan explained.

“Oh, okay. I thought you might say something like that. I rather liked being Haripreet Batra, though. I wouldn’t mind being him all the time, if it were possible,” Harry muttered while Healer Jordan lifted the spells that changed his appearance. He felt his forehead and traced the familiar lightning bolt pattern and felt a little more weighed down by gravity than he had moments before.

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As they walked through the corridor to the library, Harry leaned toward Hermione and said, “Let’s look at the photo album in the library with my digitus, okay?”

“Yes, I was hoping we could,” Hermione said. “And there were some other books I was hoping to look at more closely. I’m really curious about why your repairs turn rainbow colors and I’m hoping there are books in the library that will tell us why that’s happening. Oh, and do you have a slate and stylus? The one I mail ordered hasn’t come yet. I’ve been reading about braille, but I was also hoping to try writing it, as well.”

“Yes, and that’s a lot to do in - what - an hour before you have to be back at the reception area to meet your dad?” Harry teased.

They were greeted at the door by a message from Besel welcoming them to the library at the same time that it explained that she was out and they were on their own. They settled at the table that overlooked the courtyard (according to Hermione). Hermione ran over to the stacks to get books while Harry Accio’d the books they just retrieved from his vault, his anagnóstis, the digitus, the slate and stylus, parchment, and the quick quotes quill from his staff.

Harry ran his fingers over the books and swallowed. His throat was a bit dry. He felt for his anagnóstis and ran it over the cover, but didn’t find any text. He opened the cover and felt a delicate tissue page. He turned it and ran his fingers over a page with pasted photographs.

He found the top photo on the left-hand side of the page and lined up the digitus and pulled it across the photo. He set down the tool and found that there was braille underneath the frame of the image. He tried to read it, but it was taking too long to figure out, so he grabbed his anagnóstis and was surprised by a boy’s voice that sounded kind of familiar saying, ‘papa and mum and Fleabag, 1972’ in his aftí. He wondered who Fleabag was.

He was intrigued and started running his fingers over the forms that were emerging - larger than the frame and jumping up to meet his fingers. While he was exploring the image, trying to figure it out, he heard Hermione place a stack of books on the table and start to sort through them. She flipped open one of the books and he heard her take the slate and stylus that he had set out along with a piece of parchment. He heard the slate puncturing the parchment and then the rhythmic punching noises of the stylus.

“Hermione, is this a man and a woman standing on a porch, waving?” Harry finally asked. “Are they older? Is there a small dog that’s bouncing around at their feet?”

“Yeah, I think those are your dad’s parents, Harry. They must have been pretty old when they had your dad,” Hermione said.

“So, that was my dad’s voice…”
“What really? You heard your dad’s voice?” Hermione gasped.

“Yeah, with my anagnóstis. It’s the best thing about it… it talks in the voice of the person who wrote the words,” Harry explained.

“So these people… they’re my grandparents,” Harry said. “They must be dead, right? I mean if they were still alive I wouldn’t have to live with the Dursleys.”

“Yeah, probably. They look pretty old in 1972 and that was over twenty years ago,” Hermione agreed. “Run your digitus over the next one. It says it is your dad getting ready to go to Hogwarts. He’s on the same porch with the same dog and it says 1972. He’s wearing his robes. You look a lot like him. He has glasses, too.”

“He sounds like me, too,” Harry said as he pulled the digitus over the photograph.

Harry felt the form of a boy trying to hold onto a rambunctious dog that was constantly jumping out of his arms and licking him in the face. He could feel the glasses on the boy’s face and his messy hair. Harry touched his own hair - marveling at how the miniature version of his dad’s hair had the same texture.

“Hermione, are there photos of my mum in here?” Harry asked. He started to turn the page and then realized he had to end the charm that made the images three-dimensional. He touched the digitus to the images and said, “Non tangere,” and felt the glossy surface of the photographs that had been restored to their original shape.

“Yeah, those are the ones I saw - at the back of the album. The newest part,” Hermione said as she helped him flip to the back of the album. “Here, try this page.”

He found the photographs and pulled the digitus across them, then used the anagnóstis to read the caption.

A soothing voice spoke in his ear, “James, Harry, and Lily - our new family - August 1980.” Harry took the aftí off his ear, and ran the anagnóstis over the braille again - so that Hermione could hear Lily’s voice, too.

His fingers were trembling as he felt the small forms that were warm to touch - his mum holding him - tiny baby Harry and his dad sitting next to them, arm around his mum’s shoulders. He could feel his mum gently rocking him and the way his dad was pulling both of them against his body - like he couldn’t get close enough. He could feel the smiles on their faces and the way his parents both were gazing at him. He took a moment to explore the room they were sitting in. It was a cozy living room, a bit cluttered with books and newspapers. He went back to the three forms on the couch - they were warm to the touch.

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione breathed as she squeezed him, laying her head on his shoulder.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed.

After Hermione left, Harry decided to skip dinner - he was still full from the late lunch and he didn’t want to experience a repeat of the dinner the night before with Gordon. He wandered around the center for a little bit and then, before he really realized what he was doing, he was walking through the door of the Gym out to the park of Old Ellerby.

Harry inhaled deeply - he could almost taste the grass that must have been recently mown - it was so
thick in the air. He did a quick check of the area to see if there were any people nearby and was relieved that the coast was clear.

He pulled out his broom, stuck his staff into the slot in his broom handle, and pushed off, reveling in the way the cool evening air moved through his hair and made his T-shirt whip around his torso.

He felt absolutely free. There was nothing for him to run into, nothing to trip him up, no hands coming out of nowhere to pull him somewhere he didn’t want to go.

He had a momentary memory of Professor McGonagall’s fierce voice insisting that he could not fly and imagined knocking it out of the way with a bludger bat. She might be able to forbid it at Hogwarts, but right now, he knew that Healer Jordan and Godric, even Figora and Besel, weren’t going to stand in his way.

He felt the sand that had been weighing down his limbs trickle out of his toes and he urged his broom higher into the sky.

He could be himself up here.

He could do what he did best.

He could fly.

Harry remembered to cast the *Scribunt loqui* charm as he was walking back to his dorm, hopeful that Gemma would be back. It felt weird to be walking on the ground again after soaring on his broom for what seemed like hours after dinner. He cast the *Reveleo memento* as he entered the room and greeted Aminah.

Harry went over to Aminah’s area.

“Hey, how are you doing? Do you know if Arig’s okay? Has he come back yet?”

“I’m okay, Harry. Thanks. Um, I haven’t heard about Arig yet. Isn’t it still a full moon?”

“Yeah, I guess so. I just thought he’d be back by now. Was your weekend okay?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, it was good. My mum made some of my favorite foods that I’ve been missing,” Aminah said.

“What dishes did she make?” Harry was asking when the door opened and he heard Gemma’s footsteps running up to him. She hugged him after waving across his hand and then hopped over to Aminah to greet her.

“Hi, Gemma. How was your weekend?” Aminah asked.

“That’s good. I’m glad,” Aminah must have been responding to Gemma’s protactile signing. “Hey, I’m pretty tired, Harry and Gemma - so I’m going to go get ready for bed.”

Harry and Gemma said their good-nights to Aminah as Gemma tugged Harry over to her desk so that they could catch up on their weekend using his *anagnóstis* and her notebook.
He was excited to tell her about flying and the photo album of his family. She was excited to show him her broom and share the pumpkin pasties she’d made with her mom that morning. They laughed as they dropped crumbs on the paper and the smears of pumpkin made funny noises in Harry’s ear that he had a hard time explaining to Gemma.

“Would you two quiet down already!” Mei shouted from across the room.

“Hi Mei,” Harry greeted. “Welcome back!”
Phantom pains

Harry wasn’t sure what it was that woke him up at first - until he heard it again. A piercing cry rent through the room and Harry sat up trying to figure out where it was coming from. He heard Mei splashing, “What was that?” she cried out groggily.

“I dunno. It sounds like someone is in pain,” Harry said, lurching out of bed. He grabbed his staff, shook it out, and stumbled out into the center of the room where the tile was cold on his bare feet.

“Tony!” Harry shouted as the screams rang out again. “Are you okay? What’s hurting you?”

He was at the foot of Tony’s bed and could feel Tony thrashing around, his legs kicking out, tangled in the sheets.

“Someone turn on the lights!” Mei yelled.

He heard a thud and realized that Tony had half fallen onto the floor, still screaming, but his voice was now muffled. Harry collapsed his staff and stuck it in his pocket, then crouched on the floor and started crawling toward Tony’s cries on the floor, sweeping with his arms the way he’d move his staff across the space until he found Tony. He was surprised by an overwhelming odor of liquor… like Aunt Marge’s breath but way stronger… coming from Tony. He turned his face away and gulped air before turning back.

“Tony, Tony! What’s going on?” Harry asked feeling more frantic as Tony’s screams got more intense.

Harry got his arms underneath Tony’s shoulders and was trying to lift him back onto the bed but he was too heavy and he was still twisting and thrashing around. All Harry could do was cradle his head in one arm to try to keep him from banging the back of his head on the tile floor. Harry was running his free hand over Tony’s torso, trying to find a wound. He was certain that he must have been stabbed to scream like he was.

“Hey, can anyone give me a hand here?” Harry shouted to his roommates - then groaned, not just from the effort of keeping Tony from hurting himself, but also from the realization that Aminah never woke up during the night, Gemma wouldn’t know that something was going on unless Tony’s thrashings really vibrated the floor, Mei would have to get out of her tank (and when had she ever done that willingly?), and Arig was still transformed - sleeping off his werewolfishness.

Tony’s screams were scrambling his brain and it was all he could do to keep his head from knocking against the floor or the side of the bed. He didn’t know what to do - or even how injured Tony was … but a noise was getting closer. Harry couldn’t figure out what it was through the screams.

“Tony, knock it off!” Mei screeched. “Someone get Healer Jordan! Aminah! How are you sleeping through this racket!”

And then Mei was flopping onto the ground next to him.

“Mei, how did you get over here?” he said at the same time that she exclaimed, “Oh Merlin’s bollocks, he reeks! Tony! What were you doing last night?”

“Is he still sleeping? He’s not hurt?” Harry asked.

“He’s going to be hurt after I get through with him!” Mei said and Harry was worried, until she took
a deep breath and said, “Yeah, I think he’s having a nightmare - but I dunno, he’s maybe passed out. Blood stupid prat.”

“If he’s having a nightmare, then it’s better not to wake him up. Can you help me get him back on the bed? I can’t lift him,” Harry asked.

“Gah!” Mei groaned as she heaved herself closer, her tail brushing against Harry’s bare back.

“It’s not like I can lift him either… he’s freaking huge.”

“Can’t we use magic?” Harry asked. He got his staff out of his pocket and touched it to Tony’s shoulder and tried, “Wingardium leviosa,” but nothing happened.

“I think that only works on things, not people. Try, “Mobilicorpus,”” Mei said in a surprisingly even tone.

Harry touched his staff to Tony’s shoulder and said the incantation and was surprised when Tony’s body grew lighter in his arms and he and Mei were able to lift him back onto the bed where he levitated over it by a couple of inches until Mei grumbled at Harry to Finite the charm already. Tony dropped onto the bed with a slight thud that interrupted his screams for a second.

“He’s in so much pain,” Harry said, grabbing his own head in his hands. “What can we do? Why isn’t it waking him up?”

Harry was trying to untangle the sheets around Tony’s legs, but gave up as he was still kicking out. Maybe it is better if he can’t kick us.

“I can’t believe that Aminah is sleeping through this - Gemma, I get, but Aminah! How is she still asleep? You’d think with what happened to her, she would be a light sleeper.”

Harry was now holding Tony’s shoulders down so that he wouldn’t launch himself out of bed again, which meant that he was leaning close to Tony’s face, breathing in his noxious fumey breath and his screams were splitting open his head. He felt the bed lurch as Mei pulled herself up onto it to lie across Tony’s legs. She let out a string of curses that made Harry wonder about how much time she spent following pirate vessels.

“You’re both doing well,” Healer Jordan said. Harry jumped. He hadn’t heard her enter the room. Tony’s screaming was completely disorienting him. “How long has Tony been like this?”

“I dunno - just about five-ten minutes,” Mei grunted.

“Okay, I’m going to run some diag… Whoa! Stand back,” Healer Jordan exclaimed as she yanked Harry off the bed and he stumbled to find his footing. There was a retching noise followed by a sickening splatter that splashed on Harry’s bare feet. An acrid odor overtook the area. A second retching noise splattered into a metal bucket that Healer Jordan must have conjured. Then she was muttering the cleaning spell that Madam Pomfrey had used outside the floo at St. Mungo’s that left a peppermint aroma in its wake. Harry gagged a bit when he realized that Healer Jordan had saved him from getting that full in the face. Relief washed over him as Tony had stopped screaming and was now just whimpering.

“I guess it is better out than in,” Mei said as Tony heaved again. “Especially with what he’s been drinking.”

“Okay, I think he’s done. I’m going to run the diagnostics now,” Healer Jordan said.
She made little humming noises. “Okay, he’s stable enough for me to move him to the hospital wing. I’m going to transfigure his bed into a gurney. You two can go back to bed. Thank you. You did well keeping him safe and summoning me. You can tell your roommates what you witnessed in the morning, but please be mindful of Tony’s privacy. I’ll let you know how he’s doing tomorrow.”

“But what’s wrong with him?” Harry asked.

“I think he must be having phantom limb pains,” Healer Jordan said.

“What? What are phantom limb pains?” Harry asked.

“His brain is confused - it keeps trying to send messages to his arms, but they aren’t going through, so it thinks something is wrong - so it sends pain messages. It happens to a lot of amputees.” Healer Jordan had sat on the bed next to Tony and Mei had flopped back down to the floor.

“Why are you rubbing his stumps?” Mei asked.

“It helps reduce the pain,” Healer Jordan explained. “Mei, do you want some help getting into your chair?”

“No.” Mei grunted sliding into her chair, and then he heard moving metal things and guessed that she was unlocking the wheels. Harry shook out his staff and followed the sound of her wheels back to their side of the room. He took a detour to the toilet before going back to bed. He scourgified his feet and pajamas even though he was pretty sure that Healer Jordan had already cleaned them with her spell.

It was a while before he was able to fall asleep again and he guessed that Mei was also struggling from the amount of water splashing against the wall between their sleeping areas. He felt as though he could still hear Tony’s pain-filled cries echoing off the walls of the dormitory long after Healer Jordan had guided the gurney with a quietly moaning Tony out of the room.

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Harry was certain that he had just fallen asleep again when the morning bells rang and the lights started flashing in the room. He could hear Gemma’s bed vibrating. He pulled the covers over his head trying to ignore it all. But it was too persistent. He was just about to extract his legs from the blankets and turn off the alarm, when he heard Aminah’s staff. It was the first time she got up to turn off the alarm.

“Thanks, Aminah,” he called out, his voice cracking with sleep.

“Yeah, no problem,” she said, yawning.

“It’s about time someone shut that blasted thing off,” Mei grumbled.

Harry rolled over to his side and started feeling around on the desk by his bed, trying to find the schedule he’d left out the night before. He had to stretch farther out of his cocoon of warm blankets than he wanted to, but finally he found it. He Accio’d his anagnóstis from his staff and read the updated schedule while also feeling the braille with his left hand as his right hand guided the anagnóstis over the words. It was a little awkward to do this while still in bed, propped up on his elbows, but he was eager to find out what the day would be like, but not enough to get out of bed.

Harry Potter’s schedule
Monday 5 July, 1993

7 am Breakfast

8 am Self-defense and balance with Ms. Midgeon in the O&M room

10 am Navigating with your staff with Mr. Burbage in the O&M room

12 pm Lunch

2 pm Braille with Madam Flamel in the Library

4 pm Practical life with Healer Besel in the Louis Braille room

6 pm Dinner

7 pm Meeting with Professor McGonagall and Healer Jordan in office

He groaned. What a long day. He was tempted to go back to sleep now that the alarm was off, but then he was afraid he’d sleep through breakfast and his stomach was tight with hunger.

From skipping dinner last night.

He extracted himself from his blankets and made his way slowly to the toilet thinking about Tony. He wondered if Healer Jordan was able to do anything for Tony’s pain. He was also thinking about what Healer Jordan had said about filling Arig, Aminah, and Gemma in on what had happened last night with Tony but at the same time respecting his privacy. He wasn’t exactly sure how they were supposed to do that.

At breakfast, Gemma sat between Harry and Aminah. After they had gone through the buffet and Harry wolfed down his eggs and sausages, he quietly filled them in on the night with Mei’s interjections.

“I visited Tony this morning,” Mei said, surprising Harry - he hadn’t heard her leave the dorm. “I guess he had a rough weekend. Healer Jordan has a potion that she’s developed to help with the phantom limb pain. It’s kind of cool. It makes your body think that your limbs still exist and then gradually shrinks them until they are the size of your residual limb, so that it stops searching for the missing pieces. It takes several doses to convince your body that they aren’t there anymore, but in the end, the pain goes away. And she invented it.”

“Wow, that is impressive,” Aminah agreed. “I’m really sorry I slept through last night… I should have woken up to help you.”

“How can you sleep through that is what I want to know!” Mei said, “Though I mean, there wasn’t really anything we could do for him. I mean Harry and I figured out how to keep him from banging up his head more, but other than that, we couldn’t do much. Healer Jordan came right away. I guess the wards let her know that a student in our dorm was distressed. At least you got some sleep. I’m going to be dragging today and Hǎi rén isn’t going to give a pixie’s blue nose hair.”

“Um, I take sleeping potions, Mei,” Aminah stated quietly.

“Oh, sorry. I guess that makes sense.”

“How are those lessons going, Mei?” Harry asked as his knife and fork squeaked against his plate.
“Okay, I guess. I’m getting better at controlling my Jiāorén magic, though you wouldn’t know it from talking to Hǎi rén,” Mei grumped and then switched to a mocking voice, “You’re not even trying - do you want to be stuck in the in-between your whole life? Put some effort into it…

“Do you think they’ll kick Tony out?” Aminah asked, “Isn’t underage drinking a violation of the code of conduct?”

“Yeah, Tony’s worried about that, too,” Mei said. “Though he should have thought that about that last night.”

“Yeah, well. I’m sure he was just trying to find a way to dull the pain,” Aminah said.

Harry pushed back his chair, shook out his staff and turned to Gemma, “I’m going to the owlery before self-defense. Want to come with me?”

She tapped his arm twice, “sure,” and stood up, offering her arm.

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Though he was tired, Harry was feeling good about the day’s classes. They had practiced casting protective spells in self defense. Gemma had even managed a nonverbal cushioning spell that Harry tripped on and then bounced off of like a trampoline. Gemma’s glee at having produced the charm was contagious enough to override his embarrassment at having been bounced around like a bludger between the Weasley twins.

He felt like he had really made some progress with learning braille with Madam Flamel, though it was slow going and he was having a hard time telling apart ⠿, ⠽, ⠽ and ⠨ with his fingertips. Madam Flamel had assured him that it was a natural part of the process and that it would get easier as he worked on conditioning his fingers to be more sensitive.

Now he was waiting outside the Louis Braille room for his Practical Life lesson with Besel wondering what they’d be learning. He heard footsteps approaching and cast the Reveleo Memento to learn that it was Gemma and Peter. He waved in their direction. Gemma waved across his hand that was holding his staff and took his other hand to place lightly on top of Peter’s. Harry waved across Peter’s hand and Peter repeated the gesture and then added one that Harry didn’t know.

“Gemma, what does this mean?” Harry asked, repeating the zig-zag line that Peter had signed.

Gemma poked her index finger into his sternum.

“It means ‘you’?” Harry asked and she tapped his hand once, “no,” and then repeated it.

“It means ‘me’?” Harry was perplexed and she took his hand and turned it palm up to write, “H-A-R-R-Y” space “P-O-T-T-E-R” space “Y-O-U-R” space “N-A-M-E” space “S-I-G-N” and then she touched his scar, tracing the lightning bolt pattern it cut through his forehead. He felt his neck warm.

“Oh,” he said, grimacing.

She wrote a question mark and then “W-R-O-N-G?”.

“I hate my scar. I hate people being able to recognize me by my scar,” he confessed. “Everyone thinks it is such a great thing, but for me, it is the only thing I have from the night my parents died
and it is a daily reminder that Voldemort tried to kill me, too. Healer Jordan transfigured me so that people wouldn’t recognize me when I went to Diagon Alley yesterday with Hermione and erased my scar and it was really nice to have a whole day without it.” He could tell that Gemma was relaying all this to Peter since they were standing close together, touching each other. Both Gemma and Peter made the sorry sign on his hand and tapped three times, “I understand.”

Peter and Gemma were signing between them and then Gemma grabbed Harry’s hand and wrote “N-E-W” space “S-I-G-N” space “H” space “+” space “S-E-E-K-E-R” space “O-K-?” space and then she took his hand and moved it through the motion - sliding his right hand palm down across his left hand palm up and taking his index fingers up to his eyes and pulling them out and around in a parallel motion.

“Isn’t it kind of… I dunno, sick? to use a sign for seeing for my name?” Harry asked.

Gemma made the laughing sign and Peter joined in, his laughter noises jarring. There was something morbidly contagious about it. Harry was surprised when laughter bubbled out of him was well.

“Merlin, you three are making a racket out here. What are you all laughing about?” Mei asked.

“Just the sign for my name that Gemma and Peter came up with,” Harry said once he was able to draw a breath and he signed his name which made them all double over again.

“That is funny,” Mei snorted. “So, what’s mine?” And they started laughing again as Gemma made the sign for “M” and walking.

“Oh, there you all are! I thought I heard something,” Besel said from the doorway. “Are you going to come in?”

“Oh, yes, coming!”

As they entered the space through the familiar naval tug of the Egress, Harry, still laughing, coughed when smoke from the room was drawn into his lungs. Harry squeezed his staff in the air to get a description of the room and learned that Aminah and Arig were already there.

“Hey, Arig! I thought you’d be out another day!” Harry exclaimed as he navigated closer.

“Blimey Harry, how’d you know I was here?” Arig said, his voice sounded tired - like it was an effort to form the words.

“Oh, my staff - I asked who was in the room when I came in. You do that, too, don’t you Aminah?” Harry asked.

“Yeah. I hate not knowing.”

“Well, I’m knackered, but sick of lying around. So I talked Healer Jordan into letting me come for this lesson at least,” Arig explained. “I heard what happened to Tony last night. Aamzing how you and Mei helped him. I’m sorry I wasn’t there. Phantom pains are so awful. Poor bloke.”

“Yeah, it was …” Harry didn’t really have the words to describe the sound of Tony’s pain and just trailed off.

“Yeah,” Mei agreed, rolling up next to him.

Harry used the momentary silence to squeeze his staff again to hear the description of the room and he learned that they were in a very old cottage. The room was almost unbearably hot, the only relief
came from a breeze that carried the distinctive odor of cut grass and manure coming from an open
doors across from them that also let in a blinding light in the otherwise dark space. Through that door,
he could hear a sheep or goat (or maybe a few) bleating as well as the clucking of chickens. His afti
described a large walk-in style fireplace with a cauldron bubbling over the smoldering fire on the east
wall. Near the fireplace was an old spinning wheel and an assortment of cauldrons and cooking
utensils. The fireplace was framed by a large mantel that held a lot of old tools. There was an alcove
in the corner that was filled with musty mattresses, pillows, and blankets. A rough-hewn table with
benches on either side stood in the center of the room.

“Are you listening to something?” Arig asked.

“Er … Yeah. I was getting a description of the room,” Harry explained holding up his staff.

“What is this place?” Mei said in disgust. “What are we doing here?”

Besel’s chair stirred up dust as she moved across the room to the other side of the table.

“Let’s get settled and I’ll tell you. Gemma, thank you for interpreting for Peter. Could you all gather
around the table in the center of the room? You may sit on the benches. And there is room at each
end for Mei and me,” Besel instructed.

“So, this is the childhood home of Louis Braille in Coupvray, France - just outside of Paris. We’re
here for some practical life experiences. Today we’re going to bake some bread in the stone oven
outside in the yard as well as help out with some farm chores.”

Mei groaned, “How is doing chores in a medieval French farmhouse anything close to Practical
Life?”

“Well, we could always just clean the dormitories and prepare dinner for the Center, if you’d rather
do something that is more applicable to your immediate life,” Besel offered.

Harry was certain that she was absolutely serious and his shoulders slumped.

“But I thought it might be kinda fun to dabble in life in early nineteenth century France, though
without the Napoleonic army tromping by - so this is just a simulation of the farm at that time, not a
trip back in time,” Besel continued brightly. “I’ll give you a tour and tell you a bit about each job and
we’ll break into small groups to tackle each job. Any questions?”

“I don’t think my chair will pass through that door,” Mei said.

“True, luckily, we’ve got magic to help us over those barriers,” Besel said. She must have done
something with her wand because Mei and Arig both made agreeing noises and Gemma, sitting next
to Harry, shook a bit. He drew a question mark on her hand, but she was signing with Peter on her
other side. Harry figured that she had transfigured the door to widen or put in a ramp and let it go.

“Okay, let me give you the tour of the cottage and the farm and then we’ll get started,” Besel said.
“We’ll start where we are. This is the main room of the cottage - the kitchen, living room, and some
of the sleeping quarters of the Braille family. There are other floors above us with more sleeping
quarters, but we’ll just look at the workshop and this room today. Aminah, Harry, and Peter - did
you use your staff when we first arrived to get a description of this space?”

Harry and Aminah answered “yes,” and Harry guessed that Peter did as well because Besel went on,
“Good. So you know that there is a large walk-in fireplace to my left with a cauldron over the fire
and a variety of tools for cooking, housework, and farm maintenance on the mantel. Behind me is the
alcove with a convenient bed. Once some of the ingredients are gathered from the farm, we’ll start
making the bread in here in the oven that is next to the fireplace and is already being heated by the fire.”

“Is that why it is so stinking hot in here?” Mei grumbled.

“Yes, of course this is a muggle farm, so they couldn’t just cast a cooling charm or create a breeze as easily as we can,” Besel explained. “I haven’t cooled this room because we want the oven to be hot for our bread. And I wanted you to have an authentic experience. I think that you’ll find that some of their adaptations are really very ingenious. Let me show you the workshop where Simon-René Braille was a saddler.”

Besel’s chair moved across the floor stirring up dust as she went. Harry wiped a trickle of sweat from his brow and felt another one travel down his spine as he waited until Gemma and Peter stood up. Then he swung his legs over the bench and stood up, shook out his staff and followed the group through the door to the workshop. It smelled of wood shavings and cured leather and was noticeably cooler than the kitchen.

“Hey, I can use some help here,” Mei said from the doorway behind Harry.

“Excuse me, Harry, can you move to your left so that I can get by to assist Mei?” Besel asked. Harry shuffled out of her way, his elbow hitting something wood that was sticking out into the room. He felt it and found that it was a wooden workbench. He heard Besel mutter a spell and then Mei joined them in the room, the wheels of her chair brushing Harry’s leg. Arig came in behind her - moving more slowly and heavily than his normal bouncing gait on his crutches. Besel’s chair moved by Harry and she drew their attention to the workbench that ran along the whole wall. Harry’s staff described a lot of small metal tools hanging above the bench.

“This is where three-year-old Louis Braille punctured his eye with one of the sharp awls used to make saddles. Because of the limited medicine available at the time, the infection from the injury spread to his other eye as well and it wasn’t long before he was completely blind. His keen intelligence was recognized at an early age… “ here Mei snorted derisively which Besel ignored and continued, “… and his father created a tactile version of the alphabet out of saddle tacks to help teach young Louis how to read. It was unusual back then for the family of a saddler to value literacy as they did. Here, I’m going to pass around the block of wood that has the beginning of the French alphabet on it that Louis first learned his letters on.”

“Here, Harry,” Arig said. “It’s pretty cool.”

Harry found the wood block that Arig was holding out for him and took it. He ran his fingers over the surface. The letters were spelled out with the round heads of tacks flush against the wood in neat rows. Each letter took a lot of space and there wasn’t room for many letters. He traced the letters and imagine what it must have been like to learn to read like this.

He wasn’t sure who he should pass it onto next. “Aminah, have you seen this yet?” Harry asked, he’d heard her staff near him.

“Oh, thanks,” she said as he tapped the wood against his staff so that she could locate it.

“Later, when he was a student at the Royal Institute for Blind Youth in Paris, Louis was introduced to a system of night writing that Captain Charles Barbier had devised so that soldiers could pass messages in the dark. It was cumbersome, though, and never useful enough in the trenches, but Captain Barbier thought that people who are blind might be interested and brought it to the Institute. Louis Braille - who was only twelve at the time - took it and over the next three years refined it to the system of raised dots made within the six-cell system. It is now used throughout the world,” Besel
“Okay, let’s head back out to the Farm. I’m going to transfigure your shoes to Wellington’s as we go out to the farm,” Besel said. “It’s pretty muddy out there.”

Mei was grumbling under her breath, “…nothing practical about mucking around in the mud on a simulated farm of a blind muggle in France in the 1800s…”

Harry thought she had a point, but he was also kind of intrigued.
Goats

Harry felt as if the mud was trying to pull his wellies off. He was using his staff more like a cane to keep himself from toppling into the muck; he was glad that it was sturdy. The mud was fetid - it smelled like rotting leaves, piss, and manure. There was a buzz of flies that erupted with every step. Each suctioning step made the odor rise around him and he struggled not to gag. He didn’t blame Mei for holing up in the Farm house. Besel was very patiently talking to her, trying to convince her to venture out.

Arig and Aminah were struggling through the mud near Harry, Gemma and Peter were a bit farther along - nearing the fenced area where Harry could hear the goats yelling at them. *It must be feeding time.*

Besel came breezing by him. “You’re doing great. Just a few more feet and you’ll be out of the worst of it… well, until we get into the pens. I’m going to catch up with Gemma and Peter.”

“Is Mei coming?” Aminah asked, her wellies squelching in the muck.

“Yes, I’m right here - just bobbing along like a giant fish lantern during the Lunar New Year behind Besel.” Mei’s sardonic reply came from higher up than usual.

“That’s the way to travel!” Arig hooted in delight. “C’mon! Healer Geller! Let us fly over the mud, too! Get me out of this muck - it’s trying to take my Wellie off.”

Harry paused for a second, tempted to get his broom out of his staff.

“You’re getting along just fine!” Besel encouraged from across the yard.

Finally, Harry made it to the wood fence where Gemma, Peter, Besel, and Mei were waiting. He ran his hands over the worn planks. Aminah and Arig were right behind him - Arig’s breath was labored as if he’d just run a distance. Harry had managed not to fall in the mud. Aminah was not quite so lucky, but she didn’t get hurt and Besel had helped clean her up. Harry swatted at flies that kept wanting to land on his ears and nose.

“The goats are happy to see us. They are hungry and ready to be milked,” Besel said.

“Milked? No way are we milking goats!” Mei exclaimed.

“Well, I’ll do most of the milking, but you can assist and give it a try if you’re interested,” Besel said. “It takes a while to get the hang of it. Let’s throw them some hay and then we’ll come back for milking after we visit the chickens.”

“Arig, can you grab a flake of hay?” Besel instructed.

Harry listened as Arig made his way slowly over to a nearby barn that he knew was there thanks to his staff. It sounded like the mud wasn’t so bad by the building that was situated on higher ground and Arig wasn’t slipping around as much as he had been in the middle of the yard where the rainwater had puddled, creating the deep ruts of muddy sinkholes that they had just crossed.

Harry heard the hay rustling as it passed by him and then land in some kind of container on the other side of the fence - he guessed that Arig had sent it to the goats, rather than try to carry it while managing his crutches in the mud.
“Er, Healer Geller, I don’t think I’m going to be able to go near the livestock,” Arig announced from the barn. “They are already looking cagey. I’ll just stay over here and rest.” Harry could hear the sound of hay moving and guessed that Arig was settling down on a hay bale.

“Right, that’s probably wise,” Besel agreed.

Harry used his staff to identify Gemma and Peter who were standing at the fence and let them know he was there by waving across their backs.

Mei was describing the goats to Aminah - though her descriptions focused on how muddy they were. He had always wanted to visit a farm ever since he was a kid devouring picture books at the local library and he wasn’t going to let Mei spoil it for him. Granted, those books never really described the odors… or the ravenous mud.

Most of the goats had stopped screaming at them once the hay hit their trough and it sounded like they were scrambling for the choicest bits of hay. A few of them continued to bleat plaintively at them.

“Wow. They are so loud,” Aminah commented.

Besel led them through a gate to a smaller fenced-in area of the barnyard. Harry’s staff told him about a small structure that he gathered was a hen house. He could hear the chickens clucking and scratching in the mud.

“Over here is where we’ll gather the eggs. Actually, let’s just do that. Mei, can you grab that wire basket by your elbow on the table over there?” Besel said.

“Harry, could you help me lift open this door into the hen house?” Besel asked.

Harry was confused, but stepped forward anyway, swishing flies away that were trying to fly up his nose.

“It is hinged at the top and we’re going to prop it open, it’ll give us access to the nesting hens inside the hen house. Here, let me guide your hand to the bottom of the door - it will swing out and then I can put the stick in that props it up,” Besel explained as she guided Harry’s hand to the rough wooden slats that made up the door. “You’ll have to be mindful not to walk into the door when it is propped open as it is right at forehead level for a lot of you.”

The hens inside clucked in alarm as the door was lifted open.

“Okay, now we’re just going to slide our hands underneath the nesting hens and gather their eggs. Sometimes they’ll hop up and move away and that will make it a little easier. These hens are pretty gentle as they’ve grown accustomed to visit from residents at the center - so they won’t try to peck you. Who’d like to try?” Besel asked.

“Great, Peter and Gemma! Gemma, make sure he knows about the overhanging door. Mei, can you hand Gemma the wire basket?” Besel asked. “Mei, do you want to gather some eggs?”

“No, that’s disgusting,” Mei said. “These flies are trying to eat me. Are we almost done?”

“Can I try?” Harry asked.

“Sure, if you come over to this side,” Besel directed, “these eggs haven’t been gathered yet. Watch your head; that’s right.”
Harry followed her voice and the sound of her chair while tracing the edge of the door with the handle of his staff to avoid getting splinters in his fingers. Besel hand found his other wrist and guided it down to the wood frame that contained the nest. He felt straw and warm feathers that twitched away from him. They were soft like Hedwig’s.

*Ruffled feathers.*

He found the crevice between the straw and the warm body and rooted around until his fingertips glanced over the smooth hot surface of an egg. He gently lifted it out from under the hen who grumbled at him. *Brooding hen.* He transferred the egg to his other hand and went back in to see if there were others and found a second egg, but no more.

“Gemma, I have two eggs for the basket,” Harry said in her direction, but she must have been focusing on getting her eggs.

“She can’t see your notes, Harry,” Mei said. “Peter’s holding the basket - he’s about two feet to your left.”

“Right,” Harry edged over toward Peter, holding the two eggs in one hand and his staff in the other, hunched over under the propped open door until he found Peter, who was hunched over even more. He waved across Peter’s wrist and followed his hand to the wire handle and the handle down to the basket where he gently added the eggs. Peter’s other hand fluttered over his and he guided it to the two eggs he had added to the basket.

Besel was directing Aminah to another nest and when she had gathered an egg from the nest, he helped her place it in the basket that Peter held.

“Okay, nice work. Harry, can you get Gemma’s attention for me, please?” Besel asked.

Harry traced his hand over Peter’s back and found Gemma’s shoulder and waved to her. He could feel her turning toward him and said, “Besel was asking for you,” he explained.

“Thanks, Harry. That’s a nice collection of eggs. I’ll send them in to the table in the Farmhouse and we’ll head over to the milking station. But first, Aminah, will you help me lower the door to the chicken coop?” Besel said.

Harry heard the latch that secured the door fall into place. As she led them to the goat pen, Besel described the wooden platform where the goats would stand with their heads held still in a feeding trough while they were milked.

“Aminah, could you please get a scoop full of the grain from that barrel behind you and put it in the trough?” Besel asked, and went on to explain that milking goats got a special blend of oats and beets to supplement their diet and also to appease them while they were being milked. Aminah had no trouble scooping the grain from the barrel. She used her staff to navigate by the group and found the trough eventually with her staff and Besel’s verbal cues. It sounded like most of the grain made into the trough.

“I’ve got the sterilized milking buckets over here on a shelf out of reach from the goats. I also have some brushes and clean and sanitized rags for cleaning the udders before we start milking. Once the goat is on the stand and her head is secured, then we’ll brush her down and clean her udders, then I’ll get the bucket and start milking her. Her udders are full and she is uncomfortable - so she is eager to come into the milking area,” Besel explained and Harry could hear her picking up and setting down the tools as she talked about them.
“Oh, that’s a good question, Gemma. Oh, actually it was Peter. Peter asked about the baby goats. They have been weaned and are playing in another pen. The farmers won’t start milking the mother until the baby starts eating solids. If they are male, then they’ll most likely be sold for meat or to another farm as a stud. Dairy goats usually only keep one stud on the farm because they are a bit challenging to handle. And stinky! Female goats might be added to the herd or sold depending on how many the farmers want to keep.”

“How do you have goats and other live animals on a simulated farm?” Aminah asked.

“We’re actually visiting my neighbor’s farm in Hogsmeade, but the inside of the Farmhouse was transfigured to look like Louis Braille’s house. My neighbor was kind enough to let us milk a couple of his goats for our lesson today. He might stop by in a bit to help us out,” Besel explained.

“The easiest way for me to explain how to express the milk is to ask you to think of the udder as a water-proof glove filled with liquid. You want to trap the liquid in one of the fingers and prevent it from moving up into the hand of the glove before you squeeze the liquid out of a hole in the tip of the finger. So the first step is to hold the finger (or the teat) where it meets the hand (at the udder) and squeeze off the milk so it can only escape through the hole in the tip. Then use the rest of your fingers and the palm of your hand to express the milk out of the teat. You’re going to alternate between teats to allow them to refill with milk once they are emptied. You have to work fast because they are used to skilled milkers and they will kick the bucket if you dally,” she explained.

“Okay, if you all would stand over here to the side, I’m going to let the first milking goat in. She’ll jump right up onto the stand, so make sure you’re not in her way. Also, they all want to get in first - so it is a bit of a tussle at the gate and I’ll do my best to only let one in. Gemma, could you help me with the gate?” Besel asked as she headed to the gate where the goats were bleating loudly again.

Gemma pressed Peter’s hands into Harry’s as she left. Harry greeted Peter and hoped that he knew what was going on and that Gemma had been able to translate everything for him because he sure didn’t know all the signs for what Besel had been describing.

It sounded like there was a real struggle at the gate as all the goats wanted in. Besel was shouting directions to Gemma and pretty soon Harry heard the goat’s hooves scrambling on the wooden platform that they were standing near.

“Harry, can you secure Midnight’s head? She’s put it between the V-shaped wooden slats and you just have to pull them together and fasten them with the cord that’s tied at the top,” Besel explained.

“Sure,” Harry said, dropping Peter’s hand and making his way to the front of the stand where he could hear Midnight chowing down on the oats. He had just found the V-shaped slats that Besel described on either side of her head and was pulling them together when he heard an awkward squawk. He wondered what it was, but was focused on securing Midnight’s head. It took him awhile to find the cord and figure out how it slipped over the slats, but finally, it was secured. The flies seemed more persistent in the goat pen and tormented him while his hands were occupied.

He walked back to where he’d left Peter and was surprised at how forcibly Gemma grabbed his hand and forced it open to write, “L-E-F-T-P-E-T-E-R-A-L-O-N-E-!”

Harry turned to her, horrified and then reached out for Peter’s hand and rubbed “sorry” across it repeatedly while he said, “I’m so sorry! I didn’t think!” Of course, Peter had no idea that Besel had asked Harry to secure the goat’s head.

Peter patted his hand, accepting his apology.
Besel seemed unaware of the exchange and continued with her lesson, “Thanks! Okay, first I’m going to brush Midnight down to help guard against stray hairs and mud from getting in the milk. Mei, can you please brush her on her other side?” Besel asked. “Here’s the brush,” Mei grumbled, but it seemed that she was actually brushing the goat from the sounds.

“Before I start milking, I’m going to use the sanitized rags to wash off her udder and teats. I’ll also follow up with a quick scourgify charm just to make sure that the milk isn’t compromised. Now, I’m going to start milking. If you’d like to give it a try, let me know. We’ll have to work quickly so that she doesn’t step in the milk. If that happens, then it all goes to the pigs or the cats.”

As if on cue, a cat meowed and rubbed up against Harry’s legs as the milk pinged against the metal of the bucket. Midnight let out a throaty belch that had an overpowering odor of fermenting grass.

“Oh, Merlin’s pants! That stinks! Surely, you can extract the milk using magic,” Mei said. “And can’t you do something about the flies?”

Peter coughed, apparently overcome by the stench.

“Yes, we can magically milk the goats, but it isn’t good for them over the long term,” Besel said and Mei snorted and Midnight’s hooves danced around on the wooden platform. “I can either infuse the air with an essential oil scent that the flies don’t like or make a breeze move through here to move them along. Which do you prefer?”

“The breeze, please,” Mei said and Besel muttered the incantation. The breeze felt good and also helped move the goaty belches out of the pen.

“Okay, Gemma, sit here on this stool, wipe your hands with this towel, and grasp here. I’ll keep this teat going,” Besel said and Gemma pressed Peter’s hands onto Harry’s again. Harry waved across it and apologized again.

Harry felt the cat wind between his legs and Peter’s and when Peter flinched at the unexpected movement against his legs, Harry spelled “C-A-T” into his palm. Peter crouched down to pet the cat, pulling Harry down with him.

“That’s right. Whoops!” There was the sound of the metal bucket being dragged across the wood. “I’ve got it. That was close, phew! Okay, just try again, that’s fine.”

The cat mewed expectantly and hopped away from them.

As they stood up again, Peter drew a question mark on Harry’s hand - no doubt wondering what was going on. Harry mimicked the hand motion of milking and wondered if it was remotely close to the BSL sign, but Peter seemed to understand. Harry could smell the sweetish aroma of the milk as it hit the metal bucket mingled with the earthy odors of the goat. He and Peter were standing close enough to the wooden stand that their legs were pressed against it and he could feel the movement of the goat on the stand. Harry reached out and found the Midnight’s neck. He took Peter’s hand and placed it on the goat next to his hand. He could feel a rumbling in Midnight’s throat and guessed that she liked it as she pressed against their hands. She was warm and her coat coarse.

“That’s good, Harry and Peter. She likes it. Keep petting her,” Besel encouraged. “Oh, I think she’s running out of feed. Aminah, can you get another scoop of oats?”

Harry attempted to translate Besel’s praise for Peter, but his signing vocabulary was so limited that he ended up just saying, “yes, good,” and hoped that Peter understood.

“Okay, this goat is done and we’re going to get the next one on the stand,” Besel said. Harry heard
the wooden gate opening on the other side of the enclosure and wondered if it was Arig, but didn’t hear his crutches. The goats bleated loudly and it made Harry wonder if they recognized the person who’d just come in.

Harry cast the **Reveleo memento** charm, but his staff didn’t know the person. It described a tall, white-bearded wizard and Harry’s breath hitched in his lungs, **Dumbledore**?

“Oh, hi, Aberforth - perfect timing!” Besel greeted and Harry muttered to his staff to add this person to his staff. He breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn’t Dumbledore.

A gruff voice responded with a terse greeting to Besel.

“We’re just switching goats and we could use your help convincing Midnight that it is time to head back to the pen,” Besel said. “Friends, this is my neighbor, Aberforth Dumbledore - you all know his brother, Professor Dumbledore at Hogwarts.”

The students responded with greetings laced with the kind of surprise that Harry felt - **Dumbledore has a brother?**

“Yeah, yeah. That old tosser is my brother, what of it?” Aberforth replied. “Come’er Midnight, no messing around. Time to get back with your sisters. Stop trying to lick the fish girl.”

Mei shouted in protest. Harry wasn’t sure if it was for being called a fish girl or for being licked by the goat. **Probably both.**

The gate opened and it sounded like there was a bit of a tussle as Aberforth exchanged one goat for another and the new goat clamored onto the platform. Besel instructed Aminah on how to secure Stormy and invited Harry to try milking after Gemma and Peter had brushed her down.

Harry moved around Besel’s chair and she took his hand and guided it to Stormy’s back. She was softer than Midnight. He found the stool with his staff and sat down on it, sticking his collapsed staff into his pocket. He felt like he was really close to Stormy and her sharp hooves that he could hear digging into the wood of the platform, but tried to calm his breathing.

Besel handed him a warm, wet rag and instructed him to wash Stormy’s udder, which was heavy with milk, hot to the touch, and unexpectedly hairy. Besel had him feel her hands as she started milking Stormy. The milk tinged off the metal bucket with such force that it sprayed him in the face and he turned away. He was amazed at the way Besel’s hands moved - strong and sure and what she had described before now made a lot more sense. She guided his hand to a teat and he tried to mimic her motions. At first, the milk moved back up into the udder until he figured out how to squeeze off the teat with his thumb and then express the milk trapped in the teat with the rest of his fingers. There was a satisfying hiss as the stream of milk hit the side of the bucket, though it was a much smaller stream than what Besel was able to get. The next one was stronger and pretty soon he’d found a rhythm.

“That’s right, nice job, Harry!” Besel encouraged. “Do you want to try both?”

“Sure,” and pretty soon the milk was tinging off the side of the bucket with nearly the same intensity as Besel’s. Stormy was leaning into his shoulder, her hot flank pressed into his cheek.

“You might want to consider a future in farming, Harry,” Besel laughed as the cat rubbed against Harry’s leg.

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After washing the eggs that they were going to use for baking carefully one by one at the handpump in the yard, they all washed their hands with a big bar of handmade soap that had a strong peppermint aroma. Then they gathered around the farmhouse table as Besel walked them through the steps of filtering the milk and then pasteurizing it in a double boiler in the cauldron for fifteen minutes.

They scourgified the table and set to work gathering the supplies for making bread. Besel asked Harry to scoop a little more than two cups of flour into a large wooden bowl from a sack of flour contained in a barrel in the corner. Arig came over and held the lid of the barrel for Harry while he scooped out the flour.

Harry held the bowl against his torso with one arm and navigated back to the table with his staff. He felt the table to make sure there was room for the bowl before he set it down - he’d learned this lesson the hard way at Privet Drive.

“Great - now we just need some salt, baking soda, and oil and we can make our bread,” Besel said. “Yes, Gemma, please set those canisters on the table. Aminah, I think the oil is behind you on the shelf, in a jug. To your right a little, yes, that’s it. Mei, the measuring spoons are near you, can you bring them over here?”

“Arig, since you didn’t get to milk the goats or gather the eggs, would you like to mix together dry ingredients?” Besel asked. “Add a teaspoon of salt and a tablespoon of baking powder to the flour and stir it up.”

“Sure, I can do that, but I’m pants at cooking,” Arig said. “This salt is weird - big chunks.”

“Well, here’s a chance to get better at it. It’s kosher salt,” Besel explained. “Mei, how about you mix the wet ingredients in this bowl - 3 eggs, a cup and a half of goats milk, and 6 tablespoons of oil.”

It sounded like Mei demolished the first egg on the side of the bowl.

“Hmm. Try a lighter touch next time. I think we’ll have to compost that egg and rinse out the bowl at the pump. Here’s another bowl - anyone want to show Mei how to crack an egg while I take this to the compost?” Besel asked.

Harry was standing near Mei.

“I can show you, Mei,” Harry said. He felt around on the table for the basket of eggs until Mei grunted and shoved an egg into his hand. He found the side of the bowl that Besel had set down in front of Mei - it had a nice thin lip.

“You want to strike it once with just the right amount of force that it cracks open without creating a lot of shell bits. It takes some practice,” Harry explained and he hit the egg on the side of the bowl and eased open the two halves with one hand and let the yoke and white slide into the bowl.

“Bloody show-off,” Mei muttered.

“Nah, just years of making all sorts of eggs for breakfast every morning,” Harry deferred. “You get the hang of it. Now you try.”

Mei cracked the egg using a bit less force this time, but struggled a bit getting it to open. “Oops, I got shell in it again… not so bad this time, though.”

“The best way to get the shell out is with a big piece of shell - it cuts through the egg white more easily than a spoon or other instrument. Here, like this one,” he said, handing her a shell half that had
a nice edge on it. “You’ll have to get it though, I’m pants at getting shell out of eggs these days.”

Mei muttered as she chased the bit of shell around the bowl until she got it out. Her second one went more smoothly. She measured out the oil and the milk and stirred the mixture together.

Then Peter added the wet mix to the dry mix and stirred the two together in a squelching batter. Besel asked Gemma to pull a heavy cast-iron pan down from the shelf and they coated the pan with oil, eased the batter into the pan and set it in the oven to bake.

As they cleaned the dishes in a washing tub out in the yard, the aroma of the baking bread began to waft through the room. Harry was on drying duty and was using a soft, homespun linen towel to dry the dishes - he’d hand them to Gemma who ran them back to the kitchen to hang them up. Aminah was washing and Peter was rinsing.

It wasn’t too long after they’d cleaned up that Besel said that the bread was ready to eat. They gathered around the table with a tub of butter and a jar of jam, a fresh pot of tea, and enjoyed the fruits of their labors. Aberforth dropped by and sampled a piece with them, grunting in what seemed like satisfaction.
Harry was surprised that Tony hadn’t yet made an appearance, even during dinner. He knocked on Healer Jordan’s office door.

“Oh, hello Harry. You’ve arrived early. Is everything okay?” Healer Jordan asked as she opened the door and invited him in.

“Hi. Yeah. I just was wondering how Tony’s doing,” Harry said.

“He’s still recovering, but he’s doing better. I think he’ll spend another night here, though. Do you want to talk to him? Professor McGonagall and I aren’t quite ready to meet with you yet, so you have a little bit of time,” she said.

“I’d like that, thanks,” he said and she led him back to the room where he had recovered from his face plant… it seemed like ages ago, but it had been less than a week.

“I’ll come and get you when we’re ready, okay?”

“Sure, thanks,” Harry said and then swept his staff in front of him as he entered the room, “Hey, Tony?”

“Oh. Hi, Harry,” Tony said from a corner of the room. Harry walked closer, his staff’s tip tingling against something metal in his path. He tapped his staff twice to get a description of what was in front of him - a rolly stool.

“Oh, sorry, I left that stool in the middle of the room,” Tony said. “You could bring it over here, and then you’d have something to sit on.”

Harry bent over and rolled the stool in front of him a bit awkwardly as he was also trying to use his staff to find his way.

“That’s a good spot,” Tony said shifting a bit on the camp bed and Harry sat down and collapsed his staff.

“How’s it going?” Harry asked.

It was quiet for a bit. Harry wondered if Tony had shrugged. There was something familiar about all of this. Harry speculated that Tony was feeling weighed as he had earlier.

“Er. I’ve been better,” Tony said.

“Yeah, I bet,” Harry commiserated.

“Thanks for last night. Healer Jordan said that you and Mei helped me. I don’t remember any of it.”

“It sounded like you were in a lot of pain… so I guess it is good that you don’t remember it.”

“Well, I remember the pain. It’s better now. So that’s good. I haven’t been able to wear my arms today, though,” Tony said. “Healer Jordan gave me some potion to help with the pain, but it makes it really hard for me to use my magical arms… I guess they are connected - the use of my magical arms and the phantom pain. They told me I had to manage it carefully… but I didn’t think it would be so bad.”
“Mei told me about the potion,” Harry said.

“Yeah, Arig was going on about how brilliant it is. Figures he would think so,” Tony grumped. “I mean… it’s different for him, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, his leg’s got to work differently than my arms,” Tony said.

“How would it be different?” Harry asked.

Tony was quiet as if he were deliberating. Finally, he said, “Well, you know, since werewolf bites don’t ever really heal. He can’t just have a magic leg that connects to his nerves like my magical arms. That’s why he doesn’t have one yet, even though he’s been missing his leg for longer than I lost my arms.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that,” Harry said.

“Yeah, well, he told me, didn’t he?” Tony said. “I was a prat… drinking firewhiskey this weekend. I guess I should have stayed here. It would have been easier than going home. Less temptation. I just…” Tony trailed off.

“It was okay here this weekend,” Harry offered.

“Why didn’t you go home?” Tony asked.

Harry stilled, kicking himself for setting a trap like that.

“The Weasleys wanted to visit the Center and see everything and poke around London…” It wasn’t a lie, he rationalized. “There are a lot of them. The Weasleys…”

“Right,” Tony said, unconvinced. “You got some new clothes, though! They look like they actually fit you! Very nice.”

“Er, thanks?” Harry said, uncomfortably rubbing the fabric of his new trousers between his thumb and index finger.

“Harry?” Healer Jordan’s voice came from the doorway.

Harry was relieved for the excuse to leave, but then remembered what he was here for. He stood up slowly and shook out his staff. “Is it time?”

“Thanks for coming by, Harry,” Tony said.

“Yeah, feel better, mate,” Harry said and then turned, navigating to the door.

Healer Jordan guided Harry to the seat he had occupied before when he’d talked with Healer Jordan and Professor McGonagall and he felt his limbs grow heavy again… it seemed like a struggle to draw a breath. He wasn’t sure what they could be discussing and the last two meetings had been hard.

“Good evening, Mr. Potter,” Professor McGonagall greeted as he walked by.

“Oh, yes, hello, Professor McGonagall,” Harry said as he sat down.

“Are you alright, Harry?” Healer Jordan jumped right in. “Is something on your mind?”
“Er, yes and no,” Harry said, tucking his hands under his knees to keep them from trembling.

“Okay. Thanks for meeting with us again. We were hoping that you might have thought about our discussion last week about sharing some key memories with us… concerning your… er… the Dursleys,” Healer Jordan said.

“Oh, right. Um. I dunno. I’ve been thinking that… well, it wouldn’t really help anything,” Harry said, pulling his chin to his chest. His lungs felt as if they were wrapped in wire.

“I understand, Harry. It’s okay,” Healer Jordan said while Professor McGonagall made a slight hiss and he imagined that her lips were a tight, white line of grim disapproval. He tried to make himself smaller. “We are not here to pressure you, simply to check in.”

“How was your day today?” Healer Jordan asked.

“Er. It was fine,” Harry said, shrugging.

“Healer Geller said that you’re a natural at milking goats.”

“It was kinda cool,” he admitted. “And kinda gross.”

“Why on earth is he learning how to milk goats?” Professor McGonagall exclaimed. He could feel the wind as she whipped her hands in the air.

“It is just one aspect of our Practical Life curriculum,” Healer Jordan explained.

“How is that practical?”

“About as practical as transfiguring beetles into buttons,” Healer Jordan countered.

Harry had to hold back a giggle. It sounded like he’d hiccupsed.

“I dunno. It felt good to learn how to do something that useful, actually. Like, make our own food. I mean, I already know how to cook and everything, but to be able to work with the animals and be outside, even though it was smelly, muddy, and there were flies everywhere. I mean, no offense, Professor McGonagall. I also like learning how to change rats into teacups - and other things, but this was nice, too,” Harry finished quietly, realizing that he was digging himself in deeper.

Professor McGonagall grabbed her tea cup and stirred it vigorously, the spoon rattling against the china.

“Was there something else you needed me for?” Harry asked, edging forward hopefully. Maybe he could leave.

“Ah, yes, actually,” Healer Jordan said. “We’re going to bring in a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher to work with you. Given your history and new vulnerabilities, we believe that extra work in this area is prudent. You’ll continue to work with Ms. Midgeon on self-defense and building balance and strength with your peers, and then also work with Professor Lupin one-on-one. There might be times when other students join you as well. He will be working with other students in different subjects.”

“Professor Lupin is taking the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts in September,” Professor McGonagall added.

“Okay,” Harry said, unsure how he felt about this news. “When will these new classes start?”
“They’ll be added to your schedule next week. Professor Lupin has other commitments until then. You’ll start with him on Monday.” Healer Jordan explained.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He was feeling like his schedule was already pretty packed. He needed to go back to his room and work on his braille practice work that was due tomorrow.

Besel had asked Harry to bring a memory to the front of his consciousness as part of their mind-healing session on Wednesday. Harry had hoped that they’d be working with the herbs they had planted the week before, but the rain precluded that. It was too muddy and cold.

So as the rain drilled against the glass, Harry was sorting through his memories, trying to find one that he felt was safe enough to extract and examine. Besel had asked for something from his childhood, from before Hogwarts, before he knew he was a wizard. He thought about bringing forth one that involved his accidental magic… making his hair regrow after horrible haircuts, dodging Dudley and his gang and ending up on the roof of the school, the incredible shrinking sweater. He finally settled on vanishing the glass and speaking to the snake at the zoo. It was a mostly happy memory… he’d gotten ice cream.

He hesitated. Besel had recoiled the first time he’d told her about his parseltongue abilities, but she had recovered pretty quickly. He thought of Little Friend and breathed through the pang of absence.

“I have my memory… it is from the first time I knew I could talk to snakes, before I knew I was a wizard,” Harry said. He was looking forward to that trip to the zoo again…

“Oh, hold the memory steady and I’ll help you bring it forth to add to the pensieve,” Besel instructed, placing her wand on his temple. It was a mark of how much he trusted her that he did not flinch.

He felt the tug as the slippery worm of the memory slid from his mind and resisted the urge to touch the place on his forehead where it had exited.

There was a plop as if a gelatinous mass had fallen into a glass of water.

“Here, Harry, come closer to the pensieve,” Besel instructed, her levitating chair making an airy noise as she maneuvered closer to him and grasped his hand, guiding it to the stone rim of the bowl. He ran his fingers over the surface finding the incised lines of what he guessed must be runes.

“Careful, rubbing the runes can enact the magic.”

Harry stopped trying to discern what they meant, “Sorry.”

“No worries. I know it is how you see… Okay, we’re going to enter this memory of yours by leaning forward as if you’re putting your face into water. I’ll go first, but I’ll keep a hold of your hand, so you’ll want to join me as soon as I go in,” she said, leaning toward the stone bowl.

Harry felt her arm moving as she was sucked into the bowl and her hand twist around in his as her angle changed. He leaned forward putting his hands together as if he were diving. It was similar to going through the painting on the HMS Eden to travel to Fernando Po. As soon as his face went through the gelatinous liquid, he realized that he could see something. His breath caught in his throat.

At first it was just foggy, but fog with shapes behind it, shadows and faint colors and then his feet hit a concrete surface and the wisps of fog disappeared and he could see in vivid detail - absolutely everything around him. It was breathtaking. Mind numbing. His chest constricted.
He gasped. He was standing in the driveway outside of Privet Drive, the walkway was lined with Albus Agapanthus with the brilliant white round heads composed of miniature lilies. Harry noticed that he was still holding Besel’s hand and he dropped it quickly and then looked at her. But he couldn’t see her. All that was there was the walkway and the pavement beyond the yard. Grass like emerald shards lined the walkway.

“Where’d you go?”

He knew she was there because he’d been holding her hand. He reached out for it again and she grasped his hand.

“I can’t see you,” he said, then he held his own hand in front of his face. “Ugh. I can’t see myself, either.”

“That’s because I wasn’t there in the original memory. Your brain is looking at an image that was already stored in your visual cortex, so it can ‘see’ what was in the memory, but it has no imprint of me or yourself as you are now. But I’m here as are you. You can sense me as you do outside the memory,” she said.

“This is pretty weird,” Harry admitted. “So you can see me? I’m not invisible to you? Is it okay if I hold onto your chair, so that I know where you are?”

“Yes,” she said, guiding his hand to the back. “So, where are we right now?”

“We’re outside my Aunt and Uncle’s house,” Harry said as the front door opened and Vernon lurched out of it, belly first. He was yelling to Petunia to fetch his sunglasses. Dudley and Piers were on his heels, shoving each other jovially.

Ten-year-old Harry followed at a safe distance in an oversized faded T-shirt and threadbare trousers that made his thin frame look even more stick-like than it was. His thick black hair stuck out at odd angles, his glasses were held together in the center with cellotape, his trainers were wide on his thin feet and the soles were cracked.

He looks skittish.

They piled into the car. Vernon groused at Petunia for taking so long. Harry and Besel sat in the back, with the three boys, but it wasn’t cramped as Harry expected it to be, and Besel’s chair seemed to blend in with the rest of the car upholstery from what Harry could tell. He felt the faux leather seats, marveling at their texture and breathed in the new-car smell that always made him feel a little ill. He hadn’t noticed all the tactile details in the memories that Tom Riddle had shared with him in the diary - probably because he was so focused on the events he was witnessing, but now he was more aware of his other senses, having depended on them so entirely for the last few weeks.

Harry realized that he was focusing on the tactile details because he was completely overwhelmed by all the visual information he was getting. Even though this was a memory and all this information was stored in his brain already - the amount of detail was dizzying. No wonder he hadn’t paid much attention to the texture of his trousers or his cousin’s clammy odor before - he had been bombarded by images. Outside the car, the landscape zipped by and he was hungrily trying to see everything. He was panting at the exertion.

“Harry, take a deep breath,” Besel counseled. “Draw in through your nose, hold for a count of two, let it out through your mouth slowly.”

Harry tried, but let out his breath in a ragged rush.
“Again, and close your eyes,” she said.

“But I don’t want to miss anything!” Harry protested.

“It’s all here in your memory, Harry, you’re not going to miss anything,” Besel said.

He closed his eyes and sat back against the seat and breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth until his heart stopped pounding.

He opened his eyes and watched Piers and Dudley who had tired of their banter and started pestering memory Harry. Little Harry had pressed himself as close to the car door as possible to avoid contact with the two other boys anyway and now he made himself smaller and stared out the window.

Vernon was in the front seat bleating to Petunia in his usual litany of complaints, of which Harry figured prominently. It was different hearing the tirade of gripes with Besel next to him. He heard it differently, as if he weren’t Harry… as if he hadn’t heard this nearly his entire life. He felt shame creep up his neck and he started fidgeting. This was a happy memory - he’d gotten to go to the zoo, he’d been given more ice cream that day than he had in his living memory before that moment, he had the best kind of revenge (if fleeting) on his cousin, and learned he could talk to snakes.

“What’s wrong, Harry?” Besel asked.

“Maybe this wasn’t such a great memory to choose after all. Can we leave?”

“Sure, it’s your call. To leave a memory before it has come to the end, you have to have to intentionality to leave it, more than when it naturally comes to the end. Of course, we can leave it when you’re ready,” Besel said. “Just focus on returning to my office.”

“Can we fast forward away from this part and hop to when we’re at the zoo? I don’t know why I started it here, anyway,” Harry said, hoping that their conversation was obscuring Vernon’s particularly vehement whinging about the motorcycle in front of them, but then the conversation turned when Little Harry said, “I had a dream about a motorcycle - it was flying.” Harry forgot all about fast forwarding and could only watch in horror as Uncle Vernon turned around and blasted Harry with his onion breath so hard that big Harry could feel the spittal landing on his face.

“MOTORCYCLES DON’T FLY!” he screamed as the swerving car punctuated his anger.

Harry felt Besel flinched next to him, but Dudley and Piers snickered.

“I know they don’t fly. It was only a dream,” said little Harry and if it were possible, seemed to shrink even smaller.

Big Harry hugged the smaller version of himself, settling his arm around his shoulders, shielding him from the animosity in the car. He could feel his thin arms and bony shoulders under his T-shirt and the shaky breaths his younger self was taking. He wanted to protect him.

When they got to the zoo and as the Dursleys were debating about leaving little Harry in the car, big Harry kept one arm around his shoulder and the other hand resting on the back of Besel’s chair. He leaned over to Besel and said, “the memory gets better from here,” hoping to reassure her.

But as they were getting ice cream at the entrance, instead of the delight at the lemon pop that he remembered, here was biting truth. The Dursleys had intended to walk away without getting him anything and would have, except that the kindly woman serving the ice cream had noticed him. It was so much more painful to witness the events unfold in front of him in brilliant, unapologetic detail. What hurt the most was the repugnance on Aunt Petunia’s face - the way she looked at Little
Harry as if he were something stuck to her shoe. He was just a little kid.

*Why does she hate me so much?*

Harry stood between himself and Aunt Petunia as if he could shield himself from her - he who was invisible and absolutely powerless to change these events. This little kid didn’t deserve to be treated this way.

“Let’s leave now. It’s just going to get worse. They really yell at me when I let the Python out,” Harry said. “I got shoved in my cupboard with no meals after that.”

Harry and Besel were suddenly back in her office, the vibrant colors of the zoo, the robin’s-egg-shell blue sky, the verdant greenery of the shrubs gone in half a second. Rain pelted the window and he breathed in the antiseptic air of the hospital wing of the Center.

“I’ll share my memories with Healer Jordan and Professor McGonagall. This one and others,” he stated grimly.
It seemed as though there wasn’t enough air in the room. Harry’s knees felt like noodles and that needles were piercing every fold in his body. There was an acrid odor, too. He realized it was him. His pits stung.

“Harry, remember the breathing exercises. In through your nose, out through your mouth. That’s right. Careful, the pensieve is on your left. Here, the camp bed is two feet to your right. That’s right. Steady now. I’m going to take off your shoes and put some blankets under your legs to raise them up. Next, I’m going to levitate a blanket over you and cover you up,” Besel informed Harry. “Accio pepper-up potion.”

“I thought pepper-up was for colds,” Harry managed to utter.

“Yes, it is brilliant for colds - but it also useful for shock, which I think you’re experiencing right now,” she said.


“That’s right, but not all wounds bleed. Emotional trauma can cause shock. Please take the potion and if and when you’re feeling up to it, we can talk about what just happened,” Besel said, pressing the cool, glass vial into his hand.

Harry propped himself up on his elbow and sniffed at the vial, feeling the mint vapors opening up his nasal passages, tendrils tickling his brain. He pressed the thin glass to his lips and felt the cool liquid coat his tongue. He imagined it was a vibrant green as it coursed down his throat, snaking through his sinuses, and blowing out his ears and nose. He tried, but couldn’t hold back a cough.

Besel encouraged him to do the meditative breathing exercises that he’d been practicing with her as well as Ms. Midgeon after his coughing fit was over and the steam didn’t seem to be exiting his ears as forcibly.

“I’ll guide you through the body scan, okay?” Besel said.

“Alright,” Harry said.

She started by asking him to squeeze and release his toes one by one first on his left foot, then his right foot, and gradually worked up his body. By the time she’d verbally reached his knees, his heart didn’t feel like a gerbil trying to escape his ribs. He had never felt as safe before with an adult as he did with Besel. Just that thought alone made his breathing steady.

Her soothing voice was asking him to tense and release the backs of his knees when he lost track of it. He slipped in and out of awareness as he was trying to figure out how to activate the muscles behind his knees that had somehow become peppermint flavored marshmallows melting in hot cocoa.

Someone snoring woke him up. Then he realized that he was the one snoring and that his chin was resting in a puddle of drool. He wiped his face with a corner of the pillowcase and shifted carefully to his back, trying to remember why he was in a camp bed in the hospital room in the center again.

The memory of the scenery rushing by as he, the Dursleys, and Piers drove to the zoo came back
into focus suddenly - but it wasn’t that. It wasn’t all the houses, people, and cars with so much color, shadow, and texture and being able to see for such long distances in between all the buildings, even for milliseconds or the expanse of the sky up above, cut as it was by bisecting wires of telephone lines. It was the blow of having sight for the brief forty or so minutes that he had spent in his memory and then returning to instant sightlessness that was jarring. It was the journey back through the Pensieve that garroting his windpipe.

He remembered Besel’s breathing exercises and tried to use them, aware that he was getting light headed again. As he acclimated to being in the Center, he realized that he was starting to associate the pain of the loss of his sight with the presence of pepper-up potions, the texture of overwashed linens, and the sound of sterile metal instruments striking glass vials. He doubted he’d ever associate it with anything else.

“You’re waking up,” Besel said from the side of the camp bed accompanied by the sound of paper sliding against paper and a book closing.

“Erp! I didn’t know you were there!” Harry said, touching his hand to his face and realizing that he wasn’t wearing his glasses.

“I never left,” she explained. “You slept for about a half-hour. You haven’t missed dinner yet.”

His stomach rumbled as if it was just reminded that it was hungry.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay, I guess,” he said, wiping his face again, worried that he still had spital on his chin, then struggling to sit up.

“You don’t have to get up if you don’t want to,” Besel said.

“No, it’s okay. I want to sit up,” he said finally managing to throw off the blankets and extract his legs. He leaned his elbows on his knees.

“I’m not sure I can do the memory thing again… it was really hard to come back…” Harry said slowly.

“No worries, Harry. We’ll only do what you’re comfortable doing. If you don’t want to do it, you don’t have to do it,” Besel explained.

His shoulders sagged in relief.

“Do you want to talk about the memory?” Besel asked.

“Not really,” Harry confessed. “Is that okay?”

“Absolutely,” Besel said without hesitation. “You mentioned that you wanted to share it with Healer Jordan and Professor McGonagall. Is that still the case?”

“Yes, I just don’t want to go in it again. I’ll also give them other memories if they want them. I just don’t want to watch them hurting him again,” Harry said, then realized he was talking about himself in the third person and corrected, “… hurting … me.”

“That is a big revelation, Harry. That is big work,” Besel acknowledged.

He shrugged in response.
“I’ll give this memory to Healer Jordan,” Besel said. “We can get the others later - when you’re feeling more rested.”

He nodded.

Thursday after dinner, Harry and Gemma took their brooms to the O&M room to practice flying. Gemma had confided to Harry during dinner when they were conversing via notebook and anagnóstis that she was nervous being able to fly since her balance was connected to the damage to her inner ear. Harry was thinking about that as they’d walked through the gym to the park. He tugged on her arm just as they stepped out onto the pavement outside of the gym to get her attention.

“If your hearing loss affects your balance, how come you feel really steady when you’re guiding me? You never trip or seem off balance,” he said.

She made the writing sign on his palm, so he summoned the notebook, pencil, and anagnóstis from his staff to give to her and waited patiently while she wrote.

“I’ve been practicing and strengthening my core for a while - it was really bad at first, but I am better. But that’s with both feet on the ground. I’m nervous about being able to balance on a little stick up in the air,” she explained.

“We’ll just stick close to the ground, okay? It is bound to be soft from all the rain yesterday. We’ll take it really easy,” Harry assured.

Gemma tapped “okay” on his hand and the “thank you” sign as well, which meant she touched his chin with three of her fingers. He stored the writing implements in his staff and took her arm again.

The grass at the park was marshy from the heavy rain the day before, so they mounted their brooms right away to avoid soaking their trainers. Harry put the bell charm that he learned from Godric on Gemma’s broom so he’d be able to tell where she was. Gemma’s broom was making gentle bell tinglings that were pretty loud when she was right next to him, but not too persistent because she wasn’t moving much.

He set his staff to vibrate and put it inside his broom.

He turned to Gemma, “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” she tapped on his arm and he realized that once they started flying, he wouldn’t be able to communicate with her. He was suddenly alarmed and reached out for her, finding her shoulder.

“Wait,” he said. “How are we going to talk once we’re flying?”

She took his hand and wrote, "B-E-L-L-S-?

“But you can’t hear them,” he said.

She tapped his chest and he took it to mean, “but you can.”

So, he took her left hand and muttered Campanis Minima and did the same to her right hand - they made different bell sounds from the one he’d cast on her broom.

“Okay, shake your right hand… twice means ‘yes’ okay? And shake your left hand once for no, okay? They sound different to me. Shake your hand a lot to get my attention. Yes, that’s right. Okay,
at least we have something. I’ll just try to stay in front of you so that you can see when I’m trying to get your attention, okay? Or I’ll cast a lumos charm with my wand.”

She shook her right hand twice and the chiming bells sounded. Her left hand had more of a clanging bell sound and her broom sounded more like jingle bells. It was a bit cacophonous when it was all going at once, but it was better to have some sense of communication.

“Okay, are you ready now?” he asked, smiling in her direction.

Her “YES” was emphatic with the bells and he grinned (reminded of Tinkerbell talking to Peter Pan) then leaned forward gently to start flying low to the ground - his feet just ghosting over the lawn. He was relieved that his staff’s vibrations were easy to detect over the bell noises from Gemma’s broom.

They made a gentle lap around the park. He could hear her struggling a bit to keep the broom steady and at a constant speed - the bells were really good at communicating those differences. Harry kept a little ahead of Gemma and would turn to ask her if she was okay with a hand signal, knowing that she probably couldn’t read the papers while they were flying. She responded with her “yes” bells. Her flying got more steady the longer they did it and he stopped when they had gone around once and asked if she was ready to go a little higher.

“Yes!” was her enthusiastic reply, so they went up a couple of feet higher and did the same circuit. He could tell that she was getting the hang of the balancing and smiled back at her. She jingled her “yes” bells at him.

They were just about to reach their starting point again - Harry could tell by the vibrations that they were getting close to the gym, when he was jolted by a force that hit him and went through him at the same time - it made a booming noise that expanded through his body, pushing out both his ears painfully. He struggled to stay on his madly vibrating broom and heard Gemma’s bells explode in discordance. He wrangled his broom back under control and slowed and dropped closer to the ground, trying to near Gemma’s, which seemed to be bucking. He could hear her gasping for breath and reached out for her, while his feet sought the ground. His feet sank into the grass at the same time that he made contact with her flailing arm and grasped it. He pulled her to him and she jumped into his arms as her broom shot off. He managed to hold onto his.

“Accio Gemma’s broom!” he shouted and then quickly put his broom in the crook of his arm, his left arm still holding her trembling form against his body, and stuck his right hand out enough to receive her broom, which smacked against his palm as they tumbled to the soggy lawn.

The cold, wet grass soaked him from the back of his head to his ankles. Gemma scrambled up and helped him stand up.

“What was that?” Harry shouted to no one in particular, while Gemma was drawing big question marks on his hand.

“Did you feel that?” he asked her.

“YES!” she tapped furiously, the bells sounding mad as they chimed.

“Let’s go back to the Center,” Harry said as he attempted to remove his staff from his broom with trembling fingers. Finally, he was able to get it out and put his broom back into his staff. He shook out the staff and took Gemma’s offered arm and they ran to the Gym door - but it wouldn’t open for them. It was locked. Gemma tugged on it first, then pounded on the door - the weird combination of noises with the bells and the pounding made Harry’s head ring. He muttered a “Finite campanis minima” to make all the bell noises stop, though Gemma was none the wiser.
“This door has never been locked before,” Harry stated. “What’s going on?”

He started pacing back and forth in front of the door as Gemma continued to pound on it. He figured it was frustration as much as fear that was making her so insistent.

No one came.

Finally, she relented and joined him in pacing, offering her arm as sighted guide. They walked back and forth a few times together.

It occurred to Harry that he could ask his staff for help as Healer Jordan had counseled him, but he was loath to do that - this wasn’t really an emergency. They were just temporarily locked out - that blast of magic, though - and that’s all it could be - was worrisome.

He stopped and faced Gemma, “let’s go to the telephone. We can call the Center from there and find out what is going on.”

She tapped “okay” on his arm and started walking toward the telephone box. She stopped and tapped his knuckles with her broom.

“Do you want me to put it in my staff?” he asked.

“Yes, please” she signed protactily and he stuffed the broom into his staff and they set off again.

As they were walking along the hedgerow that bordered the park, someone came splashing through the puddles on the pavement toward them. Harry gripped Gemma’s arm a little tighter, cocking his head trying to get cues for why someone was running toward them. She slowed a little and guided Harry over to the side of the pavement a bit and he held his staff parallel to his body so that he wouldn’t trip them up and the person ran by them, making a noise in greeting that sounded something like, “evening!”


Harry muttered “Finite scribunt loqui” as Gemma snatched the paper from the air by his mouth. He cursed. Now they could only sign protactily. Something was going on - the muggle repelling charms weren’t working. They were closed off from the Egress and in some muggle village in the middle of who-knows-where.

“We could be anywhere in the United Kingdom!”

He took in deep breaths as Gemma led him around the corner and toward the phone box. A car splashed through the wet street on their left and then another one. It seemed this was a pretty busy street which made Harry wonder what happened when the muggle repelling charms were working - where did all these people go?

Did they all think that they were terribly forgetful?

He could hear kids playing at the park now on the other side of the hedgerow. The previously deserted village had seemingly come alive.

Gemma stopped and indicated that she was going to turn to her left, then waited for another car to pass. She guided him a bit circuitously across the street - he imagined that the rutted road had deep puddles of muddy water.
She stopped and he heard her prying open the door - the moisture must have made it stick a bit. He reached out and helped her pull it open and they both went inside.

Harry hoped that they were enough out of range of view that none of the muggles would notice that he was *Accio*’ing muggle money from his staff. He silently made a wish that the restriction of underage magic that had been lifted from him so that he could use his staff’s magic was still in place. The coins and paper money zinged into his palm and he handed them to Gemma who counted out the ones they needed. She pressed the extra back into his hand and he stuffed them in his pocket. He also *Accio*d the scroll from the Center, hoping that they had printed a muggle phone number on it. He also handed it to Gemma, figuring that she could find it a lot more quickly than he could with his *anagnóstis*.

After a bit, she shook the scroll and he turned his face toward her and asked slowly, knowing that reading lips was really hard, “do they have a muggle phone number?”

She wrote a question mark on his hand and he tried again, and then she signed, “yes,” moving toward the phone. He tried to move out of her way in the cramped space while she handed him the receiver, slotted in the coins, and dialed the number. The phone rang and rang and finally, someone picked up, “You have reached the Perenelle Flamel Adaptation Center. We are currently closed. Your call is important to us. Please leave us a message and we’ll return your call as soon as we are able.”

It was a recording, a beep sounded and Harry said, “Hi, Healer Jordan? This is Harry Potter and Gemma Boot. Something happened. Um. And we’re stuck in the village in the O&M room - you know the one with the park and the gym. We can’t get into the gy…” but the beep sounded again cutting him off.

“Merlin’s pants!” Harry exclaimed. “It cut me off.” He tried to hang up the phone, but kept sliding the earpiece over the buttons, instead of finding the cradle. Finally, Gemma guided his hand up a little higher and he found it.

She took his hand and wrote a question mark. He summoned the writing instruments out of his staff and wrote out as clearly as he could on the floppy notebook while standing up about what had happened.

She tapped his hand for sighted guide, and he put the pencil and *anagnóstis* in his pocket, but hung onto the notebook, and then took her hand while she left the phone box. She seemed to be in a hurry and he understood when he smelled someone smoking a cigarette outside the phone box and the tapping of an impatient foot. He stumbled a bit as the tip of his staff caught on the lip of the phone box as they were leaving. He was awkwardly trying to hold both his staff and the notebook in one arm. Gemma slid the notebook out from the crook in his arm and nudged his hand toward her elbow, then led him away from the telephone box.

Harry cast the *Tempus* charm under his breath, knowing that it would only sound in his *aftí*. It was 8:16 pm. Then it occurred to him to do a location reading with his staff and he squeezed it. They were standing outside of the White Hart pub on Crabtree Road in Old Ellerby. It was a pretty quiet pub as far as Harry could tell, but maybe they could go in and have a pop while they figured out what they were doing.

He ran his hand down Gemma’s arm to her hand and turned it palm up, then signed “write” on it. She handed him the notebook and he tried to write legibly on it, “let’s go sit in the pub and figure out what we’re doing. I have muggle money. Get pop.”

She tapped, “okay” on his arm and guided him to the pub.
His staff found the step that Gemma paused in front of and they made their way inside. Gemma paused and Harry guessed it was because it was dark inside and her eyes needed to adjust. He squeezed his staff to get a description of the pub. There were only a few people in it - a man behind the bar cleaning glasses Harry guessed by the squeaking noise that he could hear over a scratchy jukebox record that was playing an old Beatles tune and a couple of solitary men seated at the bar. The pub was thick with smoke, grease, and stale sweat.

She led them to the bar and then jiggled his hand on her arm. He guessed that she wanted him to talk.

“Hi? Excuse me?” Harry said in the direction of the man squeaking the glasses.

“Where’re your folks? Kinda late for you two to be out and you really shouldn’t be in here. Underage and all,” the man probed. “Children need to be with an adult.”

“Uh, yeah. We were playing at the park and our mum said to come here to wait when we were ready to go. We just rang her from the phone box. She said we could get a pop while we waited,” Harry lied.

“Well, I guess if it is just for a bit. What can I get for you two?” he asked.

“Just a couple of ginger beers, please.” He dug out the muggle money from his pocket and handed it to Gemma.

The man set two glasses on the bar near them and said, “that’ll be two quid.”

Harry could hear Gemma rustling through the money. He put the notebook on the bar and wrote “2 £.”

The man snorted… “what? you’re blind and she’s deaf … and daft as well?”

“She’s not daft, just not used to the mu- money,” Harry hastily covered up his gaff.

“Well, I’ll be. Never mind. It’s on me. You two find a seat and I’ll bring the drinks over to you,” the man said, his tone changing dramatically.

“It’s okay, we can pay for it,” Harry said, feeling the heat rising in his neck. He didn’t want charity or pity.

“Nah, it’s alright. It takes some guts to go out and about like you two are. My little nephew, he’s nearly three now, he’s having a hard time; can’t walk yet; weak muscles. They are trying to figure out why he's struggling so much, but maybe he’ll be getting along just like you two in a bit. Independent. Gives me hope,” the man said, his voice a bit thick with emotion.

“Thank you, that’s very kind,” Harry said, swallowing down his pride. “I’m sure your nephew will… get along.”

Gemma was drawing a question mark on his hand. Harry heard the man grab the glasses off the bar and Gemma was pressing the money back into his hand. He stuffed it in his pocket, then wrote, “free. Find table.”

Gemma led Harry through a short maze of pub tables and chairs and put Harry’s hand on the back of a thick pub chair - it’s surface sticky with a patina of grease and smoke. The barman brought the drinks over to the table and then slapped Harry on the back amiably as he was tapping his staff to make it shrink.
“You kids enjoy,” he said as he walked away.

“We will, thanks!” Harry said, settling into his chair. The table felt even thicker with layered grot - he held his fingers so that they just whispered over the surface until he located his glass. He felt around the lip of it to see if there was a straw sticking out of it, remembering how he stuck himself in the nose with the one at the Thai restaurant he’d taken Dr. Granger and Hermione to last Sunday.

Gemma had settled next to Harry rather than across from him so that they could write easily on the notebook. Their backs were to the bar and Harry felt that he could use his anagnóstis here - that it could be mistaken for a pencil as long as no one was looking too closely, it would just look like they were writing in a notebook. He hoped nobody would think too much about how a blind kid was reading what a deaf kid was writing.

He heard Gemma slide her drink closer to her and take a tentative sip. She made an aspirated hiccup. It was an unexpected noise from her - without voice, just the sound of the air moving through her diaphragm.

She slid the notebook back to him and he read her notes: “This is tingly! Wow! Why did he give us the drinks? What if no one comes to get us?”

Harry started to write back, but Gemma stopped him and moved his hands farther down the page.

“He said we reminded him of his nephew who can’t walk yet and that he hopes that he’ll be getting along as well as we are some day. He was nice…” he paused here thinking about the daft remark and tried to let it go. “I don’t know. I guess we can ask if there is a place where we can stay for the night? Or we could try to catch the Knight Bus - does it operate outside of London? I wonder how far from London Old Ellerby is?” Harry had reached the end of the page and had to turn to the next page to finish writing all of this.

Gemma took the notebook and was studying it while slurping noisily on her straw. She had reached the bottom of the glass and was trying to suck up the last drops.

_She likes it._

Gemma guided his hand holding the anagnóstis to a word he’d written - his own voice sounded in his aftí, but it was unrecognizable as a word. He had to read the whole sentence again to figure out what he’d been trying to write. He laughed as he wrote it out again, trying to be more careful this time. Gemma made the laughing sign across his back.

The pub door opened and a few more people came in - mostly men with gravelly voices who greeted the barman absentmindedly and then paused for a moment, then continued on to sit at the bar with their mates. Harry guessed that the pause was when they noticed the two strange kids sipping ginger beers.

He was savoring his pop. It wasn’t something he got very often. The Dursleys never let him have it at home and guarded it fiercely, so he was never able to sneak one. And of course, the wixen world didn’t do fizzy drinks.

The door opened again and this time the voice that spoke was familiar.

“Oh, Harry and Gemma! I’m so glad I found you!”
“Thank goodness you’re both okay!” Besel said. There was something in her voice that made Harry sit up straighter and pay closer attention. She sounded really relieved and worried. As she neared them in her levitating chair, Harry turned toward her wondering if her chair was like his staff in that it looked like a muggle electric wheelchair to the barman.

“We couldn’t get back into the Center - we were…” Harry trailed off as he started to tell her the story, then realized that it probably wasn’t wise to say what happened while they were still in the pub.

“We rang… did you get our message… mum?” Harry added, trying to keep up the story he’d told the barman.

“Er… How about we head back and you tell me all about it,” Besel said, catching on.

“Good idea,” Harry said standing up and shaking out his staff. He grabbed his glass to gulp down the last swallows and heard Gemma grab hers. She offered Harry her arm and guided him to the bar where they left their glasses.

“Thanks so much for letting us stay here while we waited and for the ginger beers,” Harry said.

“Cheers!” replied the barman from a way down the bar. He was muttering something that sounded suspiciously like “… and ye poor lame mum…” that Harry didn’t want to hear the end of.

Once they were outside, they didn’t talk right away. There were a lot of people out and about in the Old Ellerby, even at that late hour. Probably flooding back in after being randomly sent away with the Muggle Repelling charms… Harry guessed with a twinge of guilt.

Harry and Gemma followed behind Besel as she crossed the street to the pavement that led to the park. Harry knew that Gemma was probably wondering what was going on even more than he was. He didn’t hear the *Scribunt loqui* papers fluttering by Besel’s mouth and guessed that she’d also noticed the number of muggles out and about in the village and *finite’d* the charm.

Harry could tell from the sounds that Besel’s chair was a lot easier to maneuver over the curbs and uneven stones in the pavement than Mei’s had been. He wondered how high up she could go in her chair.

*Did it use similar magic to brooms? Why do wixen insist on flying around on brooms when there are much more comfortable forms of transportation?*

He’d ask Hermione when he wrote her next.

He noticed that Besel seemed to be muttering things as they walked back to the gym - he wondered what spells she was casting and why.

Gemma’s pace was faster than normal and Harry stumbled a few times trying to keep up and finding uneven stones with his toes.

*This was easier when we were running! Has Besel communicated something visually that I missed?*

After walking along the hedgerow and not encountering anyone on the pavement, they turned into the park, on the path that led to the gym. Harry noticed that the cars had stopped passing, too. It was
becoming the deserted village with which he was more familiar. A bright light exploded in Harry’s eyes and he yelled and grabbed his head.

“Oh, sorry, Harry - that was my Patronus. I should have remembered to warn you. I sent Healer Jordan a message,” Besel explained. “The muggle repelling charms are working again,” Besel said, the papers fluttering by her mouth as well. “No one can see us here, but the Egress is closed. We have to go through St. Mungo’s. I’m sorry, Gemma. Not until we’re safe. We just need to get back to the Center. I’ve notified Healer Jordan.”

“So I can cast the Scribut loqui charm again?” Harry asked and did as soon as she said: “Yes, do it.” Gemma made the happy sign on his back when the papers started fluttering again.

“Have you apparated before?” Besel asked.

“Apparating… isn’t that how Tony lost his arms?” Harry gulped.

“Um, yes,” Besel confirmed. “What happened to him was very rare, but we don’t have time to talk about it. This is the fastest way and safest way. We’re in an emergency situation - and I need you to trust that I’m going to keep you safe and unharmed, okay?”

Harry nodded slowly and could feel a shiver travel through Gemma.

“Thank you. We’ll hold hands in a circle and twist to the left. Harry, you should collapse your staff during apparition and store it,” Besel advised.

Gemma gripped Harry’s hand hard and he held Besel’s hand with his other - and they were twisting and being painfully pushed on all sides and Harry had a sickening memory of watching sausage meat being encased in skins at the local butcher’s. Harry staggered against Besel and her chair when his feet slammed into the ground and collided heads with Gemma. He grabbed his head and then turned away quickly, dropping to his knees on a gravelly pavement as quickly as he could as he spewed his ginger ale and remnants of dinner. He could hear Gemma doing the same and felt the splatter his hands.

“Oh, dear. Apparition sometimes has that effect,” Besel commiserated. “Especially if it is your first time.”

“I’ve gotta start traveling with a bucket,” Harry moaned.

Besel quickly muttered, “Evanesco vomitus” and the peppermint aroma helped overtake the sick. Harry sat back on his heels, flicked out his wand from his wrist holster and used the Aguamenti charm to rinse out his mouth and clean his face. Gemma pulled on his arm and he guessed that she wanted some, too. He cast a small stream of water, thinking of the drinking fountain at Primary - she held his arm while she drank and then splashed water on her face.

“Oh, we’ve still got to get back into the Center,” Besel hurried them along.

“Where are we?” Harry asked.

“We’ve apparated to St. Mungo’s and we’ll be able to travel through a warded Egress in St. Mungo’s to the Center. I’ll let Healer Jordan know that we’re here and she’ll be able to let us through the wards and the Egress,” Besel said. “Harry, close your eyes.”

And then Besel muttered, “Expecto patronum” and bright light burst against Harry’s eyelids.

He was thankful for the warning. She started talking, “I’ve got them, they are safe, and we’re going
to enter St. Mungo’s and head to the Egress. Will you be able to let us in?”

Gemma tapped Harry’s hand for sighted guide and they started following the sound of Besel’s chair across the pavement.

Harry had his staff out and was listening to the way the tip sounded on this deserted London street and he was fairly sure that they were walking along a building that had a stone or brick wall that then changed to glass - just from the sound of it. Besel stopped and turned and Gemma edged up close to Besel so that Harry’s staff touched the back of her chair.

“We’re here to go to the Perenelle Flamel Adaptation Center,” Besel said, her voice sounding a bit echoey. “Come along.”

Harry felt her moving forward and even though Gemma was moving forward he was certain they were going to walk into a glass wall. He hung back a bit and felt around with the tip of his staff, but didn’t find anything, so moved forward and felt the tug of an Egress and understood. There had been a glass wall there - it had just opened for them.

The sounds and smells of St. Mungo’s closed around him and he felt a bit weak-kneed as the memories of his last visit there washed over him. Gemma patted his hand. He wondered if she had spent time here, too, and if she had a similar feeling.

There were wixen about them - but it wasn’t as busy as when he had come with Madam Pomfrey.

Harry heard someone gasp from across the room and then bumbling footsteps approached and a quiet voice addressed him, “Harry?”

Harry stopped making Gemma stop because he didn’t let go of her. He could hear Besel continuing a way in front of them, but then she paused and turned around. She made an impatient sound.

“Yes?” Harry cocked his head to the side trying to hear better. The voice was familiar.

“I heard you were hurt. I didn’t think it was so bad, though,” he said.

“Neville?” Harry said.

“Yeah, it’s me, Neville. Merlin’s beard, Harry. You can’t see me, can you?” Neville said as he moved a few steps closer.

“Er, no,” Harry said. “What are you doing here? Are you okay?”

“What - you mean like never? Like you’re bli-? Are you here for a cure? Oh, drat. I’m dithering doxie. Gran is always saying that I need to hold my tongue. Sorry,” Neville said and Harry could tell from the sound of his voice that he was hanging his head.

“Nah, it’s okay, Neville. I mean, yeah, no cure,” Harry shrugged trying to shed the uncomfortable feeling. “Are you hurt? Is that why you’re here?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m fine. Just visiting…” Neville stumbled. “What are those papers?”

“Oh, right. This is my friend, Gemma Boot,” he turned to Gemma and said, “Gemma, this is Neville Longbottom - he’s in Gryffindor, too. My year. And this is Healer Geller,” Harry said, making a motion toward Besel’s levitating chair sounds.

“It’s nice to meet you both,” Neville said. “Harry, I’m really sorry that you got hurt. But Ginny’s
okay, right? Was there really a giant serpent down there?"

“Yeah, Ginny’s okay,” Harry said slowly.

“Harry, we really need to go,” Besel said, coming closer. “And this isn’t a discussion to be having in such a public place.”

“Oh, sorry. I’ve got to go, too, my Gram’s waiting. Are you staying here, Harry? Can I come back and visit you?”

“No, I’m in training, at the Perenelle Flamel Adaptation Center - we’re going there now,” Harry said. “But, I guess they are connected.”

“Oh, maybe I could visit you? Is there anything you need? I mean, I dunno what I can do, but maybe I can help out somehow…” Neville said nervously.

“Um, you don’t have to do anything, but it’d be nice to hang out, play some exploding snap or something. Just send me an owl. At the Center,” Harry said.

“Okay, I will. Maybe this weekend?” Neville said.

“Sure, yeah,” Harry said. “Good to see you, Neville.”

“Er, right. Yeah. See you, Harry,” Neville said and rushed off. Harry could hear him talking to a stern-voiced witch on the other side of the waiting room.

“Harry, Gemma, we’ve really got to go. Now,” Besel said in a tight voice that surprised Harry. Gemma jumped and her pace was hurried again as she followed Besel.

They turned down a corridor as a group of healers in animated conversation about how to best concoct a dreamless sleep potion passed them and then stopped. Other footsteps echoed in the corridor. Harry thought that they might be at the Egress. As the noisy conversation of the healers faded, he heard clipped footsteps and heavy swishing robes. Someone was following them. Harry was certain. Someone with overpowering perfume that filled the corridor- sickeningly sweet like the greenhouse when the Devil’s Snare was blooming. Harry gagged. Gemma squeezed his hand and drew a question mark.


Gemma tapped “yes,” on his hand.

“Excuse me, could I have a moment of your time?” a cheery voice called out. To them, Harry supposed. Gemma didn’t turn and Besel was muttering something under her breath. Harry was curious, but also felt on edge. He didn’t turn. Something wasn’t quite right. Besel was trying to get the Egress to open before the person reached them. Harry kept his staff so that it was touching the back of her chair.

When Gemma touched his hand, he realized that he was gripping her arm rather tightly and he tried to relax his hold.

The witch called out again, “Oh, yoo hoo! Harry Potter!”

He stiffened. It wasn’t any voice that he recognized and he felt a deep foreboding that made his gut feel heavy. This was not good.
“I just want a word,” she was getting much closer.

Then Besel lurched forward and Gemma and Harry stumbled after her and the odors and sounds of St. Mungo’s were replaced by the more calmingly familiar sounds and smells of the Center. Harry breathed. The Egress was closed - and it seemed the person who had pursued them was cut off.

“Medusa’s toenails,” Besel muttered. “How is it that she happened to be there?”

“What’s going on?” Harry asked and he had a feeling that Gemma was signing the same thing rather emphatically.

“Not now. We’re still not safe,” Besel said.

“But we’re in the Center,” Harry protested.

“Yes, but the Center was threatened tonight - that’s why you were locked out. The Egress was closed,” Besel explained in a hurry as she moved across the reception area. “We’ll go to Healer Jordan’s office. I need to tell her…”

“What? Threatened? Who’d threaten the Center?” Harry questioned - he could feel Gemma signing as he hung onto her arm, no doubt asking the same questions.

“Besel, Harry, Gemma! Thank Morgana. Come in here,” Healer Jordan said from the door behind the reception desk.

They passed through the doorway and Harry was welcomed by the familiar aromas of Healer Jordan’s office - dominated by an oddly comforting mixture of pepper-up potion and Darjeeling.

“Healer Jordan, there was a reporter from the Daily Prophet in the entry at St. Mungo’s - it was almost like she was waiting for us. She took a special interest in Harry,” Besel said in a rush.

Harry felt his throat closing.

*Why would a reporter take a special interest in me?*

“Thank you, Besel. That is truly unfortunate. I’ll contact the Daily Prophet immediately and remind them of the Protection and Privacy Statutes that apply to all of the residents as well as those at St. Mungo’s,” Healer Jordan said as soon as had she closed the door and muttered spells at the entrance. “They’ll be facing hefty fines from the Ministry if they put even a fragment of a sentence in the paper about any of our residents.”

She paced a bit and then turned back to ask them, “So, how are you both?”

“We’re fine. Nothing happened to us except we felt a weird blast of magic that nearly knocked us off our brooms. But then we couldn’t get into Gym to come back to the Center,” Harry answered as Gemma had tapped on his chest to indicate that he should speak first. She tapped “yes,” on his arm as she read his *Scribunt loqui* notes. “We went to the phone box and called the Center and left a message. Did you get it?”

“Yes, that’s how Besel knew where to find you,” Healer Jordan said. “You did well. Kept your wits about you and did everything exactly right. That would have been a situation to use the emergency feature of your staff as well, Harry. But I imagine it didn’t seem like an emergency to you.”

“No, I just thought we were locked out. I didn’t know the Egress was closed,” Harry admitted.
Gemma was signing.

“The Center was threatened by a wizard who wanted access to one of our residents - neither of you. Our defenses held and the wizard did not gain access to the Center nor the residents, but our wards were triggered and all Egresses were closed. You two were the only ones who were outside of the protections,” Healer Jordan explained. “Fortunately, no harm was done and we can put this behind us. I imagine you’re tired and want to get to bed. It is late. Your roommates were worried about you - they’ll want to know that you’re okay.”

“Okay, thank you. Good night. Thank you for coming to get us, Healer Geller,” Harry said. He could feel Gemma signing next to him.

He signed “thank you,” again just because he could and they left the office.

Harry wanted to ask Gemma all about the reporter that followed them at St. Mungo’s, but didn’t want to hang out in the corridor using the notebook to communicate - so decided to hold his questions until they were back in their dorm.

He could tell by the rapid pulse thrumming through Gemma’s thin arm that she was agitated still - she had been trembling slightly since they were hit by that blast of magic on their brooms. He had expected her to calm down once they were back in the Center and as they neared their room he wondered if he should have brought her disturbance to Healer Jordan’s attention - maybe she needed a calming draft or something.

When they entered the room, Mei, Tony, Arig, and Aminah greeted them and gathered around them - except for Mei. She stayed in her tank and the group gradually migrated in her direction so that they were clustered around the tank exchanging stories of what had happened.

There was just a lot of talking over each other until Mei shouted, “For Morgana’s distaff, one at a time! Gemma can’t read all the papers when they are flying around like someone stepped on a nest of doxies!”

“So you were locked out of the Center when the Egresses closed and Healer Geller brought you back and nothing happened except you got to have some muggle drinks in a muggle pub,” Mei confirmed. “While here we were subject to a Tsunami when the Egress to my tank was closed. Luckily I was here and not out at sea. But I did get pushed out of my tank and flung against the wall like a bear swotting a salmon. Thankfully, Healer Jordan is dream at healing charms.”

“Yeah, but we were still completely flooded out. We just got everything dried out,” Arig said.

“Okay, Aminah - why don’t you tell them what happened here?” Mei invited.

“Oh, well. Yeah. My father tried to breach the wards to get to me, but they held,” Aminah said softly.

Gemma grabbed Aminah in an embrace - Harry knew this because he was still holding on to Gemma’s arm and he was pulled into it a bit awkwardly. He let go.

“I don’t know how he found me. I think that’s the scariest piece. My mum only let me come here because the protections and secrecy are supposed to be so rigid - magical protections and Ministry regulations that keep us safe and our privacy shielded,” Aminah hiccuped and Harry could hear Gemma rubbing circles on her back.

“There was a reporter at St. Mungo’s when we came through to return here. Healer Geller said that it was like she’d been tipped off about us,” Harry said.
“Was it that horrid Skeeter woman?” Tony asked.

“I don’t know who she was,” Harry said. “She reeked of perfume, though.”

“You know, she’s that blonde curly-haired witch who wears really bright colors…” Tony explained. “That’s right. It was her. Gah! I hate her. Wrote about me, didn’t she? Vile, lying witch.”

Harry guessed that Gemma had confirmed her identity.

“This is not good. What if she finds out about me and the Center’s work with Wolfbane potion?” Arig moaned. “People will be showing up here with pitchforks and torches.” He started pacing - his crutches making their rhythmic noise. He was breathing in gasps.

“Healer Jordan said that she was going to call the Prophet and remind them of some Act - that they can’t talk about residents - for our safety,” Harry said.

“Yeah, I bet she’s dying to get her talons into you, Harry,” Mei said. “Boy-Who-Lived and all that.”
At breakfast the next morning, Harry was sitting next to Aminah as he worked on eating his tomatoes and toast - he was finally getting the hang of managing the slippery beasts! He had a niggling question.

“Aminah, how did you know that it was your father who tried to get into the school?” Harry asked.

“Healer Jordan told me - we have an agreement. They’ve warded the Center against him specifically as well as his magic - so anyone who is *Imperius’d* by him wouldn’t be able to get in either. He made an attempt and it activated the wards. I’m sorry you were shut out of the Center. That must have been scary,” she said.

“I guess - Gemma was more scared than I was. I hope she’s doing okay,” Harry said, a bit distracted as he kept an ear out for her arrival at breakfast.

“So, she slept in the hospital wing last night? After you took her back to Healer Jordan?” Aminah asked.

“Yeah, she was pretty shook up. I didn’t really realize how badly until we were all talking about it last night at Mei’s tank and she got so trembly. It kind of scared me. Sorry that I just took off,” Harry said.

“It’s okay. It’s good you were looking out for her. She’s been so kind to me - even though she’s so much younger - a first year - and not even, she didn’t even get her first year. When I was her age I was terrified of the older students. And then throw in there that she can’t even talk to us very easily… I would have not even tried…” she paused and took in a deep breath. “Your *anagnóstis* thing is so cool. I got a reader this weekend when I went to Diagon Alley with my mum and it’s really handy and all, but it doesn’t do half the things your *anagnóstis* does. Weren’t you going to take it to … er what’s her name in the workshop?""

“Oh, yeah, Figora. I did, actually. Hey, that’s funny. I never thought about how I got it back. It just showed up in my staff again. Wow. I was really out of it,” Harry muttered.

“There’s been a lot going on…” Aminah said.

“Yeah, that’s for sure,” Harry agreed. “I’ll ask Figora what she thought about making copies.”

“Cool. I know Fitz was also interested. Even Godric, for that matter,” Aminah said.

Harry wanted to ask Aminah more about why her father was trying to get to her, but didn’t know how to bring it up. He figured he’d just have to wait for her to want to tell the story.

Harry rolled the scroll he’d received that morning from Neville between his fingers in his pocket. He needed to visit the owlery and send his response. Neville had a lot of questions, which he had tried his best to answer. He was going to come to visit him tomorrow and Harry was glad to have something to look forward to for the weekend. It made him think about how, in some ways, he was lucky to have been blinded by the Basilisk. If he hadn’t, he’d be stuck at Privet Drive all summer, cut off from his friends at Hogwarts and having to sneak meals and do the chores well enough that no one noticed he was there. As hard as it was to not be able to see, it was at least better than that.

He shook his head in disbelief at himself.
If Ron could hear me, “Lucky to have been blinded…”

“Mei, any sign of Gemma?” Harry asked.

“Nope, she’s still not here, Potter,” Mei responded.

“You know. Everyone else calls me Harry. You could, too,” Harry said. “We’re roommates after all.”

“Yeah, you’re right, Harry,” Mei conceded.

“Okay, well, I’m going to check in on her before class starts,” Harry said as he pushed his chair back and stood up, shaking out his staff.

Listening to the satisfying sound of his silver tip bouncing off the walls of the corridor, Harry was also thinking about how much safer he felt at the Center than he did at either Hogwarts or Privet Drive - even with the breach and getting locked out. Last night he had fallen asleep wondering why he didn’t remember the *Alohomora* charm when they were faced with the locked door. They hadn’t even tried it.

*I wasn’t that worried about being locked out. I knew it was going to be okay.*

He knew now that *Alohomora* wouldn’t have even gotten him in, but why didn’t he even try it?

*Because I wasn’t scared. I should have been scared. Gemma was scared.*

He knocked on Healer Jordan’s office door and was greeted by her.

“Hi, Healer Jordan. I was hoping to see Gemma,” Harry explained.

“Yes, she was hoping you’d come by. She wasn’t up to taking breakfast in the dining hall, but she’s doing much better this morning. I’m so glad you thought to bring her back last night,” Healer Jordan said. “I’ll take you to her.”

Harry took Healer Jordan’s offered arm and followed her back to the familiar camp beds. It seemed they’d all be taking turns in the makeshift beds.

*Will they transform the camp bed into a tank for Mei when she needs it?*

Healer Jordan placed his hand on the back of a chair at the table where Gemma was eating her breakfast. Harry *Accio’d* the notebook, pencil, and *anagnóstis* from his staff and set them down on the table so they could talk. Gemma jumped up and gave him a hug, waving a greeting across his back as she embraced him. He squeezed her small frame and waved across her back in response.

“Hiya, Gemma. How are you feeling today?” Harry asked when she let him go and could see the papers fluttering by his lips. He felt for the back of his chair again and sat down and held up the notebook to see if she wanted to use it to respond. She took it from his hands and he waited while the pencil scratched against the paper.

“I’m feeling better. I slept last night - no dreams or anything. Can you get the pencil sharpener out - this pencil is getting dull. How about you? Weren’t you scared?” Gemma’s voice was chipper and it made Harry smile as he listened to her.

“Good. I’m glad you slept. I did, too. I wasn’t really afraid… until that reporter witch was following us and Besel seemed so worried. That kind of worried me. I should have been more alarmed, I guess.
I just thought we got locked out accidentally. I didn’t think that someone was trying to break into the Center,” Harry said as he Accio’d the sharpener out of his staff and handed it to Gemma along with the notebook.

She got up and went to a bin (he presumed) where he could hear her sharpening the pencil. She wrote again and handed him the notebook.

“I think the scariest thing was hearing that Aminah’s father got so close to finding her. After what he did to her… and trying to get her again. Do you know if they’ve sent him to prison? He should be locked up,” Gemma’s voice sounded tremulous.

“What did he do to her? Sorry. I guess I shouldn’t ask. She’s said that she’s not ready to tell me yet,” Harry said, sitting on his hands and lowering his chin to his sternum. He was feeling lucky again. At least what the Dursleys do to me isn’t really abuse. It isn’t right, but it could be worse.

Gemma put a finger on his chin, surprising him into lifting his face toward her.

“Sorry,” he signed and sat up straighter.

She grabbed the notebook from in front of him.

“What are you sorry about? You look really sad,” she wrote quickly.

“I was just thinking about Aminah being hurt by her own father. That’s all I know. I dunno - just the thought makes me sad,” he shrugged.

It seemed like she’d finished eating.

She tapped three times on his shoulder, “I understand.”

“I need to send a note with Hedwig. Are you going to go to classes today? Do you want to go to the owlery with me?” he asked.

“Yes,” she tapped and he heard her standing up.

He managed a small smile. He liked the normal-ness of a trip to visit Hedwig with Gemma. A new normal.

Even though Harry left self-defense feeling a bit sore and drained, he had the warm feeling in the back of his throat that he got after a good Quidditch match. They had been practicing casting shield charms and while he’d been knocked off his feet more than a few times, he’d been able to cast the shield charm with both his staff and his wand by visualizing a bubble of protection surrounding him.

“Remember to think of it as a transparent, invisible protection, Harry,” Ms. Midgeon had advised.

“Oh, drat. Is mine rainbow colored?” Harry asked feeling his ears get hot.

“Yes, like an oil slick,” she chuckled. “It’s okay - just try again. Though you never know when a rainbow *Protego* charm will come in handy. I’d keep that one up your sleeve.”

It took a while, but he finally was able to cast an invisible shield charm. He could hear it when it was in place or rather the absence of the noises that it cut off as well as feel the zing of magic that made the hair on his arms and back of his neck stand on end.
“Hey, you did it! Harry! It’s invisible!” Arig shouted.

“Aw, I like the rainbow ones… they are so pretty,” Martha said, clearly peeking from under her blindfold. “Like giant soap bubbles.”

Tony, Aminah, Fitz, Martha, and Arig were in the class with him (Gemma, Peter, Adam, and Shannon were working with another instructor on casting it nonverbally) and they all left feeling a little more confident in their abilities. Harry was surprised that Adam needed to work on his shield charm nonverbally, but Adam quietly explained before they’d split the class that the tremors that made him invisible also made his wand work unstable - that’s why he was at the training. Arig’s challenge was balance and managing crutches and his wand. Tony could cast the charm without problem, but he was working on finessing the placement. It took him a while to place the protection in a way that didn’t leave him exposed.

Aminah’s were opaque - like pavement according to Tony. By the end of class, she, too, was able to cast an invisible shield around herself, to a resounding cheer.

Fitz was able to sustain a strong and invisible shield charm pretty early on in the class. He admitted that it was one he’d been working on at home - not only for himself, but for his husband and their children. He told Ms. Midgeon that her instruction made the difference and he was finally able to cast it easily.

Martha could cast the charm just fine without the blindfold, but blindfolded she couldn’t get a shield that would block a feather, let alone a falling classmate. She kept working on it and Ms. Midgeon told her that not everyone got it in the first class. It took practice and that likely the fact that she didn’t have to cast it blind was an impediment to casting it while blindfolded.

Even though the room was padded and there were cushioning charms, Harry still ended up getting bruised on other people’s elbows and knees when he fell against them or they fell against him. It was a very lively and bouncy class.

Ms. Midgeon had also taught them some basic healing charms at the end and in the dressing room while he was changing, Harry felt his body for bruises and then touched his wand against the bruises that he could reach and said, “Episkey” and felt the area of the bruise warm then cool. The bruises were still a bit sore, but not as tender to the touch as before. He had a feeling that he’d be using the healing charms a lot and mentioned it to Fitz, who replied, “Yeah, it kinda comes with the territory.”

Since Harry had received Neville’s request to visit Harry at the Center before he’d heard from Ron about the weekend (Errol the owl had arrived after dinner on Friday night sounding as if he might expire right then and there), he had to send a quick note to Ron explaining that he had plans on Saturday, but could maybe come for a visit on Sunday if someone was willing to come to pick him up (he was very insistent that he wasn’t going to floo there).

Hermione had written that while she and her parents were busy this weekend, she was hoping to come to visit during the week to use the library during the day while Harry was in classes and eat dinner with him and hang out with him for a bit in the evening. She had said that Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday would work and he just had to pick the day. He wrote back that he thought that Wednesday might be a good way to make the week go by more quickly.

Friday night, Harry and Gemma were sitting up in the window seat by her area of the Montmorency
room passing the notebook between themselves as they worked on their respective school work - Harry on his braille (he was puzzling through an uncontracted version of *Fox in Socks*) and Gemma on signs related to herbology.

“In your mind-healing sessions with Healer Geller, do you go into memories?” Harry asked Gemma.

When she had tapped “yes,” on his arm, he went on to ask, “when you pull up a memory from before you got sick, can you hear and speak?”

She tapped “yes,” and then “no,” and her pencil starting scratching across the spiral-bound notebook as she elaborated.

Harry had his left hand at the beginning of the row of raised dots while he ran the fingers of his right hand over the first word in the sentence over and over again: ⠅⠝⠕⠭.

“K-N-O-X?” Harry muttered to himself. “What does that mean?” He used his *anagnóstis* to check the sentence, worried that he had mistaken the word, but it read ‘Knox on fox in socks in box’ in the voice that reminded him of old reruns on T.V. - something American - like the Dad from *Leave it to Beaver.* He remembered reading this book when he was learning how to read (the first time) - it had been one of Dudley’s, but he couldn’t remember what Knox meant.

Gemma tapped his hand with the notebook and he took it to read what she’d written.

“I said ‘yes’ and ‘no’ because I can hear what everyone is saying in the memory and that is amazing - not just the voices - but all the sounds - the birds in the trees, the planes going overhead, the music - but I can’t hear Besel when she travels with me and the ‘now’ version of myself doesn’t have a voice, but my memory-self speaks so easily. It actually makes it harder… to see and hear what I lost so vividly; to have the contrast right there. The old me and the new scarred me. I’m more aware of how I feel left out and cut off from everyone. So much more alone,” Gemma said.

Harry found it hard to swallow as he read it. It was so much like what he’d experienced. He put down the notebook and twisted so that he could ( albeit a bit awkwardly) put his arm around Gemma’s shoulders and pull her close. She hugged him back - and patted him on his back, telling him that it was okay.

They settled back into their work companionably and he started thinking about how he had tried to hug the 10-year-old version of himself in the memory. Would that he could have actually comforted him - protected him. He had never really realized how much he thirsted for touch before he came to the Center.

He had noticed at Hogwarts how Hermione was a hugger and how Ron and sometimes Dean, Seamus and others would wrestle him or throw an arm around him as they joked or ran around the castle… it had taken him a while to get used to it; at first he would flinch when they did that, expecting a blow instead of a hug. He did get used to it though, and now that he couldn’t see, touching was so much more important than it had been before.

Gemma and Peter’s waves across his hands or his back were as welcoming or more so than waves or smiles he’d received from his friends at Hogwarts. It reminded him of the first meal he had at Hogwarts - when the table exploded with plates of food and he could eat whatever he wanted.

Seeing himself shrinking away from any human contact in the Pensieve because they only kind of touching he could expect from the Dursleys was hurtful - pushing him away or tormenting him - it made him really sad. He remembered the photo from the album that Hermione had found in his vault of his parents holding him. He wanted to look at it again.
He Accio’d the album and the digitus from his staff. Gemma wrote a question mark on the back of his hand.

“It’s a photo album of my parents and me,” he said.

He opened up the album and turned past the pages he had already looked at with Hermione. Gemma looked over his shoulder as he was turning the pages and sometimes slowed his hand so that she could look more closely. He was pretty sure he was on a page he hadn’t looked at yet - the shapes of the photos were organized differently. He ran the digitus over the first image, then carefully started feeling it. Gemma was pressed against his side and her fingers ghosted over his as she reached out to feel the image, too.

His brows were drawn together as he tried to figure out what was going on in it. As he ran his fingers over the objects, they enlarged so that the detail was more apparent. He could feel a lot of furniture - bookcases (the titles of the books jumped out in big braille labels as his fingers ran over them), soft throws over the back of a shabby sofa that a cat had mauled on the arms, teacups on side tables, a fireplace with lots of pictures on the mantel, and then he found the people in the photo. They were sleeping on the floor near the fire (Harry could feel the magic of protective wards over the fire) - there were children’s books scattered around them - the images from the covers of the books jumping up to make shapes under his fingertips - a cow jumping over a moon.

It was a lanky man with a mess of hair that stuck out in all directions and glasses askew on his face with a warm toddler wearing footy pajamas sprawled across his chest that was rising, falling, and rumbling with unheard snores. The man had a hand on the baby’s back, protective even as he slept. Harry even felt a tendril of drool that had escaped the baby’s mouth and was puddling on his father’s neck. He wiped his hand on his trousers. Underneath the caption read, “James and Harry.”

Gemma directed his fingers to one of the books and a strange creature wearing socks with tufted ears and a pointy nose strode across the cover and then he realized that the braille was the same he’d been struggling with moments before, “Oh, wow - Fox in Socks! My dad was reading it to me.” Goose pimples rose on his arms.
Gemma pushed Harry’s hand to the next photo on the page and he ran the *digitus* over it with his other hand following closely behind to capture the figures blooming from the photograph. Gemma’s arm snuck around his shoulders and now she was pulling him against her. She was trembling.

“What is it, Gemma?” Harry asked. She pushed his hand back to the image, the tremor in her hand more apparent.

Three figures in this one - one in a loose nappy who kept wiggling out of the grasp of the two and running in and out of the frame. It was clear the two were trying to create a more muggle-style traditional family portrait, but the miniature figure kept gleefully bolting whenever he got a chance.

Harry laughed as the game of chasing and catching kept going in different iterations until he was feeling the figure of his mom as she was getting up from the sofa to chase after little Harry once again and noticed that she did it in a really awkward way, grasping the back of the sofa, pushing her hips up first and leading with her belly and rubbing it as if it ached. He felt her torso and it was distended and large and when he ran his fingers over it, something inside her belly moved - it jolted him and he took his hand away quickly. He tentatively touched it again as if he didn’t quite believe what he had discovered.

His dad had scooped up little Harry and the three… the *four* of them… hugged with Harry hanging in delight between James and Lily. They sat on the couch and a clearly worn out little Harry laid across Lily’s belly hugging it, his mouth moving as if he were chattering.

“I had a sister or a brother?” Harry muttered. He felt an ache blossom in his chest as though he needed to cry but the pain was so hot that all the tears had left his body in a vapor.

Gemma was rubbing a big sorry circle on his back, over and over again.

“Why hasn’t anyone ever told me?” he said numbly.


“Yeah,” he breathed. He felt so tired. He ended the 3-D version of the image and closed the book and stored everything back in his staff feeling strangely mechanical and organized, and scooted off the window ledge.

Gemma frantically grabbed his hand, her index finger pushed so hard into his chest that he was sure he’d have an index-finger-sized bruise. “*YOU*” space “*G-O-I-N-G D-A-R-K A-G-A-I-N*?”

“What?” he asked. “Oh, well, I don’t know. I’m just so tired. I just want to go to bed… I don’t think so, Gemma… I’m sad… I’m really sad… And mad, too… And I don’t know… I’m just sick of being me… Why didn’t I just die with them? Why didn’t they let me die with them?” The question was ripped out of him, tearing his throat as it left his body and he dropped to the floor, curled in ball by her bed, feeling numb. Gemma curled her body over his and cried silently - the tears he wasn’t able to shed.

**Fratrem**
After a while, she stopped shaking and she was rubbing a sorry circle on his back and then began to spell out words. It took him awhile to realize it. Slowly his breathing steadied and he started to focus on what she was writing. She seemed to be saying the same phrases over and over… it was starting to etch fissures in his back.


He uncurled and took deep shuddering breaths. All those years shut up in his cupboard. He’d been so good at locking away the pain. He hated feeling so much. It was so much easier when the feelings were tamped down and buried.

Now that the shock was wearing off, he was aware that his other roommates were being very quiet. He recoiled and then remembered that he wasn’t the only one to have embarrassing outbursts of uncontrolled emotion. Maybe they were just giving him and Gemma some space - maybe they weren’t judging him. He took in another deep breath and lifted his chin in Gemma’s direction.

“What do you mean, ‘beyond the veil’?” he asked slowly.

She made the writing sign on his hand. It took effort, but he sat up and leaned against his bed and summoned the writing tools out of his staff.

He rolled the hem of his T-shirt between his thumb and index finger as he listened to the pencil scratch across the paper - the soft cotton fabric curling and unfurling soothingly.

Gemma nudged his hand with her notebook, “You know, the veil of death - my Gran passed through it. She’s on the other side now. I still dream of her a lot and wake up and it was like I was visiting with her. She’s right there. Not far from me. Still loving me. Still part of me. Close by. When I was sick, my mom said that I was delirious - but I swear - Gran was with me the whole time. There were times when I wanted to pass through the veil and be with her, but she said it wasn’t my time yet. I had things to do on this side. It was hard coming back. But I’m glad I did. I would have never met you if I had crossed over then.”

He nodded in acknowledgment, remembering the Mirror of Erised and his family … it was like they were just on the other side of that glass. And they seemed so happy to see him. Like the family in his album… so happy together.

“I’m glad you didn’t cross over, Gemma,” Harry said, the words feeling leaden. He searched for her hand, finding it, and squeezing it.

“You two okay over there?” Mei said from the end of Gemma’s area.

“Yeah, we’re okay, Mei,” Harry said.

“No one is shutting down and disappearing under their covers for a few days?” Mei asked.

“I don’t think so…” Harry answered, letting out a deep breath. Gemma wrote a question mark on his hand. Mei was too far away for Gemma to be able to read her papers.

Harry repeated what Mei had asked for Gemma as he listened to Mei’s wheels move back to her part of the room.

“What time are you going home tomorrow?” Harry asked Gemma.
“Mum’s coming to get me early because we have a wedding to go to,” Gemma wrote. “Her cousin’s daughter, I think. I’m kind of nervous. It is the biggest family event I’ll have been to since I got sick.”

“Will anyone else there sign or will they all have the *Scribunt loqui* charm?” Harry asked.

“Some will use the charm, but most won’t. My mum will pester them, though, and that’s almost worse. I mean it’s okay if they don’t - it’s too hard to follow what people are saying when a lot of people are talking. And I bet it’ll all be boring stuff anyway. And a lot of people don’t talk to us because my dad’s a squib. Mum’s really close to this cousin - that’s why she got invited. Most of the time the family kind of ignores us… like my mum died instead of got married,” Gemma wrote as she scooted closer to Harry and pulled his arm around her so that he could read what she’d already written while she wrote more.

“I’m glad Terry will be there. He was going to go on a camping trip with some friends, but decided to move the trip to during the week so that he could spend some time with me. Stewart is going to be there. We’re cousins.”

“Stewart?” Harry asked, then remembered. “The one who reminds you of Ron?”

“Yeah, Mum says he’s coming. She’s asked me to give him another chance. I’m going to try. I’m not sure. What he said to me last time really hurt. I’m worried about seeing him again. About what he might say,” she said and leaned against Harry more, so that he shifted and put his arm around her. He could tell that she was running her fingers over the scars on her face. He brought his right hand up, followed it to her face as she traced the scars.

“Did he say something about your scars?” Harry asked.

Gemma nodded against his hand.

She wrote again, “It’s silly, really, to care what I look like. But I think some people are scared to get to know me because of them.”

“Well, maybe they aren’t worth knowing,” Harry tried to console, but he knew it didn’t really take away the pain of being rejected. He hated the attention he got because of his scar - but it was different. He really liked it when he was transfigured as Haripreet with no scar.

“Could you transfigure your face to look like what it used to look like?” Harry asked. “Healer Jordan did that for me when I went to Diagon Alley. I mean, she changed what I looked like so that people wouldn’t recognize me. She smoothed over my scar.”

He ran his fingers over his scar, which made it tingle, so he stopped.

“Yeah, my mum can do that for me. She might do it for the wedding. But sometimes that just makes it harder. It’s like lying about who I really am,” Gemma said.

“People do it all the time, though, right?” Harry said. “If it makes the wedding a little easier for you, why is that so bad?”

Gemma shrugged against him.

“Well, I hope that you have a fun time at the wedding and eat lots of cake,” Harry said.

He’d never been to a wedding before, but when the Dursleys went to weddings, Dudley always talked about the cake. Harry was usually stuck with Mrs. Figg looking at her albums of cat photos. He smiled. Hanging out with Mrs. Figg was usually better than being locked in his cupboard, so he
had to work hard at not appearing to like it too much, least the Dursleys cotton on and deny him that outing as well. She was always kind to him, even if her house did reek of cat pee.

Gemma yawned and rubbed her eyes.

“Yeah, let’s go to bed. It’s late,” Harry said.

Gemma nodded and handed him the notebook and pencil. He put everything away and staggered to his feet. Gemma hugged him, waved goodbye against his back, as he shook out his staff to head to the toilet to get ready for bed. Neville had said he’d show up around 10 am - so Harry could sleep in tomorrow. He was looking forward to that.

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“Hiya, Neville,” Harry greeted when Neville’s ungainly steps sounded in the reception area as he entered through the Egress from St. Mungo’s.

“Hiya, Harry,” Neville answered - his voice both eager and nervous.

“Were you visiting at St. Mungo’s again?” Harry asked.

“Uh, yeah. We visit a lot,” Neville said. “Me and Gram.”

“Who… ?” Harry paused, was it rude to ask?

“Sorry, I shouldn’t ask.”

“No, it’s okay. I visit me mum and dad,” Neville said.

“Oh. Wow. Are they okay?” Harry said.

“Well, no. Not really,” Neville said. “They’ve been in there since I was a baby.”

“Oh, Merlin. I’m sorry, Neville. I didn’t know,” Harry said, swinging his staff and stepping closer to his friend. “Are they getting better?”

“No, and Gran says that they won’t ever get better. They don’t really know - their bodies are there, but their minds are pretty much gone. So that’s… But yeah,” Neville said. “Oh, I brought you something.”

There was a pause and Harry cocked his head to the side, trying to hear better and at the same time, burning with so many questions that he wanted to ask Neville - who was essentially as much of an orphan as he was.

All this time and he didn’t know. He had never asked why Neville lived with his Gram. Then he realized that Neville must be holding something out to him. He felt heat rising in his neck. “Oh, are you … ?” he held out his hand and found something papery.

“Oh, sorry, Harry. I forgot you can’t see… Here,” Neville said at the same time and his sweaty hands grasped Harry’s and turned it up so that he could place a small package in it.

Harry put his staff in the crook of his arm so that he could use both hands to examine the little package. He felt around the edges. He cocked his head to the other side as he puzzled it out.

“What is it, Neville?” Harry asked.

“Oh, it’s a package of Chocolate Frogs,” Neville said, sounding embarrassed. “You like them, right?”
“Wow, thank you! Yes, I do like them,” Harry said. “You’ll have to help me open it so that the frog doesn’t get away.”

“Oh, I didn’t think of that. Sorry, Harry,” Neville said. “Oh, and the card… I’m an idiot.”

“Hey, no. It’s great. Thank you. And have a special tool that turns images into forms that I can feel, so I’ll be able to look at the card, too,” Harry said, trying to soothe his friend. “I’ll show you when we open it. Okay?”

“Sure… so, what is this place?” Neville asked as Harry tucked the card into his staff. “It’s so beautiful and peaceful… like being underwater.”

“Oh, well, yeah, everyone says so. It’s the Perenelle Flamel Adaptation Center - I guess it is a place to learn how to get used to… well, being blind for me, but for other people, it is getting used to other big changes in their lives,” Harry explained.

“Oh, so… there’s really no magic that can make you see again?” Neville asked.

“No, I’m really just lucky to be alive. They say I just have to get used to being blind. Adapt. And all that. So I’m trying,” Harry said, though he felt a flash of anger burn through his chest - a momentary feeling of the injustice of it. He took a deep breath trying to tamp it down. It wasn’t Neville’s fault. “What do you want to do today?”

“I dunno… you said we could play exploding snap,” Neville said.

“Sure, here. I’ll show you around and then we can maybe go to the courtyard and play there. Do you want to see this place? It is kind of cool. There are lots of Egresses to neat places - not just St. Mungo’s. I learned how to milk goats and there’s a park where we can fly brooms, and a beach - last weekend all the Weasley’s visited and we went swimming in the Caribbean,” Harry said and he turned and started walking toward the door to the corridor.

“You learned how to milk goats?” Neville asked, his steps clattering behind Harry’s as he rushed to keep up.

“Yeah, and hey, there’s a garden, too. Do you want to see it?” Harry asked.

“Sure,” Neville said. “So you can still fly a broom?”

“Yeah, I thought it might be hard, but it was actually even better than before,” Harry admitted, slowing as he used his staff to find the doorknob and open the door to the corridor. He held the door until he felt Neville push against it and then walked through.

“Maybe you could help me…?” Neville laughed.

“Did you bring a broom?” Harry asked.

“No, I don’t have a broom. Gran thinks I’m going to smash my skull and end up in a bed next to my parents,” Neville said glumly.

“Well, maybe we could go to the park and you could practice on mine for a bit,” Harry said.

“Wow, the light in here is really weird. All shifting and moving. Like being underwater, but different from the reception area. Darker. It’s pretty eerie,” Neville said.

“Yeah, that’s what Hermione said. It is just nice rest from the bright light in the library and the dining
hall for me,” Harry said.


“I can see really bright light, but it just hurts my eyes, so I close them when I’m someplace bright,” Harry explained. They were quiet for a bit while Harry thought about how he should make a leaflet to hand out so that he wouldn’t have to keep answering the same questions over and over again.

“So, on the right is the owlery and in a few paces on the left will be the door to Healer Jordan’s office (did you know she’s Lee Jordan’s Aunt?),” Harry said, feeling like a tour guide in a museum.

“Seriously? No idea,” Neville said.

“She runs the Center. Lee came with the Weasley’s last weekend,” Harry said.

“Did they play any jokes on you?” Neville asked.

“Er. Well, yeah. They changed my T-shirt… I didn’t know they did it,” Harry said. “They weren’t … well, I don’t think they meant to be mean, really.”

“Yeah,” Neville said. “It’s probably funnier when you’re not the butt of the joke.”

“Yeah,” Harry remembered Neville being gullible enough to take things from Fred or George and then later have them explode or turn to slime in his hands. Most first years learned pretty quickly to be wary of the twins and Lee.

I wonder why Neville still takes things from them.

“Through here is the dining hall. Pretty good food. Even better than Hogwarts, really,” Harry said, as he used the panel to open the doors.

“You get around here really well… is it hard? Does that staff talk to you? Sometimes it seems like you’re listening to something I can’t hear,” Neville asked.

“Oh, yeah. It’s pretty brilliant, actually. It does a lot of stuff. Even protected me from getting hit by a lorry,” Harry said. “It casts a shield charm. But yeah, I can just ask it to guide me to where I want to go and it’ll tell me how to get there. It speaks through this little metal ring I wear on my ear.”

“That’s cool, Harry. Wow, this place is so light… it’s like being inside of a lily,” Neville said in awe.

“Do you think you can stay for lunch, Neville? The menu said that we’d be having fish and chips,” Harry asked.

“Mmm. Yeah, that’ll be alright. I can just zip back to St. Mungo’s and ask Gram. She’s sitting with mum and dad,” Neville said.

“Would she want to come, too? We can have visitors for meals,” Harry asked.

“We can ask her - she might like that. The food at St. Mungo’s isn’t that great,” Neville said. “Pretty bland.”

“Okay, over there is the courtyard with a bit of a garden and through these doors are the classrooms,” Harry said pointing first to the windows that overlooked the courtyard and then in the direction of the doors.

Neville ran over to the windows overlooking the courtyard.
“Oh, let’s go down there, Harry. It looks really nice. I think I see some Aconite. Let’s go look,” Neville said as Harry walked over to him.

“Sure, the door’s over here,” Harry said, but Neville was already opening it and headed down the steps. Harry swung his staff in an arc, trying to figure out if the door was still open or if it was closing and nearly got it stuck in the closing door. He yelped and pulled it out quickly - wondering if his staff would snap in half. Neville had clattered back up the steps from the courtyard and pushed the door open again.

“Sorry, mate. I should have held the door for you,” Neville said. Harry could imagine how red his face was - not just from embarrassment, but also from running up and down the stairs.

“It’s okay. I just had a run in with a couple of doors already, so I’m careful,” Harry said, touching his forehead where he’d had the bruise.

“Did you want to hold my arm? You know, like you were doing with that girl - Gem-ma - at St. Mungo’s?” Neville asked.

“I could teach you how to do sighted guide, if you like. It is kind of handy for walking together,” Harry offered. “Though Ron thought people would think we were… you know… gay. He didn’t want to do it, but he got over it.”

“Oh, well I don’t care. Besides, no one is here. Why don’t you show me how,” Neville invited.

Harry gave him a quick lesson and then took Neville’s arm and they went down to the courtyard.

“It is Aconite!” Neville exclaimed as they walked on the stone path toward the bench under the tree.

It was pleasantly cool out and a light breeze was making the leaves on the tree shiver. Harry drew in a deep breath of the fragrant plants growing in the courtyard - all their aromas intermingling so that it just smelled fecund.

“It’s poisonous, you know. But it also has healing properties. It’s used in a lot of potions… it’s called Wolfsbane as well as Monkshood,” Neville explained as they stood under the tree.

“Didn’t Snape mention those the first day of Potions?” Harry asked, letting go of Neville’s arm and reaching forward with his staff to find the bench. He sat down and started passing his hands over the herbs to stir their fragrances.

“Yeah, it was a trick question, wasn’t it? They are the same plant - with different names,” Neville said. “Don’t touch it, Harry - it’ll make your fingers numb.”

“Oh, how will I know which one it is? Does it smell?” Harry asked. “I like coming here and smelling the herbs. There are some that I know from the garden at Privet Drive.”

Harry couldn’t imagine admitting this to Ron, but with Neville, he wasn’t worried. Neville liked plants.

“I guess you’ll know when you touch it and your fingers go numb! It doesn’t have a smell,” Neville said. “It is mostly contained in this garden - you’d have to reach way over the lavender and other herbs to find it. I think you’ll be okay,” Neville said and Harry could tell that he’d crushed a rosemary leaf between his fingers because the sharp aroma was suddenly present.

They played exploding snap on the bench for a while. It took them a bit to figure out how to play so that they each had an equal advantage. First they tried with just braille, but Neville struggled to tell
the cards apart, then the spoken version, but Harry had the advantage there, then they set it up so that
they showed the picture and spoke in Harry’s *aftí* simultaneously when his hand was hovering over
the deck and they were more equally matched and soon they were laughing so hard they nearly fell
off the bench.

They took a break to eat the chocolate frog - Neville was poised to catch it as soon as Harry opened
the package.

“Oh! It’s Beaumont Marjoribanks! He’s my favorite!” Neville said. “Here, do you want to look at it
with your thing - what’s it called?”

Harry summoned his *digitus* from his staff and pulled it across the card, “it’s a *digitus* .”

“Merlin’s beard, that’s cool!” Neville exclaimed as Harry felt the image of a wizard in a tall pointy
hat and velveteen robes trimmed with stiff metallic threads, but covered in dirt and holding a leafy
plant in a pot. He felt the braille, too.

“It’s going to take me forever to figure out this braille - I think it is grade two - I bet I can change my
*digitus* to write in grade one - but, yeah, can you read it to me?” Harry said and restored the image to
two dimensions.

“Oh, sure, it says: A pioneer of Herbology and collector of many rare and magical flowers,
Beaumont Marjoribanks is said to have discovered Gillyweed,” Neville read from the card.

“What’s Gillyweed?” Harry asked.

“Oh, well, it’s this really cool aquatic plant that if you eat it, you grow gills and flippers and can
breathe underwater,” Neville said.

“What- permanently?” Harry exclaimed.

“Oh, no, it wears off after about an hour or so, I think. But it is useful for underwater exploration -
you can swim faster and see underwater… er, well, I don’t know how it would affect your vision,”
Neville said.

“I imagine if it could cure my blindness, someone would have mentioned it by now. I’ll have to try
that the next time Mei drags me out to the ocean. Where do you get it?” Harry asked.

“Oh, I don’t think it is native - I think you get it in the Mediterranean. I think you’d have to owl order
it. I think Snape has it in his potion stores, though,” Neville replied.

“Hmm. I wonder if Mei could go get some?” Harry thought.

“Who is Mei?” Neville asked.

“Oh, she’s one of my roommates here. Mei Lee? She was at Hogwarts,” Harry said.

“That Ravenclaw who turned into a mermaid?” Neville said.

“Um, yeah. I don’t know how I missed that, but I didn’t know until I was here,” Harry said.

“Well, I imagine that being thought of as the Heir of Slytherin meant that not a lot of people were
gossiping with you - rather they were talking about you,” Neville mumbled.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Harry said. “She doesn’t like to be called a mermaid. She’s part Jīáorén .”
“What’s that?”

“Well, I guess it is a Chinese mermaid, but they are different than European or even African mermaids. Or are they merpeople? I dunno. Anyway - they have their own magic. I suppose I should read up on it,” Harry said. “Mei’s learning how to manage both her magics - the Jiāorén and the wixen magic.”

“Wixen?”

“You know, witch and wizard. Wixen. It’s a lot easier to say,” Harry said.

“Yeah, it is. Wixen,” Neville said. “Cool.”

“Want to go ask your Gran about lunch? I could go with you,” Harry said.

“Sure, yeah. Let’s go do that,” Neville said, jumping up.

“I should tell Healer Jordan, though if I’m leaving the Center,” he said as they mounted the stairs. “I guess there was a reporter at St. Mungo’s who was trying to talk to me and it is a violation of some privacy act.”

“Oh, yeah! Gran was madder than a nest of Red Caps! It was that Skeeter witch who works for the Prophet. She asked me all sorts of questions about you after you left but I didn’t tell her anything. And wow, did Gran tell her where to stick her quill! I’ve never seen her so cross.” Neville was shaking with the memory.

“Thank you for not telling her anything. Every time I leave the Center I have to disguise myself,” Harry said.

“You weren’t disguised the other night,” Neville said, perplexed.

“Yeah, well, we didn’t plan on leaving - we were locked out of one of our Egresses and had to return through a secure entrance. Besel rescued us. Someone tried to break into the Center. They were really worried that someone seemed to be waiting for us at St. Mungo’s,” Harry explained.

“Yeah, that’s weird. She has been hanging out at St. Mungo’s a lot, looking like she was waiting for something,” Neville said.

“Hey, we should probably tell that to Healer Jordan,” Harry said, they were through the dining hall now and nearing her office. “Her office should be on the right in just a little bit, let’s knock on her door.”

“This one?” Neville asked.

“Is it the next door on the right to the reception area?” Harry asked.

“I dunno - all the doors look the same to me,” Neville said.

“Navigant Healer Jordan’s office,” Harry said and his staff confirmed that they were in front of it. “Yep, this is it.”

“Hey, I could use something like that. I’m always getting lost,” Neville said a bit glumly.

“I think you can cast the spell with your wand, Neville,” Harry said.

“Really?”
“Yeah, we could try it,” Harry said as he knocked on Healer Jordan’s door.

He heard footsteps approaching the door.

“Oh, hello, Harry. How are you doing today?” Healer Jordan greeted.

“Hi, Healer Jordan. I’m fine. Thanks. How are you doing?” Harry said.

“Just fine. What can I do for you?”

“This is my friend, Neville Longbottom. His grandmother is visiting at St. Mungo’s this morning and I was wondering if I could go with him over there to ask her if she wanted to join us for lunch. Is that okay? Oh, and also he said that the reporter that was trying to talk to me on Thursday has been hanging out a lot there lately,” Harry said in a rush.

“Oh, well. Here, come on in and let’s figure this out,” Healer Jordan said. “It’s nice to meet you, Neville. I’m Healer Jordan.”

Neville mumbled a response and they made their way into her office and settled into the chairs by her desk.

“Well, Harry, if you’re going to go over there, we definitely need to disguise your appearance. It might be easier if Neville just goes and talks to his Gran on his own. I’m concerned, though, to learn that Ms. Skeeter has been lurking at St. Mungo’s. Maybe I should go with both of you?” Healer Jordan said. “Yes, let’s do that.”
"Can you transfigure me into Haripreet Batra again?" Harry asked.

"Yes, good idea. I think we also need to change your clothing as well - just to be safe," Healer Jordan said as she began to mutter the incantations that transformed his appearance again.


Harry ran his hands over his clothes that had flashed warm during the transfiguration, just as his skin and hair had - he was wearing a button up light cotton shirt with a collar now made of light cotton and had an undershirt on as well. His shoes weren't trainers - they pinched his toes a bit and when he stepped in them, the soles were slick on the tile floor.

Harry was thinking that this was a lot of fuss for a quick trip over to invite Mrs. Longbottom over for lunch at the Center, but he was really curious about this reporter even though she creeped him out with her sugary voice and poisonous perfume.

Like Aunt Petunia when she wants something.

He wondered what Healer Jordan would do if she ran into her. He suspected that Healer Jordan would be a fierce opponent in any tussle - verbal, physical, or magical. He wouldn't want to get on her wrong side and he felt safe near her.

"I'll just finish up this bit of scroll work that I was doing before we head over there. I'll meet you in the reception area in about 10 minutes, okay?" Healer Jordan asked as scrolls rustled on her desk and a quill started scratching across parchment.

"Sure, no problem. Thank you," Harry said as he and Neville headed toward the door.

"You can go through the south door, if you like - it leads directly into the reception area," Healer Jordan said absentmindedly.

Harry paused, "Um, could I show Neville the herb garden while we wait? He likes plants."

"Great idea, you know where it is, right?"

"Yep," Harry said. "Navigant herb garden. This way Neville."

Harry led Neville through the little room with the camp beds and out another door that opened to the courtyard herb garden - it was a mirror in many ways to the courtyard on the other side of the Center, except it was more open to the sky because there wasn't a tree.

Neville drew in a long breath, "Oh, this is so… " He seemed to be at a loss for words.

As soon as Harry went through the door, the heady aroma of the fragrant plants enveloped him - it was warm and humid and smelled of dirt and green growing things that reminded him of his time with Nio hus cherio kisa. Maybe if he could live in this garden, the little snake would be willing to stay with him. Maybe the whole family of snakes would be willing to relocate to this garden. He sighed.

"What is it, Harry," Neville asked.

"Oh, I was just thinking of a little snake friend I made at Privet Drive. I wish I could bring him here
to live in this garden," Harry said before he really thought about it.

"I bet a snake would love this place," Neville seemed to be captivated. "I would love to live here."

Harry realized that he didn't really know what it looked like. He hadn't used his staff to describe it when he'd worked in here before with Besel.

Though as he thought about it, he knew that the door was oddly shaped because he had to duck to go through without hitting his head and that it was made of old wood held together by rusting metal slabs bolted on with thick nuts and iron hinges that had creaked as he pushed through. He knew that the path to the central raised bed was made up of firmly set flat stones with squishy mossy plants that grew between the slabs, sometimes overtaking them completely. He knew that the courtyard was small and contained by walls all around it that opened to the sky by the way his voice echoed in the space and the sun seared his eyes. He knew that in addition to the central bed of herbs, there were pots of plants that lined the walls because his staff had tinged against them in the crowded walkway and that some of the plants snaked their way up the walls, capturing some of the echoes and sending down heady fragrances of blooming flowers from above his head.

He had an idea of what the beds of herbs were like because he'd been digging in them. He knew their soft leaves, spiky stalks, and bitter aromas. He knew that they were in raised beds contained by a stone wall that was wide enough to sit on and at just the right height - forming a bench all the way around.

He had run his hands over the rounded and moss-covered stone wall, topped with flat stones to form the bench. He knew that the bed was keyhole shaped and that there was an entrance that allowed Besel easy access to the center of the bed.

He knew that on the other side of the courtyard was a hiccuping fountain that contained fish that burbled the surface of the water occasionally eating insects. His feet had felt the difference in the surface of the stone that surrounded the fountain making a small stone patio.

To the right of the fountain were some wrought iron chairs and a spindly table where he and Besel had sat and talked for a bit about what it meant to grieve while he ran his fingers over the leaf patterns sculpted into the chair.

He could imagine the various shades of greens punctuated with soft lavender and maybe an occasional gaudy red of a pot of geraniums. He thought that the walls must be a sun-warmed yellow and decided that he didn't need his staff to tell him what it looked like. He already knew enough.

He settled on the low wall around the keyhole garden next to Neville who had started identifying the herbs, listing their properties (as he knew them) and what potions they'd be used in.

"Wow, you really know a lot, Neville," Harry said. "You never mention any of this in Potions."

"Well, Gran has a great garden and I like working in it. I've learned a lot there," Neville said. "And I can't speak in front of Professor Snape, you know. He's..."

"Yeah, well. Maybe he'd stop picking on you so much if he knew that you actually understand what he's talking about."

"I doubt it. He's just as terrible to Hermione and she knows everything..." Neville tapered off.

"Yeah, right. Git," muttered Harry. "Why does he teach when he hates children so much?"

"No idea."
The door creaked and Healer Jordan's sharp steps sounded on the paving stones.

"Are you boys ready to head over to St. Mungo's?"

As they walked over to the Egress to St. Mungo's, Healer Jordan and Neville talked about the potions garden at the Center.

"Healer Jordan, would it be okay if I brought my mum over to the garden? I think she'd really enjoy it," Neville asked thoughtfully.

"She's a resident in the Janus Thickey Ward, yes?" Healer Jordan said.

"Yes, but she's allowed to leave for walks on the grounds if she's attended. St. Mungo's doesn't have anything as nice as the potions garden, though," Neville said.

"I'll talk with her Healer while we're at St. Mungo's and see if we can reach an agreement."

"Thank you, Healer Jordan," Neville said and his arm trembled a bit under Harry's hand.

Healer Jordan walked over to the panel on the south wall of the reception area and Harry heard the sounds of St. Mungo's slide through as the Egress opened. He heard a busy corridor with people rushing to and fro - quick footsteps and harried voices speaking of potions and magical treatments. They were definitely leaving the serenity of the Center.

"Neville, will you please lead us to your Gran?" Healer Jordan asked.

"Sure, Healer Jordan. It's just this way," Neville said as he stepped through the Egress, leading Harry. Harry took in a deep breath, wondering if he'd be able to smell that reporter's perfume right away.

All he could smell was the normal hospital smells - a mixture of medicinal potions (dominated by Pepper-up) with an undercurrent of fear-sweat and cleaning potions. St. Mungo's had a distinctive odor - one that he associated with stress and trauma.

Harry heard the ding of a bell and elevator doors sliding open and the footsteps of passengers as they exited. Neville started walking faster and pulled Harry through into the enclosed space of the elevator. Healer Jordan was right behind them and Harry heard something else that sounded out of place... the buzzing of insect wings among the noises of other passengers, one of whom was using a levitating chair like Besels, but making noises that made Harry certain it was not Besel. There was a sickening sweet smell that reminded him of insects trapped in a jar.

"Is there a bug in here?" he asked, but both Healer Jordan and Neville said they didn't see a bug.

*Maybe a bug hitched a ride from the Potions garden.*

The elevator announced each floor in a strangely saccharin voice as the doors opened and closed and people entered and exited the small space. It announced that they had reached the fourth floor.

"This is our stop, Harry - er," Neville stopped and asked in a stage whisper, "What's your name again?"

Harry cringed, "Haripreet Batra."

Healer Jordan made a hissing noise.

"Right, Haripreet. Haripreet Batra. I've got to remember that," Neville said to himself.
The person in the levitating chair stayed on the elevator and Harry's staff hit the chair as he and Neville tried to get around it and out of the door. Harry couldn't hear the insect wings and wondered where it was. He shivered, imagining it crawling on him.

Healer Jordan's steps sounded even sharper in the St. Mungo's corridor. He wondered what the floor was made out of - it wasn't stone or tile like Hogwarts or the Center and it occurred to him that it sounded rather like floors at the muggle hospitals and department stores and that seemed strangely out of place.

He breathed in the air again, realizing that he was nervous about encountering that reporter. But he didn't smell any noxious perfume here either, though the smell from the elevator lingered.

Neville had stopped and had pressed what sounded like a buzzer. They must have been in front of locked doors. Harry heard footsteps on the other side of the doors and the pop of magic - and the doors opened.

"Mr. Longbottom. It's good to see you. And you've brought guests?" A matronly sounded witch addressed them.

"Yes, this is Healer Jordan from the Per… Flamel Center," Neville stumbled, "and this is my friend, Hari-preet Batra, he's training at the Fla… the Center."

"Right, well, welcome both of you. Here to visit your parents?"

"Um, yes," Neville stammered as they were ushered into the ward that was very much quieter than the corridor. Harry wondered if the ward was magically silenced - it didn't sound natural as he shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot.

Neville footsteps echoed loudly. Harry tried to make his steps quieter, but they seemed loud as well - the slick surfaces making clacking noises he wasn't used to. He wished he was still wearing his rubber-soled trainers. He hit is staff occasionally on things - metal bed legs and rolling carts and the tinging noise resounded in the space. He thought about collapsing it, but then figured he'd make even more noise if he crashed into a cart. Neville was still getting the hang of guiding him.

"Gran?" Neville said. Harry heard curtains with metal rings being drawn back.

"Neville. I was wondering when you were coming back. Oh, hello? You've brought visitors? I thought you were visiting Harry Potter… "

"Gran, this is Healer Jordan from the Center… and Hari… preet Batra," Neville said nervously. After Healer Jordan and Harry greeted the elder Mrs. Longbottom, Neville continued, "We were wondering if you'd want to join us for lunch at the Center."

"Haripreet Batra? Of the Batra family of Leeds?" Mrs. Longbottom asked.

"Er, no. My family is from New Delhi, actually," Harry said.

"You don't sound like you're from Punjab," Mrs. Longbottom sniffed.

"Well, I've lived here my whole life, haven't I," Harry said, feeling his ears grow hot.

"Oh, right. So you're also blind and in training at the Center? And why did you come with Neville and not his friend Harry Potter?" Mrs. Longbottom asked.

Healer Jordan coughed slightly and spoke before Harry could answer said, "Neville also thought that
your daughter-in-law might enjoy visiting our potions garden - we have an Egress that allows for
easy travel between St. Mungo's and the Center, if you think she'd enjoy it, I can talk to her Healer to
make arrangements."

"Oh, well. Yes. Alice has already had her mid-day meal, but she does enjoy plants. A little too much,
actually. We had to stop bringing potted plants to her here because she'd just strip them down to the
stems and they died. But I imagine a short time in the garden will be okay. I'm sure that Healer Strout
will approve. I'll go ask her. And yes, I would love to join you for lunch. Will Harry Potter will be
joining us there?" Mrs. Longbottom asked.

"Er, yes, Gran. He will," Neville said, as his Gran bustled away down the ward and Healer Jordan
followed her.

"Harry - er, Haripreet, this is my mother, Alice Longbottom," Neville said. Harry wasn't aware that
someone else was in the area, but now that he was paying closer attention, he realized that he could
hear a very faint paper-rustling sound. Neville had pulled him through the curtain.

"Hello, Mrs. Longbottom," Harry said.

"She doesn't talk," Neville said quietly.

Harry wasn't sure what to do - he stuck out his hand in case Mrs. Longbottom was wanting to shake
his hand. Soft hands fluttered over his and turned his palm upward and then dropped something light
into his hand. He let go of Neville's arm so that he could feel what Alice had placed in his hand. It
was a very small and intricately folded piece of paper.

"Er, thank you," Harry said as he turned his face toward Neville, drawing his brows together in a
question.

"It's a wrapper - folded into a crane, she makes them out of any paper she can find," Neville
whispered.

"Thank you, Mrs. Longbottom," Harry said again.

She had started making small noises with paper again.

"Is your dad here, too?" Harry asked.

"Yes, but he just lies in bed. He doesn't do anything. He's in worse shape than mum," Neville said
and led Harry to another area of the curtained-off area. Harry reached out and found the soft form of
a mattress covered with tightly stretched sheets.

"I know that mum knows when I visit - she always has things for me - bits of paper that she's folded
for me, but dad never changes." Neville's voice was even and matter-of-fact, he sounded old - not
like a 12-year-old boy.

"I'm really sorry that I never asked about your parents, Neville," Harry said, the recent grief that he'd
uncovered for his own family feeling raw and near the surface and intermingling with the profound
sadness that he felt for his friend. He felt a deep sense of regret that he had not been a better friend to
Neville. It made him wonder about his other friends at Hogwarts. What else had he missed as he had
been so caught up in his own worries?

"It's okay," Neville said. "I didn't tell you and now you know. It's not something… just don't talk
about it with anyone else, okay? I mean. I hate it when people feel sorry for me. I thought … well,
that you'd understand, right?"
"Yeah. I get it," Harry said and he heard footsteps approaching. He squeezed his staff to get a
description of the room and the Longbottoms and then immediately regretted it - the staff's
description was even bleaker than what he had imagined. He set his staff on the floor before it was
done.

"Haripreet and Neville - Healer Strout said that Alice may travel with us to the Center as long as she
stays in my care while she's there - I have about an hour that I can spend with you in the garden and
we'll just eat our lunch there," Healer Jordan explained.

"Thank you, Healer Jordan. That's really kind of you," Neville said. "I'm so glad."

"While Healer Strout is helping your mother change to go out, I'm going to pop down to the
reception area and see if I can learn anything about the Daily Prophet reporter. I'll meet you at the
Egress in a few minutes, okay?" Healer Jordan said and Harry half expected her to apparate away,
but she just walked down the corridor at her usual fast pace, robes swishing and hard-heeled shoes
clipping along.

"She seems like a very capable and direct leader," Mrs. Longbottom said. "Let's wait out here while
Healer Strout helps Alice."

Harry was surprised when a bony hand grasped his elbow and pulled him out into the passage
between the curtained areas and he stumbled a bit and gasped.

"Gran, don't pull Harry - he can walk on his own," Neville said.

"Harry?" Mrs. Longbottom said letting go of his arm, for which Harry was grateful.

"Haripreet - Harry for short," Harry supplied. Harry felt something move on his shoulder and made a
move to brush it off, but didn't find anything there.

"Hmmm," was all Neville's Gran said as Neville offered Harry his elbow and they walked out to the
corridor to wait for Alice.

Harry was thinking that if Nio hus cherio kisa was with him, he wouldn't have to worry about some
bug. Little Friend would have taken care of it in a heartbeat and he smiled as he imagined the
 crunching.

"Why are you smiling?" Neville asked.

"Just thinking about the snake I told you about, Little Friend, and how he liked to eat bugs," Harry
said.

"I'm surprised that you like snakes after what happened," Neville said.

"Oh, well, Little Friend is tiny - not some enormous Great-Hall-sized serpent that wanted to eat me.
It's different," Harry said.

"Could you talk to the Basilisk? Why couldn't you get it to stop?" Neville asked.

"Tom Riddle was the one it was listening to - I tried, believe me," Harry said.

"Tom Riddle?" Neville asked. "Who's that?"

"Er, it's a long story. I'll tell you later," Harry said, remembering that he wasn't supposed to be
talking about it in public.
Neville's Gran joined them in the corridor with Alice who took shuffling hesitant steps. Healer Strout's voice followed them through the door with a litany of instructions that the elder Mrs. Longbottom responded to absentmindedly - as if she already had heard them many times before. The door cut Healer Strout's voice off mid-instructions.

They made slow progress toward the elevator at the end of the corridor. Neville's Gran was talking but not really saying anything. Harry followed Neville's lead.

The doors to the elevator opened and a rush of footsteps flooded toward them, some accompanied by voices in deep conversation, flowing around their slow-moving group as if they were rocks in a stream.

The door to the elevator closed before they were able to reach it and they waited for it to return. Still Gran Longbottom spoke to her daughter-in-law about little nothings - the distance to the elevator, the number of people in the hallway, the light that seemed to be flickering (Harry couldn't tell - it wasn't bright enough for him to notice the fluctuations in intensity - he stared at the ceiling for a while trying to see if he could see it). Neville was very quiet the whole time, though it seemed as though his mother was fiddling with his other hand that wasn't occupied with guiding Harry. Harry wished he could read the expression on Neville's face - he didn't know if his silence was uncomfortable or sad or simply quiet.

It occurred to him that maybe Neville was embarrassed about his family situation - he knew that pain acutely - but he didn't know how he could put Neville at ease.

_Gah, I'd trade places with Neville anytime… but I wouldn't wish the Dursleys on Neville … ever._

Finally, they were headed down to the main floor and down the corridor to the Egress. Harry's shoes were noisy in the corridor and he didn't like the way he slid around on them.

"Here we are Gran," Neville said stopping in the middle of the corridor. "This is where we cross to the Center."

"The Egress, is it?" Gran responded in a totally different voice than the sing-song one she'd been using to talk to Neville's mother. It was a jarring change of tone.

"Here comes Healer Jordan," Neville said to Harry quietly. "She looks angry."

Harry stiffened.

_What would make Healer Jordan angry?_

"We need to cross over now," she said before she'd even reached them.

Harry reached out, trying to find the panel that he had heard Besel using on Thursday. He was farther away from the wall than he realized and his hand passed through empty air.

"Navigant panel for the Egress to the Center," he tried, but Healer Jordan reached it first and he heard the Egress opening.

"Come now," she barked.

Mrs. Longbottom seemed to be dragging her daughter-in-law forward and Neville and Harry were on their heels. As they passed through Harry felt something zap his neck, right under the collar of his buttoned shirt.
"Ow!" he yelled as he snatched his hand from Neville's arm to slap his neck where he'd been stung and felt something large fall from under his collar. He heard it hit the floor - it almost sounded metallic, but not quite. "What was that?"

Someone grasped him by the forearm and pulled him through to the Center and the Egress closed behind him. Harry thought it might have been Healer Jordan.

"What happened, Harry?" Healer Jordan and Neville asked simultaneously.

"I feel like I was electrocuted… something was under my collar. I think it was that bug that I heard buzzing earlier. It was big!" He held up his fingers to indicate its size.

"Electo- what?" Neville asked.

"It's like being hit with a hexing curse, but with muggle electricity - you know - how muggles power their lights and things," Harry explained.

"Oh," said Neville. "It hurts?"

Harry nodded still rubbing the back of his neck.

"Hmm. That's odd. That's what the Egress does when someone tries to cross who isn't authorized or invited by one of our residents," Healer Jordan said. "But you said you thought it was an insect? It shouldn't do that… an insect should just not be able to pass through… unless…” Healer Jordan moved back to the panel and opened the Egress again quickly, passing through. Harry thought he had heard her wand swish through the air, but maybe he was just imagining it. In just seconds, she was back through and closing the Egress again.

"What's going on?" Neville's Gran demanded to know. "And why do you keep calling him 'Harry'?"

"Let's move to my office before we discuss this further," Healer Jordan suggested.
“ Couldn’t we go into the garden?” Neville asked.

“Sure, it’s also secure. Let’s do that. I’ll request that our lunch be sent up and I’ll join you in a moment,” Healer Jordan agreed. “Neville, you’ll keep an eye on your mum - make sure she doesn’t nibble on anything dangerous?”

“Yes, Healer Jordan,” Neville said solemnly.

They walked through Healer Jordan’s office to the Potions garden.

Harry heard Alice gasp.

“Mum?” Neville asked.

“Is she okay?” Harry asked.

“She looks almost happy,” Neville said in a hushed voice.

“She likes it?”

“Yeah,” Neville said.

“Here, let’s get her settled by the plants. These are safe. I’ll transfigure this chair into something more comfortable for her,” Mrs. Longbottom said.

Harry heard the rickety wrought iron chair by the fountain scrape against the stone and then settle on the ground close to them, then he heard a pop and a larger sounding piece of furniture hit the ground as if it had jumped. It was no longer wrought iron - the feet that hit the stones sounded wooden. He reached out his hand in the direction of the sound and found the velvety surface punctuated with deep divots with brass tack navels; he imagined an overstuffed chaise lounge. His imagination supplied a color - a deep and vivid purple.

“Here, Alice dear, sit here. That’s right. Let’s make sure you’re comfortable. Oh, don’t pick the plants. Neville, make sure she doesn’t kill all their plants. Here’s a blanket. Help me tuck in her legs,” Neville’s Gran fussed around Alice.

Harry heard a pop and guessed it was a conjured blanket.

Harry ran his hands over the back of the velvet chaise until his fingers contacted Alice’s wispy hair scattered across the back and he pulled back. He found the stone wall around the garden and sat down on it. He listened to Neville scurrying around at his Gran’s instructions as he traced the contour of a leaf between his thumb and index finger - mint of some sort, he decided, more from the sharp fragrance than from the almost heart-shaped leaf.

Healer Jordan returned to the garden and transfigured the small table into a larger one with extra chairs so that they could eat the lunch that popped into existence shortly afterward. The aroma of the grease-filled, breaded fish wafted by and Harry felt his belly rumble.

“Come, let’s eat,” Healer Jordan invited.

“Harry, do you want me to restore your normal appearance now?” she offered as Harry stood up and navigated around the chaise to walk toward the table.
“Yes, please. Especially my trainers - these shoes are pinching my toes,” he said with relief as she removed the transfigurations on his body and clothes.

“So, Harry Potter is here, after all?” Mrs. Longbottom queried. “Why the ruse?”

“We are trying to keep Harry safe,” Healer Jordan said.

“H Humph. That witch from the Daily Prophet harassed us on Thursday at St. Mungo’s, trying to get us to spill the beans on Harry, but she didn’t get a single seed from us. No, we’re not going to be the hapless fools who plant that vine,” Mrs. Longbottom opined.

“Thank you for fending her off. Did you report her to the staff at St. Mungo’s?” Healer Jordan asked.

“Yes, I sent howlers to both the Daily Prophet and St. Mungo’s,” she huffed.

“Good. They need to know that there are others who have taken issue with their behavior. What did she want to know?” Healer Jordan asked.

“She had heard that he had been injured in the dungeons at Hogwarts by the Basilisk and thought he was at St. Mungo’s. No doubt she’s heard rumors from other students,” Mrs. Longbottom said.

“Yes, well. Our residents, as well as patients at St. Mungo’s, are protected through the Privacy Act, but the Daily Prophet seems to be keen on violating their rights. They’ll face hefty fines, but who knows what the damage could be. Their safety is very seriously threatened. And I know you understand more than most people the threat that Harry, in particular, faces. We are working with the Ministry of Magic, St. Mungo’s, and Hogwarts trying to keep him safe, but the Daily Prophet seems to be determined to breach our protections,” explained Healer Jordan.

Neville was fumbling with a chair and it made a great rattling noise - which helped Harry locate the one next to him and he settled into it.

“Is it wise to be talking about this in front of the boy?” Mrs. Longbottom asked in a stage whisper as she pulled out one of the chairs at the table across from Harry as if he wouldn’t be able to hear her.

Harry’s head shot up and he realized that he was trying to see her. Damn. Why would she say that?

Boy. Uncle Vernon calls me Boy.

And did she think that he couldn’t handle knowing that Voldemort’s followers might try to get him? He’d already faced freaking Voldemort three times now. Sure he suffered serious losses, but he had managed to survive.

“Harry’s safer knowing that there’s a threat than being kept in the dark, so to speak,” Healer Jordan said. “Sorry, Harry.”

Harry dropped his head and was too intent on snuffing the embers that were smoldering in his chest to acknowledge the apology.

“I’m right here,” he fumed.

“Exactly my point,” Mrs. Longbottom sniffed.

“Healer Jordan, did you find anything? When that bug fell out of my collar and you went back? Was there anything there?” Harry asked.
“No, no sign of anyone or anything. I … well, I’m looking into it,” she said. “We’d better eat before the fish and chips get cold.”

Harry wasn’t sure he could eat. His stomach was as clenched as his fists under the table.

He listened as Healer Jordan passed the basket of fish to Neville’s Gran and then as Neville filled his plate. There was an expectant pause.

“Neville, let Harry know that you’re holding the basket for him,” Healer Jordan guided gently.

“Oh, right. Sorry,” Neville cringed. “Harry, would you like some fish?”

“Uh, yeah,” Harry said as he unclenched his fingers and reached toward Neville, finding the offered basket of fish.

“Harry, the tongs are sticking out of the basket at 3 o’clock,” Healer Jordan added.

Harry ran his hand around the edge of the basket until he found the tongs, then poked around until he was able to grasp a piece of fish and put it on his plate. He was certain that everyone’s eyes were on him and felt his ears growing hot.

“Would you like some fish, Healer Jordan?” Harry asked holding the basket out to her. She took it graciously.

“Harry, here are the chips, the serving spoon is at… er… 2 o’clock?” Neville offered.

“Thanks, Neville,” Harry said.

They ate in silence for a little bit and Harry wished he could think of something to talk about, but all he could think about was how trapped he felt… and scrutinized. Why couldn’t people leave him alone? He had a sudden memory of the spider-web laced underside of the stairs in his cupboard and how when he was stuck in there, he’d wished that someone (though fervently not the Dursleys) would notice him.

Guess I got what I wished for…

“Healer Jordan, do you have a place where you grow plants that need more shade than this garden? I mean besides the courtyard on the other side of the dining hall?” Neville asked.

“Yes, we do, Neville. We have a greenhouse that is located through the door on the west wall of this garden,” Healer Jordan explained and Harry gathered that she was pointing. “We have Shrivelfigs, Devil’s Snare (in a warded space, of course), and some other plants that thrive in low light.

He hadn’t realized that there was another entrance into the garden and chided himself from resisting the urge to use his staff to describe the space. He had thought the wall was solid, but he hadn’t walked on that side of the keyhole garden. He should have explored more thoroughly.

“Maybe after lunch, we can go check it out, Harry?” Neville asked.

“Sure, that’d be fine,” Harry said, feeling a little tired and a little sad that he didn’t share Neville’s enthusiasm. “Did you still want to practice…” he stopped himself in mid-sentence remembering that Neville’s Gran didn’t want him flying on a broom … “er… playing exploding snap?” he quickly covered his gaff.

“Er, no, not really,” Neville answered confused.
“Right,” Harry said, resolving to ask Neville about flying later - when his Gran wasn’t there.

“Alice, put that down!” Mrs. Longbottom shouted and sprang up from the table more quickly than Harry would have guessed she was capable of.

Harry started, dropping his fork with a clatter against the plate.

“A Augusta, it is perfectly fine for Alice to eat the mint. It won’t harm her and we have plenty,” Healer Jordan assured.

“... a danger to herself...” Neville’s Gran was muttering to herself as she returned to the table and resumed eating again more vigorously than before.

Harry nibbled on a chip and wished that he hadn’t been so eager to encourage Neville to invite his Gran to lunch. He was glad when the hour was over and Augusta and Alice were headed back to the Egress with Healer Jordan. He wasn’t ready for Neville to go, though. Harry pulled on his arm, holding him back.

“Neville, I was trying to ask you if you wanted to try flying on my broom,” Harry asked in a whisper as the wooden door creaked closed behind three witches.

“Maybe another time, Harry. I know I said I wanted to explore that garden, but I should be getting back… helping Gran with mum and dad,” Neville said sounding as glum as Harry felt.

“Okay, when can you come again? Hermione’s going to visit on Wednesday,” Harry provided.

“I’ll ask Gran and I’ll send you a note… Oh, wait. How would you read it?” Neville asked.

“Remember, I have tools to help me read - my anagnóstis and digitus,” Harry reminded him.

“Oh, yeah. Right,” Neville said smacking his head.

“And I’m learning how to read braille - Hermione’s learning it, too, and I bet you could if you wanted to.”

“Well, I dunno. Hermione’s very clever, but I could try,” Neville said.

“We can ask Healer Jordan if she has extra tools - a slate and a stylus - that you can use,” Harry said.

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Harry was pacing in the reception area on Sunday morning waiting for the Weasleys (he wasn’t sure who was going to show up to transport him to the Burrow) about ten minutes before he expected them to show up.

Healer Jordan didn’t think they should use the Haripreet Batra disguise again, afraid it had been compromised at St. Mungo’s - so he was going to travel with the Weasleys under his invisibility cloak and they were going to use side-along apparition. He wasn’t too keen on apparating again - but there didn’t seem to be another way to travel. Harry had asked if they could open an Egress to the Burrow, but apparently, it wasn’t magic that could be easily set up on a whim for a quick day trip.

“Okay, then can I have a bucket, please?”
The Egress opened letting in the sounds of Charing Cross Road momentarily and steps approached him.

“Hello, you must be Harry! Mum asked me to come to get you and take you to the Burrow.”

“Er. You sound like a Weasley, but I don’t know you, do I?” Harry asked.

“No, but I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m Charlie, Ron’s older brother. I’m visiting for a few days - spend some time with my little sister. Dad had to go into work and mum was busy making a feast for your visit - and no one else can apparate yet, so I said I’d come to get you. Are you ready?” Charlie asked.

“Yeah, I just need to tell Healer Jordan I’m going. She’s right through here,” Harry said, heading toward the door to Healer Jordan’s office behind the reception desk. He knocked on it.

The door opened.

“Healer Jordan? Charlie Weasley is here to take me to the Burrow,” Harry said.

“Hi, Charlie. It’s good to see you again. Those dragon’s keeping you busy?” Healer Jordan asked.

“Hi Healer Jordan, nice to see you as well. Yes, we have a young Norwegian Ridgeback who is keeping us on our toes. She’s feisty! I think you met Norberta, Harry?” Charlie said.

“Norberta? I thought…” Harry said as Charlie laughed. “Hagrid’s going to be surprised.”

“Yeah, I imagine he will be,” Charlie agreed.

“Harry, don’t forget to put on your invisibility cloak,” Healer Jordan reminded him.

“Yeah, I’ve got it here in my bucket,” Harry said swinging the bucket forward.

“What’s the bucket for?” Charlie asked.

“Yeah, well. Apparating. I’ve only done it a few times and every time I do it, I spew. So, I thought I’d be prepared this time,” Harry said, feeling his neck get hot.

“Ha! Well, I’ll make sure to apparate us to the weedy part of the yard,” Charlie said.

“What apparition point are you using - the one over on Cecil Court?” Healer Jordan asked.

“Yeah, that’s what mum said to use,” Charlie said.

“Okay. Did she also tell you that there’s a reporter who’s been trying to talk to Harry? It is very important that he’s kept safe and that his story isn’t made public. I imagine that you’ve got the training to keep a dragon like Rita Skeeter at bay,” Healer Jordan said.

“Yes, don’t worry. We’ll be quick and I won’t let anyone get near him,” Charlie said. “Okay, Harry, why don’t you put on your cloak. Here, let me hold your bucket while we walk over there.”

He tapped Harry’s hand with the back of his.

“Oh, you know how to do sighted guide?” Harry said surprised.

“Yeah, you know Godric Burbage, right? He works here. He’s a couple of years older than me, but we were at Hogwarts at the same time and he taught me a few things,” Charlie explained. “I used to
play Quidditch with him. Brilliant on the broom, even after he lost his sight.”

“Yeah, he helped me modify my broom,” Harry said.

“See you, Healer Jordan,” Harry said as they walked away.

“Have fun, Harry!” Healer Jordan said.

“Harry, I think you’re going to have to collapse your staff - it keeps showing up under your cloak. I promise I won’t let you run into anything, okay?” Charlie said.

“Okay, it’s just… Ron…” Harry said.

“I can imagine that Ron isn’t the most careful guide. Listen, Godric taught me well. I’ve got this,” Charlie assured him as they stepped through the Egress and into the traffic din and diesel fumes of Charing Cross Road and easily skirted the rubbish bins that Ron had walked Harry into the weekend before.

They walked silently and at a brisk pace on Charing Cross Road, cross three streets. Harry relaxed after the first street crossing - Charlie was a skilled guide.

“We’re going to turn left here,” Charlie muttered under his breath as he turned onto Cecil Court.

“Okay, here’s the apparition point.”

“You should take your cloak off so that you don’t lose it while we’re apparating,” Charlie advised. “We’re safe here. No one can see us.”

Harry quickly stuffed the invisibility cloak in his staff and put the staff back in his pocket.

“I’m handing you the bucket. You got it?” Charlie asked.

“Yep,” Harry said, trying to quell his nerves. He wasn’t looking forward to apparating.

“Okay, hold on tight. I’m going to turn toward you,” Charlie said and Harry felt the squeezing sensation that he’d felt with Besel and Gemma on Thursday. Saliva flooded his mouth as his feet hit the uneven turf of the Burrow’s yard and he staggered forward to his knees and shoved his head into the bucket just in time.

“Well, I guess it is good you know what you need,” Charlie said from a few steps back. Harry heard Ron shouting his name from across the yard while he upchucked again into the bucket. So much for breakfast.

Harry muttered “Evanesco vomitus” and then “Aguamenti” as Ron’s heavy steps pounded toward him. He sat back on his heels.

“Give him a minute, Ron,” Charlie advised. “He’s honking.”

“Harry? Are you alright?” Ron said, slowing as he approached.

“Er. Yeah. Just apparating … is awful. I wish there was a way to travel by magic that didn’t make me sick,” Harry said. “Do you have mint in your garden?”


“I’d like a leaf or two,” Harry staggered to his feet, shook out his staff, and put the clean bucket in his staff’s storage. “Navigant mint by the back door.”
As he neared it, he realized he would have been able to find it without the navigation charm - the aroma filled the air and he was surprised that he didn’t remember it from the last time he had visited the Burrow. He was glad for his staff that had guided him around the garden gnome burrows scattered throughout the yard.

“Your staff is telling you where the holes are?” Ron asked.

“Yeah, it’s kind of brilliant that way,” Harry said running his hands over the mint and inhaling the fragrance gratefully. He found a leaf and plucked it as he heard Charlie enter the back door.

“Harry!” Mrs. Weasley exclaimed, the back door squeaking again as she bustled out of the kitchen and enveloped him in a hug. He had been expecting it and so wasn’t surprised. He leaned into her and hugged her back with the arm that wasn’t holding his staff.

“Come on in, dear! Charlie said that apparating doesn’t sit well with you. Come have some tea and I’ll make you some toast to settle your stomach, okay?”

“Okay, thanks,” Harry said, smiling shyly.

“How was your week? Thank you so much for the letters you sent to Ginny. They really have made a difference. Between you and the Mind Healer, she’s making progress. And having Charlie here is helping, too,” she said, relief evident in her voice.

“My week was pretty good, I guess,” Harry said. “So, Ginny’s doing okay?”

“Yes, you can see for yourself,” Mrs. Weasley said as they entered the kitchen. “Ginny, Harry’s here. Sit on this bench, Harry, and I’ll get your tea.”

Harry’s knees found the bench (a bit painfully) and he reached for the table, sending a pile of papers (scrolls, he discovered when he bent to pick them up) cascading to the floor. Ron and Ginny rushed to help him pick them up and he stepped out of their way holding the scrolls he’d gathered awkwardly, not sure where to set them down, while embarrassment seeped into his chest.

“Oh, sorry, Harry,” Ron muttered taking the scrolls from Harry. “Here, this spot is clear. Sit here.” Ron pulled him by his hand to a spot further down the long table and placed it on the table. Harry put his staff away and swung his legs over the bench. Ron sat down next to him, rocking the bench.

“Here’s your tea, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said, the cup rattling slightly in the saucer as she set it down in front of him.

Harry couldn’t hear Ginny anymore and wondered where she slipped away to.

*Is she still in the room?*

Someone slid something across the table toward him. He reached toward the sound and discovered the milk pitcher - though in the path, he found an assortment of napkins and silverware as well.

“Thanks, Ginny,” Harry said. He carefully poured milk in his tea and tried to set the pitcher down where he’d found it, but must have put it down on a utensil and it started tipping over. Harry caught it as he hadn’t let go yet. A little milk sloshed out and over his hands. He felt underneath the pitcher, pushed away the silverware, found a napkin and wiped up the mess he’d made as best he could. Throughout all of this, Ron and Ginny were making little noises - like they were watching an accident happen in slow motion that they couldn’t stop. He imagined the expressions on their faces and grimaced.
“Hey, it’s no big deal,” Harry said, trying to convince himself. “Just a little spilled milk. Happens all the time, right?”

“Yeah, especially when Ron is around,” Charlie chimed in, shoving Ron so that he bumped Harry.

“Hey, watch it, Charlie!” Ron protested and Harry mopped up the tea that had splashed in his saucer and on the table.

Harry felt the table rock and guessed that Charlie had slid next to Ginny on the bench across from them.

“How are you doing, sis? Why do you look so glum?” Charlie chided.

“She always looks like that, especially when Har…” Ron stopped himself.

Harry finished the sentence in his head, “especially when Harry is around.”

“Ginny, are you still blaming yourself? Remember, we talked about this. It isn’t your fault,” Harry said quietly. “Maybe I shouldn’t have come…”

He felt defeated. How were they going to get through this? He felt as though he were slogging through thigh-deep mud.

“No, I’m glad you came to visit, Harry. It’s just hard to see you … you know … not being able to see,” Ginny said.

I’m glad you came … Just that statement made him feel lighter. Maybe they could get through it.

“Ginny, I know it seems bad, but it’s not as hard as you think. You could do it, too, if you had to. Here, I’ve got an idea,” he pulled his staff out of his pocket and accio’d his Gryffindor tie. “Tie this around your eyes.”

She took it slowly from his hand.

“Got it? Can you see?”

“No.”

“Okay, now drink your tea,” Harry said.

“Well, of course, I can drink tea,” she said a bit indignantly.

“Exactly. Of course, you can,” he agreed. “Let’s see what else you can do today without vision. I bet you’ll be surprised.”

“What, the whole day?” Ginny said.

“Well, you can take your blindfold off whenever you want, right?” Harry said, managing not to let any bitterness seep through.

“Okay, I’ll try it.”

“How about you tell me about what’s going on in the kitchen right now,” Harry said. “What do you observe?”

“Hmmm. Well, my tea has cooled down. Of course, I know that Charlie’s sitting next to me and that
you’re across the table from me. Ron, are you still there? You’re being awfully quiet,” Ginny said.

“Yeah, I’m here,” Ron said. Harry had noticed that he was being pretty quiet as well.

“Mum’s making your toast - I can smell it. She’s also got the dishes going from this morning - I can hear them in the sink. Oh, she’s walking over here.”

“What are you doing with that tie on your eyes, Ginny?” Mrs. Weasley asked as the plate clattered softly on the table in front of Harry. “Here’s your toast, Harry. Do you want any jam? We have plum or cherry jam or a pumpkin spice that is quite tasty.”

“Oh, I think I’ll just take it plain - until my stomach settles, but thank you, Mrs. Weasley,” Harry said.

“Oh, right. That’s very sensible, dear,” she said patting him on his back.

“Mum, Harry’s showing me what it’s like to be blind today. I’m not going to be able to do my chores,” Ginny said.

“Um, actually, Ginny - being blind didn’t get me out of doing my chores. I’ll help you, though,” Harry said.

“What? Those Dursleys made you do chores when you couldn’t see?” Ron exclaimed.

“Sure, I did my normal chores like cooking meals, washing dishes, cleaning the bathrooms, dusting, sweeping, hoovering, washing windows, mowing the lawn…”

Ron cut him off with his sputtering, “What? Weren’t you supposed to be resting? That’s what Madam Pomfrey said - she said you went home a month early to recover.”

“What? These muggles that you live with put you to work when you were supposed to be recovering?” Charlie exclaimed.

“Well, I did get to sleep a bit more than they usually let me,” Harry admitted.

“Harry, is that true? Did they really make you do all those things? They didn’t let you rest like Madam Pomfrey ordered?” Mrs. Weasley asked - her voice at once sharp and disbelieving.

Harry didn’t know what to say. They were all really quiet. He rubbed the spot where he’d burned his hand making sausages. Then to stop fidgeting, he tucked his hands under his legs and lowered his chin.

“Harry…” Mrs. Weasley had approached him and he flinched when she put her hand on his back and started rubbing in circles. “Harry, I’m sorry. I’m not mad at you, dear.”

“I know,” he said softly, his throat constricting.

“Oh, dear,” she sniffed. “Well. I think it is great that you’re going to show Ginny how to do her chores and get around without being able to see. It’ll be a good challenge. Maybe she’ll learn to appreciate what she has,” Mrs. Weasley said taking on a forced cheerfulness that didn’t fool Harry, but he was grateful to her for trying.

She squeezed his shoulders and planted a kiss on the top of his head, then went back to stirring a wet and sticky dough in a big bowl at the counter while muttering softly to herself.

“What are your chores, Ginny?” Harry asked.
“Well, folding laundry and feeding the hens and gathering eggs,” Ginny listed.

“Oh, well, I just learned how to gather eggs this week - we visited a farm and I learned how to milk a goat, too,” Harry said as he nibbled on his toast.

“Milk a goat?!” Ron exclaimed, “Why on earth …” but he was drowned out by a large explosion that shook the whole house and made plaster crumble from the ceiling like rain.
And I feel fine

Harry nearly fell off the bench when the explosion rocked the house. Before he even knew what he was doing, he was shouting “Protego!” not aware that he’d flicked his wand into his hand, had crouched under the table, and was pulling Ginny and Ron with him. Shrieking erupted around him - he wasn’t sure who was screaming. He heard Charlie jump up. The plaster sounded like rain as it hit his shield.

“Fred and George!” Mrs. Weasley bellowed. “For the love of Morgana, those two are going to be the death of me!” Harry heard her storm out of the room and up the stairs.

Harry put his arm over Ginny, but Ron was struggling to get out of his grasp and out from under the table.

“Harry, it’s okay - it’s just the twins. One of their experiments. Happens all the time, mate,” Ron laughed. “Come on. It’s okay. Well, I mean we’ve got plaster in our tea, but no harm done.”

“Merlin’s beard! You’ve got some reflexes!” Charlie shouted, his voice distant as if he were on the other side of the shield. Harry could hear shuffling and grunting and finally, Charlie asked, “Harry, you can ‘Finite’ your protection charm - we’re safe now. Nothing else is going to fall on us.”

Harry started emerging from under the table and murmured, “Finite protego.”

“Ginny, are you okay?” Harry asked, bending down under the table again. She was trembling next to him and not following him back up.

He could hear Mrs. Weasley’s progress through the house and then her voice thundered - he was pretty sure it was magically magnified as there was no way she could be that loud naturally. It reminded him of the howler Ron had received after the fiasco with the Ford Anglia. He cringed in empathy with the twins at the same time that he wanted to join in bellowing at them.

*What on earth were they doing?*

Harry could hear Charlie vanishing the plaster dust with an *Evanesco* charm while Ron was pouring out their tea at the sink. “Uh oh, I don’t think we can salvage mum’s cake.”

“Ginny?”

“I’m here, Harry. That… that was loud,” she said.

“Yeah. I didn’t like it either. Are you still wearing the blindfold?” he asked, returning to the underneath of the table and running his hands over her hair and finding the blindfold still in place. “You can take it off, you know.”

“I know. I did for a bit when I was scared, but I put it back on. You can’t… I’m going to try to do it today,” she said.

“Are you two coming out from under the table or what?” Ron demanded.

“We’re coming, Ron. Keep your pants on,” Ginny retorted as she started crawling back to the bench.

It seemed that Percy had joined in yell-fest in the upper floors of the Burrow and that he was ranting as he descended the stairs to the kitchen. Harry had settled back on the bench when Percy walked in
his tones reduced to mutterings by the time he was sitting heavily on the bench beside Harry.

“… caused an entire inkwell to spill on my parchment and I couldn’t clean it off without removing the entire letter I’d written to Penelope!” Percy said to the room.

“That’s the pits, Percy,” Charlie commiserated. “I’m sure it’ll be a better letter the second time you write it.”

“I doubt it. They don’t think about anyone else. Totally absorbed in their own world. No consideration of those of us around them,” Percy continued.

Harry accepted the fresh cup of tea from Ron and started to take a bite from his toast until his tongue encountered plaster dust and he sputtered and tried to wipe off his tongue.

“Oh, yeah. Harry, don’t eat that. I hadn’t cleaned the table yet. It’s covered with plaster and who knows what else,” Charlie said, whisking the plate away.

“Wanna ride brooms, Harry? We can go down to the orchard and fly,” Ron invited.

“Er. I said I’d help Ginny do her chores. How about we help her with her chores and then we go fly?” Harry suggested.

“Ginny, why are you wearing a tie over your eyes?” Percy asked.

“Harry’s showing me what it’s like for him,” Ginny said.

“Well, that seems like a waste of time. I don’t know how that’s going to help anything,” Percy said.

“Yeah,” grumbled Ron in agreement. “Look, you’ve already spilled sugar all over the table. You’re making a mess.”

“That’s plaster, Ron!” Ginny exclaimed and Harry could hear her brushing it from the table.

“Oh, come off it, you lot,” Charlie prodded. “Maybe this is just what Ginny needs. And Ron, that’s rich coming from you - the boy with the table manners of a mountain troll.”

Percy shook out a paper and Harry was reminded of Uncle Vernon’s morning habit of reading the paper and shaking it vigorously to remind those around him to be quiet. At the thought of the Daily Prophet, Harry’s gut seized and he wondered if that reporter had written anything about him. No doubt Percy would read anything like that aloud to the room.

In an attempt to push those thoughts out of his mind, Harry got up from the bench and shook out his staff, then picked up his teacup and said, “Navigant sink.”

“Here, Harry, I can take that for you,” Ron said, jumping up and trying to grab the cup from Harry’s hands.

“It’s okay, Ron,” Harry said pulling it back, “I can get it.”

“Whatever, I was just trying to help out,” Ron sulked.

“I know. I just don’t want to be fussied over. I can still do things for myself, you know,” Harry said.

“Fussing over people is what we’re trained to do around here, don’t you know, Harry?” Charlie joked, his teacup rattling in the saucer as he laughed.
“Yeah, I know.”

Harry found the sink and washed out his cup and saucer in the warm soapy water he found in a basin - carefully working around the larger dishes that were cleaning themselves magically. Ron hovered nearby and moved around Harry hurriedly cleaning his own cup and saucer. He reached around Harry awkwardly at times, moving things around and getting in his way. Harry, with help from his staff, found a tea towel to dry his cup and saucer.

After feeling Ron brush against his arm again, Harry finally asked, “What are you doing, Ron?”

“Just trying to make it easier for you. There’s stuff that you could knock over,” Ron said.

Harry stood with the saucer and the tea towel in his hands, his staff in the crook of his elbow, and took in a deep breath and wiggled his toes, remembering one of the lessons with Ms. Midgeon.

“What?” Ron asked. “What are you doing?”

“I’m just remembering to breathe,” Harry said as he took another deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Pshew! As if you’d forget to breathe,” Ron said dismissively.

Harry took in another deep breath, trying to calm his heart which was trying to gallop out of his throat.

“Ron, why don’t you let Harry finish putting away his dishes,” Charlie asked.

“Merlin’s bullocks! I’m just trying to help! Why is everyone always ganging up on me?” Ron exclaimed as he stormed off. The aroma of mint was pushed into the room by the slamming back door.

Harry breathed out again and then *Navigant’d* to the cupboard to put his teacup and saucer away.

“Harry, is he like that at school, too? I don’t know how he manages to get away with being such a lumbering Chimera,” Charlie groused.

“Yeah, well. He feels things in a pretty big way, doesn’t he?” Harry said.

“He was like that as a baby, too. One moment fine, the next moment balling his head off,” Charlie said.

“Hey, Ginny, do you want to try using my staff? It’s pretty handy,” Harry invited.

“But don’t you need it, Harry,” Ginny replied tentatively.

“Sure, but I can get around without it for a bit - I want you to try using it,” Harry said.

“I’m interested in your staff, too, Harry. It looks like it does a lot more than the one that Godric used when he was at Hogwarts,” Charlie said.

“Really? I think he uses one just like mine now,” Harry said. “The clerk at Wiseacre’s said that Godric helped them develop a lot of their adaptive magical tools. Maybe he worked on the staff, too.”

“Could be, he’s really creative,” Charlie said.

Harry walked across the kitchen to Ginny. He could feel the heat of the fire in the hearth more
intensely on this side of the table, but wondered if the Weasleys had some sort of cooling charm set on the rest of the room that kept it from getting unbearably hot like the kitchen in the Braille home. It definitely was a lot more comfortable at the Weasleys.

Harry’s staff guided him around the cauldrons, brooms, pails, and chairs that cluttered the walkways - the silver tip tinged against them. He felt a little panicky at the thought of giving up his staff to Ginny, especially at the Burrow where there were so many things to trip over - but steeled himself. He had more experience navigating without sight and if she was going to trust that he was okay, then she needed to know that getting around wasn’t so hard… and it was definitely a lot easier with his staff and aftí.

“Oh, sorry,” he said as reached out thinking that he’d find her shoulder and touched the back of her head instead. “Here’s my staff.”

She reached out and found his arm and stood up tentatively, “I dunno, Harry.”

“I’m going to also give you the aftí - it’s the little metal piece that you put on your ear and then you can hear the staff talking to you,” he said as he took it off his ear and placed it in her palm. “It goes on the helix of your ear.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Here, I’ll help you put it on,” he said and he smoothed back her hair to reveal her ear and placed the aftí. “So you can use the staff as an extension of your fingers - to feel the ground in front of you. Hold it with your index finger pointing down the length of the staff and swing it from side to side. Swing it to the left and step forward with your right foot, then swing it to the right and step forward with your left foot - that way you know that the way is clear for your foot as you advance.”

“It makes a nice noise,” Ginny said.

“That’s the goblin silver tip I made at the workshop - I like the way it sounds, too. I can tell what things are by listening to the sounds it makes as it strikes them and also to the way it bounces off things around it - like the walls and the ceiling. I can tell that the ceiling is low here by the fireplace - my staff tells me that, too, so that I know when to duck so that I don’t hit my head.”

“You’re not going to know, Harry,” Ginny said horrified and tried to push the staff back into his hands.

“It’s okay. I’ll be careful. You try it. Walk along the table here,” Harry encouraged, pushing the staff back to Ginny. “I’ll just stay here. And Charlie will make sure I don’t run into anything, right?”

“Sure thing, Harry.”

“If we were outside you’d hold it right about at your navel and swing it from side to side about the width of your body. It’s probably a little tall for you, but it should still work okay. When we’re inside, you hold it a little more close to your body, but still swing it from side to side. Some people let it touch the ground on either side, others have a ball attachment that rolls as it glides over the ground. It kind of depends on what you need. Is it telling you what is around you? Can you hear the aftí speaking in your ear?”

“Yeah, it’s describing the room to me as I move it. That’s pretty cool. Ron should try this, too. I think it’d help him feel better,” Ginny said.

“Oh,” said Harry.
Charlie was standing by him and put his arm around his shoulders. “Hey, Harry. Don’t take it so hard. I think a lot of us are feeling that way… like we should have been the ones defending our little sister from Tom Riddle and the Basilisk.” Ginny made a small sound - a gasp or a sob. “Lot of Weasley guilt swirling around the burrow. We all handle it differently. The twins blow things up, Ron runs off, Percy pretends that it nothing has happened. You’re just going to have to get used to it. I think the lot of us should talk to the Mind Healer.”

“Yes, it does help,” Harry agreed reluctantly.

Percy shook his paper forcefully as if to push the noise away.

“See what I mean?” Charlie whispered.

Harry let out a breath of air that almost sounded like a laugh - though it was hollow. He sucked it back in quickly.

“Am I doing it right, Harry?” Ginny asked from across the room.

“Have you run into anything yet?” Harry asked.

“No, and it keeps talking to me,” Ginny said.

“Then you’re doing great.”

“This is pretty cool.”

“Do you want to try navigating somewhere?” Harry asked walking toward her while trailing his hand on the table to his left. “Like ask it to tell you how to get someplace else? You can also ask it to help you find things - like I did with the tea towel or if you want it to take you to a person - as long as they’ve been Memento’d into the staff already.”

“Oh, that’s neat. How about the sitting room?”

“Okay, then say, Navigant sitting room ,” Harry instructed.

He heard her whispering the incantation and then walking toward the sitting room.

Harry had reached the end of the kitchen table - long though it was to accommodate all the Weasleys.

Charlie tapped the back of his hand with his and Harry accepted his sighted guide and went with him to the sitting room to follow Ginny’s progress. Charlie was careful leading Harry around the tight spaces and giving him cues about where he was in the room. “This is a narrow spot, Harry - the armchair on your left has a stack of cookbooks piled high on the seat - careful you don’t send them cascading as we pass by.” Harry could hear knitting needles clicking efficiently behind the stack of books - recognizing the sound from his first visit to the Burrow.

He heard Ron enter quietly through the back door and turned his head in Ron’s direction.

“Yes, I’m back,” Ron muttered.

“Good,” Harry said. “Ginny, do you think you’re ready to feed the hens and gather their eggs?”

“Yes, I guess so,” Ginny responded turning toward him.

“Ron, do you want to guide Harry? I think I should see if mum needs help. It seems like she’s been
up there a long time. I wonder if they got injured and she’s healing them,” Charlie said.

“Sure, I can do that,” Ron said grudgingly stepping forward near Harry and Charlie.

“Thanks, Ron,” Harry said.


“It’s okay. I knew you’d be back,” Harry reassured. “So, Ginny, you know how to ask the staff to tell you how to get to the hen coop, right? Go ahead and Navigant there and we’ll follow you.”

“Hey, first help me with my chores. I need to finish the dishes and sweep the kitchen,” Ron said. “Then, we can go and help Ginny do her chores.”

“Are you going to do them blindfolded, too?” Ginny asked.

“What?” Ron exclaimed. “Naw. Harry doesn’t have another Gryffindor tie.”

“But we could summon one from your room, I bet,” Harry said flicking out his wand, “Accio Ron’s Gryffindor tie.”

“Great, that’s just what I need. How are we going to sweep the kitchen if we’re all blind?”

“Don’t you all use magic to sweep?” Harry asked as the tie floated into his outstretched hand.

“Naw, mum makes us do it the muggle way. Says it builds character. Though I think she was tired of random things getting vanished along with the dust and dirt,” Ron explained as he took the tie from Harry.

“So, how are we going to do this if we all can’t see? Who’s going to lead us to the kitchen?”

“We can follow Ginny,” Harry suggested.

“I dunno about this. If we break something, mum’s going to flay us. She’s already been put over the edge by the explosion,” Ron said.

“If we break something, it’ll be my fault, okay? And we can just do the reparo charm,” Harry said.

“And have it rainbow colored? Well, if you do it, then she’ll probably think it’s straight from Morgana’s cauldron.”

“Hey, are you two coming or not,” Ginny said from across the room.

“Did you already put on the tie?” Harry asked.

“Um, yeah. Harry where are you? I can’t see!” Ron said.

“Very fun…” Harry started to say, but then Ron was flailing around and whacked Harry in the chest, pushing him into the tower of cookbooks that came crashing down, scraping his shins and landing on Harry’s toes. Harry yelped in pain.

“Pixie snot!” Ron yelled as they both bent down to pick up the books and collided heads.

“Oh, ow.”

They managed to stack them back up. Little bits of parchment and newspaper clippings had fallen
out, too, and they put those in a pile on top of the stack. The knitting kept clicking rhythmically.

Harry’s sense of where he was in the sitting room was disrupted by the commotion and his smarting head - he felt disoriented.

“Ron, do you know where we are in the sitting room and how to get to the door to the kitchen?”

“Sure, we’re by the sofa, see the footsto… umph! Yeah. It’s right here,” Ron had gone down with a thud.

“Nice one, Ron,” Harry smiled and crouched down trying to find Ron’s arms to help pull him up.

“Ow. How do you do this every day?”

“Navigant kitchen,” Harry said.

“Walk two feet to your left and then turn and walk ten feet straight ahead,” a clipped and disembodied voice said.

“Whoa! I thought Ginny had your staff,” Ron said.

“She does, but I thought I’d try the charm with my wand to see what happens,” Harry said. “That’s cool. I’m glad to know that there’s a backup.”

“Why use your staff at all?” Ron said.

“Well, I can feel the ground with my staff and listen to the echoes and get a sense of the size of a room and also it is kind of a warning to the people around me to watch out as well… at least that’s what Godric says,” Harry explained.

“Oh, yeah. I guess that would be handy, except the part where you’re warning everyone to get out of your way - I’d think that’d be embarrassing,” Ron admitted as they made their way through the sitting room to the kitchen without upending anything else.

"It's more embarrassing to fall down in front of people, I think," Harry said.

"Yeah. And it hurts," Ron said and Harry could feel him bending down to rub his shin.

Harry could hear Ginny opening a door and guessed that she was getting the brooms out.

“We have two brooms and a dustpan. How are we going to do this?” she asked.

“What? Now Ron’s blind, too?” Percy said as he got up noisily crushing the paper as he slammed it on the table and left the room.

“Well, it’s best to be really methodical about it. Did you close that closet door, Ginny?” Harry asked.

“Um, no,” and he heard the door close.

“Trust me, it really hurts to run into an open door - better to just close them so that you know.”

“So, at Privet Drive, I’d start in one corner and work my way across the floor in small sections. I also learned that if I take off my shoes and socks, I can feel the dirt better and have a better sense for when the floor is actually clean,” Harry explained.

Ron snorted.
“What?”

“I dunno why you had to be so precise about it - it’s just a kitchen floor that’s going to get slopped on the next meal time,” Ron said.

“Well, you’d do it, too, if Aunt Petunia was going to hit you with the cast iron skillet if you didn’t get every last speck of dirt,” Harry said without thinking it through.

“What? She didn’t hit you after you were blinded, did she?” Ron asked.

“Um, yeah, well. I’ll take a broom. Ron, do you want the other broom?” Harry asked finding the broom that Ginny was holding out to him.

“Seriously, she didn’t hit a blind kid for missing some dirt in her kitchen just days after he was blinded?”

“So, I used a can of soup to mark my progress across the floor so that I’d know where I was,” Harry said.

“With a cast iron skillet? Are you serious, mate?” Ron had stormed over to him and Harry suspected that he had ripped off his blindfold.

“Hey, never mind, Ron, it’s fine,” Harry tried to soothe, though he felt the sting of being called a blind kid at the same time that he was berating himself for letting that slip.

*I’m so stupid!*

“It’s not fine. I’m telling mum. You can’t go back there, Harry!” and he stormed out of the room again.

“Well, that’s one way to get out of his chores,” Ginny sighed. “He’s kind of a genius at it, actually. They didn’t actually hit you, did they?”

“So, if we start in this corner, we can work along the cabinets here all the way to the back door. We can either sweep up each little pile as we make it or use something to mark a bigger pile that we add to. Did you take off your shoes and socks?”

“Yeah. Harry, my Mind Healer says that talking about big things can help chip them down so that they are easier to handle… kind of like sharing the weight of the load. You don’t have to carry it all by yourself,” Ginny said.

“Yeah? That seems really … wise. So, is it helping, Ginny?” Harry asked.

“I guess so. I can get out of bed now… so yeah…” Ginny said.

“Yeah, that’s good,” Harry said as he set his trainers with the socks stuffed in them on the bench. He could feel a fair amount of dirt on the floor with his bare feet, even after Charlie had cleaned up the plaster.

He started sweeping along the cabinets and Ginny started sweeping along the benches. Harry placed the edge of the dustpan where he started at a broom’s width away from the cabinet so that he’d know where to start the next row. He left his pile by the back door and made his way back to the dustpan to start his second row. In the Burrow, sweeping was almost a pleasant task - without the weight of the frying pan hanging over his head.
Harry could hear Ginny adding her pile to his - but he didn’t hear his staff.

“Are you still holding my staff?” he asked.

“No, I put it by the broom closet,” Ginny said.

He was tempted to summon it, but didn’t.

Ginny cursed and Harry guessed that she’d run into the bench.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just found the bench with my kneecap.”

“If the bruise is bad, I have a bottle of essence of dittany in my staff. It works quickly. Also, I’ve learned a healing charm.”

“Naw, I’m okay.”

Ron’s progress back to the kitchen was preceded by the thunderous stomping of his feet - Harry could feel the house shaking through his bare feet on the kitchen floor.

“I’m back!” Ron announced.

“We know,” said Ginny.

“What? How’d you know?”

“Seriously, Ron? You are like a herd of Erumpents!”

“We’ve got a pile ready for you to sweep up,” Harry said.

“Hey, this looks good! Thanks!” Ron said approvingly.

“You’re welcome, Ron.” Ginny’s tone had a sardonic edge.

“Oh, wait. I’ve got to wash the dishes, too,” Ron said as he gathered up the dishes from the table in a clattering of china and piled it into the sink.

By the time he’d finished the dishes, Ginny and Harry had swept their pile into the dustpan and thrown it out in the yard.

“Harry, I don’t want to do the blindfold thing today. Maybe another day, mate, okay?” Ron said as they made their way out to the hen house.

“No worries,” Harry said.

It didn’t take long to determine that Ron was not the best guide through the minefield of gnome burrows in the yard, and so Harry talked Ginny through the main points of being led by a guide and Ginny took Harry’s arm while he used his staff to find the hen house. They were making their way through the yard slowly while Ron walked next to them making comments about the burrows in an attempt to be helpful.

The Weasley chickens weren’t quite as docile as the hens at the Braille Farm and Harry rubbed a spot on the back of his hand where a hen had nailed him with her beak. He managed not to drop the egg. That, in itself, felt like a victory.
“Here, I’ll run these back to the kitchen, then we can head to the broom shed and the orchard to fly, okay?” Ron offered as he ran back to the house without waiting for their answer.

“I don’t know about flying, Harry,” Ginny said as he and his staff led the way to the broom shed.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. You know, you could take the blindfold off while we fly,” Harry said.

“Yeah, I know. I really want to try doing this today while you’re here. At first, it was really pretty scary to not be able to see - especially with that explosion - but the longer I do it … I’m not as scared. I’m so used to looking at things, that I didn’t realize how much I hear, feel, smell, and taste things, too. It’s not all vision. I really thought you were … I dunno… cut off from everything,” Ginny explained.

“Yeah. It’s bloody inconvenient and frustrating sometimes, but it’s not the end of the world,” Harry said. And he realized that it was true.
Ron had lumbered back toward Ginny and Harry at the broom shed as they were pulling out the Cleansweeps.

“Hey, that’s mine!” Ron said.

“I know, doxie dung, that’s why I’m getting it out. Geesh!” Ginny mumbled.

“How do you know it is mine? Did you look?” Ron asked.

“I can tell by how sticky the handle is - it’s like you were eating cauldron cakes right off it. Do you ever polish it?” Ginny retorted.

“Yes, I polish it!” Ron snapped and Harry couldn’t help but laugh. “Shut it, Harry. Here’s yours, Ginny.”

“I’ll just leave mine here for now. Maybe I’ll try out Harry’s,” Ginny said. “Are Fred and George going to fly, too?”

“Naw, maybe later. Mum had to heal their burns and now they are working on putting their room back together. She is not happy. I didn’t tell her about her cake, either. I think we should stay away for awhile. Let her cool down. Good thing we did our chores,” Ron said. “Percy won’t come and Charlie’s helping mum and the twins with the repairs. They both burned off their eyebrows and their fringe! Mum’s not going to help them with regrowth charms until they have everything else put back together. Are they a sight! You should see them!”

Harry laughed imagining the twins with no eyebrows and burned fringe. He was glad they were alright.

“So Harry, you can really fly?” Ron asked.

“Yeah, I can,” Harry said. “It’s different from before, but I’m getting the hang of it.”

He summoned his broom out of his staff.

“Ophff!”

“Oh, sorry, Ginny - didn’t think you were so close,” Harry said as he poked her with his broom.

“It’s okay. It’s just surprising, you know?”

“Yeah, I think that might be one of the hardest things to get used to - not seeing things coming before they touch you - whatever they are. I’m getting better, though, at hearing and feeling them.”

“Come on, you two, let’s go!” Ron zoomed off on his broom, but Harry walked with Ginny over to the orchard where they flew. He remembered how at the end of last summer the ground was littered with apples that had fallen from the trees and that distinctive smell of the sweet, rotting fruit. He was glad that it was earlier in the summer and they didn’t have to worry about stepping in that gooey mess.

“So, Ginny, my staff goes in this compartment in my broom - Figora helped me make it. I make sure my staff is vibrating instructions instead of speaking because I really just need to know how fast something is coming at me and how big it is,” Harry explained.
“How can you tell what things are if it just vibrating? That sounds confusing,” Ginny said.

“Well, when you’re flying there are fewer things - so the vibrating works. It gets more intense the bigger something is… and it has different levels - so you start to feeling everything around you - it’s almost like they are beneath your fingertips. I dunno. You’ll have to just try it. It is kind of hard to explain.”

Harry placed the staff inside his broom.

“Hey, wait a sec. Hold onto my broom. Can you feel that? That’s Ron flying toward us. I think he’s trying to buzz us. Git. When I say three, crouch down - one, two, three,” Harry whispered and they dropped down while Ron zoomed over their heads then came back to land by them.

“Hey, how did you know I was going to buzz you?” Ron laughed.

“We could smell you coming,” Ginny said as they stood back up.

“No seriously, how’d you know?”

“Did you eat onions?” Harry laughed.

“Fine. Are you coming or not?” Ron said.

“Ginny, what do you want to do? We could fly together - but I’m still pretty new to this… you know… flying blind… and I haven’t flown here since I lost my sight. Maybe I should take a few laps and get used to the orchard again and then I could take you up? What do you think? Does that sound alright?” Harry asked.

“Yes, I’ll just wait down here and listen. Don’t leave me for a long time, though, okay,” Ginny asked.

“Yes, I’ll just wait down here and listen. Don’t leave me for a long time, though, okay,” Ginny asked.

“Yeah, I’ll do a few laps - first low and then gradually higher and I’ll come by each time and check on you,” Harry said. “Oh, here comes Ron again. One, two, three, duck!”

“Onions, I tell you! Onions!”

Harry took off and started low, with his feet trailing over the undergrowth. It was wilder here than at the manicured park at Old Ellerby and so Harry was getting more feedback from his staff about the terrain.

Ron zoomed up behind him, “Finally, I thought you’d never get on your broom. Why are you flying low? Come on - let’s go higher.”

“Hey, Ron. I need to map this out first - get the lay of the land - and I told Ginny I’d check in with her and then take her up.”

“Oh, come on mate! Let’s just fly! Ginny will be fine,” Ron whinged.

“In a bit, but let me do this first, okay?” Harry said, trying to be patient. “And don’t you dare buzz Ginny again!” This he shouted to Ron’s back as he took off again. He wondered if he would have been such a tormenting older brother had he been given a chance.

He heard Ginny yelp and guessed that Ron had not been able to resist.

Prat.
The trees in the orchard made it a lot more challenging to navigate - they weren’t neatly trimmed as the ones in the park and the undergrowth created an undulating pattern of vibrations that made him rise and fall as he progressed around the orchard.

“Hey, Ginny,” he called as he approached her. “Are you okay? That prat buzz you again?”

“Yeah - don’t worry. I’ll get him back. He won’t know what hit him,” Ginny said, sounding more like herself than she had in a while.

Like the Ginny at the beginning of term last year…

But there was something new in her voice that hadn’t been there before… an edge.

“I’m going up a little higher. Hey, do you want me to cast the bell charm on my broom so that you can hear me?” he asked, stopping by her.

“Yeah, and on Ron’s, too,” she said.

“Campanis minima,” Harry muttered while tapping his broom with his wand and it made a little tinkling noise that sped up as he moved. “Well, I’ll have to catch him to cast that spell. We’ll see if I can manage that!”

He took off a little faster than before, no longer tracing his feet over the undergrowth. There were more branches wanting to whip across his face and he learned to discern the minute differences conveyed in the vibrations from his broom. He sped up as he traveled around the orchard, tracking Ron’s moving form through the vibrations and gaining on him until he was right behind him.

“What’s that bell noise?” Ron asked slowing so that they were flying in tandem.

Harry leaned over, moving his wand through the air as he felt the thrumming through his broom so that he could touch his wand to Ron’s broom.

“Whatcha doin’ mate?”

As soon as his wand made contact with the broom he uttered the incantation. The bells on Ron’s broom had a different timber and Harry wondered how he’d done that - if it was in his intention or something innate in the object he was enchanting.

I’ll have to ask Hermione.

“Hey! Why’d you do that?” Ron sputtered.

“So you can’t buzz your sister anymore. Puts us on more even footing, doesn’t it?” Harry said as he sped up moving out of Ron’s range and then dipping down toward the ground as he neared Ginny.

“Can you hear the bells on Ron’s broom?” he asked as he went by her.

“Yes, that’s brilliant Harry - I can tell the difference between your broom and his,” she called up to him.

“One more time around and I’ll come get you,” Harry said.

“Come on, Harry, these bells are driving me crazy. Finite it already,” Ron yelled from across the orchard.

Harry shook his head as he angled his broom to do a higher lap around the orchard - weaving around
the trees that were planted haphazardly on the edge of the open space. Harry was gaining on Ron.

He went up a bit higher - the sun had broken through the clouds and was beating down on him and he felt a bead of sweat skate down his back and then soak into his T-shirt. He ran his hand through his hair and the sweat made it stand on end, even in the breeze. He’d had his eyes closed tight against the brightness for a while. He breathed in deeply.

*Merlin, I love this!*

The vibrations of his staff inside his broom zinged through him in a way that he was beginning to understand the branches of the tree that he was approaching and simultaneously distinguish Ron’s moving form on the bobbing broom in front of him. It was like an orchestra of vibrations with each component expressed by a different instrument - blending together at times but also still distinct and creating a harmony of haptic shapes. As he passed the elements of the orchard they’d fade in intensity, but were still present so that he had a sense of everything around him - a complete sphere of understanding, but with the objects he was moving toward laid out in the most vivid detail.

He marveled at the magic that translated the world around him into a language that he could understand through touch and wondered if he could use his staff this same way when he was walking through the cluttered rooms of the Burrow or if it would be too much information to be able to distinguish all the books, knick-knacks, pots, pans, and odd pieces of furniture.

He came up behind Ron and then zoomed over him, reaching down to bonk him gently on the back of the head as he passed. Ron swerved and dove as he momentarily lost control of his broom in his surprise.

“Hey! Git!” Ron roared in protest and then tried to speed after Harry in pursuit. But Ron’s old Cleansweep was no match for Harry’s Nimbus 2000 and Harry was soon out of reach. He angled down for his descent toward Ginny who seemed to be hopping around.

“What’s wrong, Ginny?”

“The bugs are eating me alive!”

“Are you ready to fly?”

“Yes, take me away from these little bloodsuckers, please!”

“Okay, I’m going to get off the broom and stand next to you, so you can get on, then I’ll get on behind you. Okay?” Harry reached out and was able to find her shoulder and follow her arm down to her hand because, he realized, he could better understand the information he was getting from his staff - he had a better sense of her form from the vibrations than from the audio descriptions he’d been mostly relying on from his staff. It was just too much information to convey in words.

He paused after he placed her hand on the broom.

“What is it, Harry?” Ginny asked as she swung her leg over. Harry, still holding on the broom, got on behind her, his arms around her. Her small frame pressed against him - warm and comfortable. He pushed off gently from the ground and they started a circuit around the orchard with their feet dragging over the grasses and scraggly bushes. At one point, Harry was pretty sure that he had accidentally kicked a garden gnome in the back of the head. He heard it muttering curses as they floated away.

“I just figured out how to use my staff in a new way that I hadn’t known before - and it is kind of amazing. I’ll show you - it’s the vibrations in the broom - it’s like a language that translates the
objects around me into a pattern that I feel, like with my whole body - so that I know where we are and what we’re approaching. Godric tried to explain it to me, but I really just now am beginning to understand what it means,” Harry said a bit breathlessly.

“Oh, that’s really amazing, Harry,” Ginny said.

“It’s going to take me a while to really learn how to use it, but yeah, it’s really useful magic. Are you doing okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, I see what you mean about the vibrations. They are weird. Ticklish and different. I really don’t know what they mean, though,” she asked as he took them a little higher.

“Are you two coming up here or not!” Ron bellowed from up above the trees.

“Better watch out, Ronald Weasley!” Harry yelled over his shoulder as he sped up a little and Ginny whooped.

Harry had given Ginny the staff and the aftí again as they made their way through the maze of garden gnome burrows after returning Ron’s Cleansweep to the broom shed. She had restored the magical voice rather than try to interpret the vibrations as she said it was like listening to Gobbledygook. Harry was missing the vivid detail that the vibrations had provided of the world around him. He felt as if his world was suddenly silent and unmoving. It was a weird sensation.

Ginny was moving slowly around the gnome burrows - really trying to be a mindful guide to Harry. Ron had run on ahead - too hungry to wait for them in their slow progress across the field. Harry heard it first.

“Who’s that?” Harry asked.

“Who’s who?” Ginny questioned.

“I hear someone talking,” Harry said as he stopped to listen more carefully.

“Oh. I don’t hear anyone. Oh, wait. Oh. That might be our neighbor, Loony Luna. I mean, Luna. She’s got a thing for our garden gnomes. She’s always coming over here and trying to talk them into moving up to her yard. Mum would love it if they would! I don’t know why they don’t go with her!”

Harry heard a trilling sound - like a bird, but not as high pitched as a birdsong.

“Loony Luna? Is that really her name?” Harry asked.

“No, I suppose not, but that’s what everyone calls her,” Ginny said, tugging on his arm.

But Harry had turned. The voice was approaching them and he was curious.

“Does she go to Hogwarts?” he whispered.

“Yeah - she’s in Ravenclaw - same year as me.”

“Greetings neighbors!” a light voice rang out across the field.

Harry lifted his hand in greeting and then let it falter - he wasn’t really the neighbor after all - maybe it was presumptuous of him to wave.
“Hi, Luna,” Ginny said grudgingly.

“Are you communing with the Germunblies then? Is that why you’re shielding your eyes from them?” Luna asked, her feet barely making noise as she approached them on the uneven tundra.

“Germuublies?” asked Harry.

“The garden gnomes. I always thought the Weasley family didn’t welcome them, but respecting their mating rituals by averting your eyes - well, I’m sure you can tell - they are impressed,” Luna said in a wisping voice that had a sing-song quality to it - as if she were narrating a fairytale.

“Mating rituals!?” Harry said.

“Harry, this is our neighbor, Luna Lovegood,” Ginny said briskly. “Luna, this is our friend, Harry Potter.” At this formal introduction, Harry stuck out his hand and waited. After a long minute, he felt a small, wiry hand grasp his in a vice-like grip. He had expected a soft and plump hand from the quality of her voice.

“It’s nice to meet you, Luna,” Harry said recovering from his surprise.

“Oh, you are Harry Potter,” she responded.

“Yes,” Harry said as warmth snaked up his neck. “I am.”

“Well, don’t let me stop you - weren’t you about to offer them your finger?”

“What?”

“They are waiting, you shouldn’t keep them waiting. They want to bestow their gift on you,” Luna said impatiently.

“Luna, we’re not offering our fingers to the Garden Gnomes. We rather need them,” Ginny said with a hint of exasperation.

“Oh, well, they’ll give them back, you know,” Luna said and it sounded like she had turned her back on them and was kneeling near the ground.

“It’s rude to keep them waiting,” she said grabbing Harry by the arm and pulling him down to the ground near her. He yelped in surprise.

She pushed his hand toward the ground where he could feel the cool air and before he was able to yank it back, a garden gnome (he guessed) had sunk its teeth into his finger and wasn’t letting go. Harry fell back onto the ground, the gnome latched onto his finger, grinding down onto it painfully.

“Ow!”

“Harry! What’s happening!” Ginny yelled.

“Come on, Ginny, you, too. I think they’ll bestow their gift on you as well,” Luna said as she jumped up and Harry could hear her dragging Ginny down, too.

Harry was still trying to get the gnome off his finger and flailing his hand around while the creature had wrapped its arms and legs around his forearm.

“No, Luna - stop. I don’t want it,” Ginny said forcefully.
“But it could help you get rid of the Wrackspurts,” Luna said in her lilting voice.

“I don’t have Wrackspurts!”

“But your mum said you’ve been spending all your time in the dark under your covers ever since you were abducted.”

“Gah!” Harry grunted as the toothy creature was finally flung from his arm and he could hear its little body thud on the ground not far from where they are. He went to stick his finger in his mouth, but Luna grabbed it.

“No, wait. You want the saliva to seep in - otherwise, it’ll just be a nasty cut with nothing to show for it,” Luna said and Harry realized that he didn’t want the gnome saliva in his mouth either.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“Well, the Gernumbli gardensi saliva will give you great powers of creativity - Pa says that’s why I’m such a talented artist. I don’t know how your creativity will manifest, but I’m sure it’ll be great,” she said with such intensity of belief that the anger that had flared in his chest when she had grabbed him and forced his hand into the gnome burrow was abating.

“Okay - but next time warn a guy, please? That was … very alarming,” Harry said, gripping his throbbing finger.

“Oh, do you think there will be a next time?” Luna asked innocently. “Are you going to come visit again?”

“There better not be, Luna. That was not okay,” Ginny said so fiercely that Harry imagined that her fiery hair was whipping around her face like flames.

“So you weren’t out here with the blindfolds and the dark glasses trying to get bitten?” Luna asked perplexed.

“No, we were just going back to the Burrow. Harry has been showing me what it is like for him… to be blind,” Ginny said.

“Oh, are you blind then?” Luna asked.

“Er, yes,” Harry said.

“Did you do that so that you could see more clearly?” Luna asked.

“What? No, I didn’t want it to happen. And no, I can’t see more clearly. I can’t see at all,” Harry said confused.

“Hey, Luna, we’ve got to go inside and get something for Harry’s bite. … Do you want to come in and have lunch with us?” Ginny asked, hesitating slightly before she issued the invitation.

“Oh, yes, I would like that very much. Thank you, Ginny. You are always so kind to me… even when your brother is not. He does say some very funny things, though,” she said in her droll way.

Harry knew she was talking about Ron and sighed. And he felt a pang of kinship with her, reminded of all the times he had hung around the playground waiting to be invited to play with children who never invited him because they were afraid of Dudley.

Harry summoned his staff and handed it back to Ginny who led him through the maze of gnome
burrows. Harry did hear odd noises coming from the burrows. He grimaced. He’d always just thought they were odd little pests and never really thought about them having their own magic and traditions and definitely didn’t want to think about them mating.

Luna followed behind them - she seemed to be skipping from gnome burrow to gnome burrow and dropping something in the holes.

“What are you giving them?” Harry finally asked.

“Oh, just fertility charms… so that they are fruitful,” Luna said dreamily.

“Don’t tell mum,” Ginny whispered to Harry as if he needed that warning.

Harry smelled the mint by the back door and breathed in deeply as they walked up the steps and into the kitchen.

“Mum,” Ginny announced to the room, “Luna is going to join us for lunch.”

“Oh, that’s very nice dear,” Mrs. Weasley said. “Hello, Luna, love, I’m so glad you’re here. Oh, Harry, Ron told me what you said about the frying pan.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably and she swooped down, enclosing him in a tight hug. When she stepped back, holding him at arm’s length and no doubt peering into his face, her voice had tears in it.

“Listen, Harry. We are going to do whatever we can to make sure you are not harmed ever again. Do you understand?” The tears had evaporated from her voice, replaced with a smoldering ember of intensity.

“Yes, ma’am,” was all Harry could think to say in response. He didn’t doubt it, though he had no idea how she’d do it.

She embraced him again, tight against her heaving chest.

“Mum, Harry was bitten by a garden gnome, I’m going to help him get it sorted out, okay?” Ginny said tugging Harry out of her arms.

“Oh, yes, dear. You know what to do. The dittany is in the cupboard in the toilet, on the right side. You’d better take off your blindfold for that, though. Don’t want to mix up potions,” Mrs. Weasley counseled.

Harry heard other people in the kitchen and wanted his staff so that he could find out who was sitting at the table and who was paging through a book by the fireplace.

“Ron, are you here?” he asked.

“I thought you could smell me,” Ron said grumpily.

“Don’t mind, Ron, he’s just hungry,” Charlie said as he set something heavy on the table. “Wash up, Ron, like mum asked and then fetch the plates.”

“Why do I have to everything?” Ron groused, to which his mother snorted.

“We’re here, too, Harry and Ginny,” said Fred and George almost in unison though Fred’s voice came from near the fire while George was at the table by Ron.
“Counting on boosting your creativity, then, were you, Harry?” George said. “Someday we’re going to figure out how to harvest gnome saliva without getting bitten.”

“Well, pa says that it is the mixture in your bloodstream that makes it effective as well as the angle of the sun, position of the moon, and direction of the wind,” Luna said blithely sitting down at the table across from George. “The conditions today were perfect. That’s why I came down to visit your colony. Ohh! Were you also honoring the Gernumblies when you burned off your eyebrows?”

Harry heard George and Fred grilling Luna on the finer points of gnome magic as he and Ginny headed down the narrow hallway to the toilet behind the fireplace, underneath the stairs. Mrs. Weasley bellowed up the stairs, telling Percy that lunch was ready.

“Ginny, I can summon the essence of dittany out of my staff if you don’t want to take the blindfold off just yet,” Harry offered. “But I could use a clean bandage.”

“That’d be nice, Harry. I’m getting used to the blindfold. Though I almost took it off when I heard you yelling,” she said as she pushed the staff back into his hands.

He felt relief as he felt the smooth surface of the staff again under his fingers as he felt for the dots that indicated the opening for the storage.
Roasted asparagus

On the way back from the toilet with Ginny holding his arm, Harry tried out the vibration setting on his staff to see if he could navigate through the house the same way as he was flying around the orchard. The hallway was definitely doable - he could discern the walls, floor, and ceiling and even gathered that there was a fair assortment of pictures on the walls - family photographs from what he remembered.

“Harry, I can kind of feel the vibrations through your body - I can’t really make sense of them, but maybe with more practice…” Ginny said.

“Really? That’s kind of cool. I want to talk to Peter more about this - I think it is what he uses,” Harry said.

“Who’s Peter?”

“He’s also a resident at the Center - he’s in another dormitory room. He was already hard of hearing and then he was in a Potions accident and lost his sight. Erumpent powder, I think,” Harry said.


“We use a form of sign language where you touch to talk - it’s called Protactile. I was already learning it to talk to Gemma,” Harry explained and he paused, putting the staff in the crook of his arm where it continued to give him information about his surrounding, including the fact that Ginny had raised her arm to move her hair. He touched the back of Ginny’s hand that was on his arm. “This means walking or going, depending on the context.”

“Wow, you’re really learning a lot, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. I guess I am,” he said, taking up his staff again.

They were back in the kitchen and it was definitely more challenging to interpret all the haptic messages he was getting from his staff - but he was able to navigate to the kitchen table where he found spots for both of them. He realized that he was using his four remaining senses more fully than he ever had before - it wasn’t just interpreting the messages from his staff. He was listening to the sounds of the Weasleys moving around the room and their voices, the sounds of the various magical objects working - the knitting in the sitting room, the pots washing in the sink, the ticking of the ever-present clock, the crackling of the fire - coupled with the smells of food cooking mingled with the gentle smoke from the fireplace. He could even tell where things were piled high on the table and where it was more open - avoiding sending a landslide of scrolls to the ground again - the vibrations were definitely better than the constant stream of words now that he was getting the hang of interpreting them.

Ginny settled next to Luna who had moved on to Erklings with Fred and George. Charlie had joined in on the discussion, too.

“Oh, those are in Romania, too - they have to ward homes and schoolyards against them,” Charlie said.

Harry felt Ginny shudder next to him.

“What are Erklings?” Harry asked.
“Nasty elf-like creatures that eat children - though I always thought that parents made up those stories to keep children from wandering off,” Ron said with a mouth full of food from Harry’s right.

“Ronald Bilius Weasley! We do not start eating before our guests have been served!” Mrs. Weasley hissed from across the room.

Harry heard Ron swallow quickly.

“Sorry, mum,” he muttered.

Harry started to get up, but Ginny pulled him back down. “Where are you going?” she whispered.

“I was going to help out,” Harry whispered back.

“It’s all ready - we just need mum to sit down so that we can start. The only way that’ll happen is if everyone is at the table waiting,” Ginny explained. “Hey, how do you eat without seeing? Sorry, that’s a stupid question.”

“Hey - it’s okay. It’s mostly the same. I mean, you don’t always know what stuff is, right? If someone else made it and put it on your plate - so you have to figure that out, but if you can get it on a fork or spoon, you’ll be okay. Sometimes it is a little tricky. We use the face of a clock to describe where things are - like your pumpkin pasties are at noon and your bangers and mash are at 6 o’clock,” Harry said.

“Ew,” Ginny said.

“Well, you know. Just examples,” Harry said.

“So, does your staff help you find things on your plate?” Fred asked.

“No, though I suppose I could use it like that - it usually describes bigger things - but I could probably ask it to help me find things on my plate. I haven’t really tried that yet,” Harry said.

“You should charm your glasses with that **Navigant** charm so that when you’re, you know, looking at things, it could tell you where they are,” George said. “Or your fork… **Navigant** pickled beets. Or better yet, have your fork summon bites of food onto it. *Accio* peas.”

“Ha! That’s a good idea. How do you put a charm like that in an object?” Harry asked. “Is it like what your dad did with the Ford Anglia?” Harry asked.

“That infernal car!” Mrs. Weasley exclaimed as she set yet another clattering platter of food on the table. He was pretty sure it was roasted asparagus.

“Oh, sorry,” Harry cringed.

“Oh, Harry, dear, don’t you worry. I just… well, I told Arthur that a world of trouble would come crashing down on us if ever word got about that monstrosity… and then there it was zooming across the pages of the Daily Prophet. You know, we still get howlers about it?” she sighed as she settled into her chair at the head of the table. “Well, what are you waiting for? Let’s eat! Percy, dear, please pass the Steak and Kidney pie to Luna. Careful, the pot is hot.”

“Fred, if we put that charm on my glasses, then I could use just the silver tip on my staff or the vibrations on my staff. But when I say **Navigant** - how would my glasses know that I’m talking about them or my staff, for that matter? That could get confusing,” Harry mused.
“You should ask Godric - I think he’s already figured out a lot of this stuff,” Charlie suggested.

“Yeah, I will. Hey, Fred and George, you guys like to make things - I need a wallet for my muggle money that I could use in front of muggles, but that maybe could help me keep track of the money - so that I know what I’m grabbing. Do you have any ideas - like how I could make something like that?” Harry asked as he held the hot dish of Steak and Kidney pie for Ginny as she scooped some out on her plate.

“You mean like how the maps at the Center spoke to you in your aftí when you ran your hands over them? Isn’t that just a simple translation charm?” Fred said.

“I dunno, I guess?” Harry shrugged. “Do you know how to cast translation charms?”

“We use translation charms for Dragon texts a lot - they are often written in languages that aren’t spoken anymore. I might be able to help you with that - if you have a wallet you want to modify. You’d probably want to add some pockets to it, right?” Charlie said.

“Well, actually - I don’t have a wallet. I just have a bag that I keep my wixen money in…” but he was cut off.

“Oooh! Wixen! I love that term. Have you been reading Sapience by Matilda Millicent?” Luna asked. “She survived being drained by vampires, you know.”

“No, but maybe Hermione has - she taught me that term,” Harry said as he attempted to grab some asparagus with tongs and transfer them to his plate. He finally felt some flopping between in the grip of the tongs and carefully lowered them onto his plate. He passed the bowl on to Ron and held it in the air for a long time waiting for Ron to take it.

“She’s very clever,” Luna stated. Harry kept hearing an odd little noise when Luna moved that he couldn’t quite figure out - a subtle dull tapping. It did help him locate her in the room, though.

“Ron, would you like some asparagus?” Harry asked.

“Ew - no,” Ron said. “I hate asparagus.”

“Can you take the bowl, though? I don’t know where to set it.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry, mate,” Ron muttered.

Harry knew he should also hate asparagus, but he actually liked the spears… maybe it was because Dudley loathed them and Harry always got generous helpings of them and they were never stolen off his plate. Usually, he liked to spear it and eat it from the tip to the base, but he didn’t want to embarrass himself in front of everyone. Even with sight, it was challenging to catch the floppy tip between his lips. Once he was able to spear one of Mrs. Weasley’s with his fork and knife and cut it into smaller pieces, he was in heaven - so buttery and just the right amount of tart.

“Oh, Harry, I’m so glad you like my asparagus!” Mrs. Weasley said. “I’ve been working on this crop for years now - and this is the latest in the season we’ve been able to enjoy it. Ronny doesn’t care for it, though.”

“Just leaves more for the rest of us, Mum!” George said.

“Is it really the last of the season?” Ginny said.

“Yes, I saved it for Harry’s visit,” Mrs. Weasley said.
“Oh, how do you cook it? Mine is always a little too soft and I like how yours are just the right amount of firm, but still melt in your mouth,” Harry said.

“Oh, you cook asparagus, too?” Mrs. Weasley said while Ron groaned loudly.

“Erm, yes. My Aunt Petunia insists that asparagus needs to be steamed, but I think you roasted yours, right?”

“Hmmm,” Mrs. Weasley said at the mention of his Aunt.

“Oh, for the love of Merlin!” Ron exclaimed.

“Shush, Ron. Yes, I roasted them with olive oil, salt, pepper, and parmesan cheese. Just 15 minutes in the oven. The trick, though, is to sprinkle them with lemon juice right before you serve them,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“I’ll have to try that…” Harry stopped mid-thought.

“Harry, you’re not trading cooking tips with our mum, are you?” Fred chortled.

“How old are you, really?” George joined in.

“At least 40!” Fred said. “But well disguised in the knobbly-kneed body of a 12-year-old.”

Harry’s neck grew warm and his ears began to tingle.

**Knobbly-kneed.**

“I, for one, appreciate that Harry is interested in cooking,” Mrs. Weasley said coming to his defense, but managing to make it worse. “But I’m really concerned that your family expected you to do all that work when you needed to be resting - and how did you do it? You hadn’t even had the training yet for learning how to get along without… without your sight.”

“I just figured it out, didn’t I. Not much choice,” he said, trying to make himself smaller on the bench.

“You could have told them no!” said Ron. “That’s what I would have said.”

“Right, you would have, Ron. Do you even remember the size of his uncle? All he’d have to do is sit on you to squash any kind of rebellion,” said Fred.

“Yeah, I’m sure Harry has done whatever he can - after all, he’s the mighty midget who slew the thousand-year-old Basilisk,” said George.

“Oh, did you kill Salazar Slytherin’s serpent then,” Luna asked. “That’s what all the portraits were saying, but I wasn’t sure if they had been misled by the nargles.”

“What?” Harry asked, distracted.

“Well, being able to cook for yourself is a marketable skill, isn’t it? I’ll tell the rest of you lot that I appreciate mum’s cooking more and more as I am on my own,” Charlie said unaware of Luna’s claim and clambered off the bench where he was sitting and, by the sound of it, had walked over to Mrs. Weasley and planted a loud kiss on her cheek.

“Aww. Sweet Charlie, dear. I’m so glad you came home - even for a short visit. It is so good to have you here,” Mrs. Weasley said, sounding tearful as she patted his shoulder.
“Well, as I’m sure you know nargles are quite mischievous and there was a large infestation at Hogwarts in the mistletoe and I suspect that they may have been responsible for quite a bit of misinformation spread by the portraits…” Luna said sedately.

“And mum and Harry, I could also write to the Ministry or whoever needs to hear that Harry’s situation with his muggles sounds bad,” Charlie said, sitting back down. “I mean, I’m just hearing bits and pieces, but why have you been with them so long?”

Harry gulped. He really didn’t want to talk about this with everyone. He tried to shrink even more into the bench, curling inward.

“No one, as far as I can tell, has embarked on a thorough cleansing and eradication of the nargles from the portraits,” Luna continued. “When I spoke to Mr. Filch about it, he was quite rude.”

“How do you eradicate nargles, Luna?” Harry said, feigning interest.

“Well, they are hard to eradicate - so that might be why Mr. Filch was so cross. I wear my butterbeer cork necklace at all times to keep them at bay.” Luna was eager to explain.

“Are you sure it is working,” Ron snorted.

“Well, yes, Ron. I am,” Luna said leaning forward to speak to Ron. “You can tell by the color of my fingernails. They’d have a tinge of green, wouldn’t they, if I were under their influence.”

Harry rubbed his thumb across his fingernails wondering what color they were.

Ignoring Ron’s continued noises of disbelief, Luna continued, “Eradication from magical paintings requires acromantula venom suspended in a boggart slough solution. Not a very stable potion, of course.”

“So, where do you get your boggart slough solution from, Luna?” Fred asked.

“Hush now, we’re not going to discuss the trade of illegal substances at this table,” Mrs. Weasley said a bit fiercely. “Fred and George, if I so as much find a drop of boggart slough in your room - you will be… well, rueing the day, that’s for sure. You haven’t even healed from the explosion this morning! Your eyebrows are quite pink still - I’m sure they are still tender.”

“Mum, may I be excused, please?” Percy asked over the twins’ grumbling.

“Oh, Percy, don’t you want to have conversation with your family?” Mrs. Weasley said, sounding hurt.

“No, I think I’ve had enough for now. I’d really like to be on my own,” Percy said a bit stiffly.

“But Charlie isn’t home often and we have guests. I want you to try for a little longer, then you may go.”

“Fine,” Percy harrumphed and sat back down heavily on the bench.

“I made lemon custard tarts for dessert, Percy - I know you love them,” Mrs. Weasley chirped as she got up to fetch the platter.

“Oh, alright,” Percy said sounding a bit mollified when the platter was set down on the table.

“Harry, after we clean up, let’s go up to my room. I have some… oh,” Ron said.
“What is it, Ron?” Harry asked.

“It’s just… well, I wanted to show you… well, Charlie picked up the latest issue of Seeker Weekly - I want to show it to you… but I really didn’t think that one through, did I? Sorry, mate,” Ron said.

“Hey, it’s okay, Ron. I have a digitus now. It transfigures flat images into three-dimensional ones that I can feel,” Harry said. “We could show Ginny, too.”

“Ugh,” Ron said under his breath.

“It’s okay, Harry. I’ll hang out with Luna. Is that okay, Luna? Can you stay for a while?” Ginny said.

“Oh, yes, that would be lovely. Father’s been quite busy with the latest issue of the Quibbler, even the gerumblies seem to have grown weary of my company,” Luna said.

“You kids go on and play with your friends. Fred and George are going to help me do the dishes today,” Mrs. Weasley said to a chorus of groans.

“Thanks, mum!” Ron and Ginny exclaimed.

“Hey - where’s your gratitude for us?” George and Fred asked in unison.

“Thanks for blowing up the house!” Ron said cheerfully and it sounded like he got whacked in the back of the head.

As Harry sank into his pillow that night listening to the sounds of water lapping against the sides of Mei’s tank, he let his mind wash over the day with the Weasleys. He wished Ron wasn’t such a prat. He sighed remembering how Ron had spoken to Luna.

True, Luna was a bit odd, but there was something about her that grew on him, even after she’d forced his hand down the gnome hole. He rubbed his bandaged index finger remembering.

The twins had a hard time containing their glee at the information she gave them about the garden gnomes… and later he heard them asking her again about where to get boggart slough from.

Ginny is definitely doing better.

He was relieved. She had spent the day blindfolded and seemed to get happier and be more herself as the day progressed - well, until it was time for him to go. But he understood. He had a hard time leaving, too. Even though he had a new defense teacher he’d be meeting in the morning.

That actually made him nervous. What was he supposed to be learning how to defend himself against now? His gut seized remembering his first visit to the Forbidden Forest at night and his encounter with the floating cloak covering the miasma of Lord Voldemort that had fed on the dying unicorn.

Maybe it was better not to be able to see those things?

He shuddered and flipped over to his side, pulling his covers around himself more securely.

Harry was running down a dark stone corridor, up ahead flickering green lights were casting eerie
shadows. The walls were oozing a black liquid muck that was collecting along the edges, creeping out into the corridor. Behind him, something enormous was after him - suffocating the air out of the corridor.

He kept looking over his shoulder, trying to see what it was, but it was always just outside of his field of vision. He just knew that he had to stay ahead of it, but the harder he ran, the slower he seemed to go.

Up ahead the flickering green lights were getting brighter, but he could also see a red form on the floor that filled him with dread.

A black shadow was hovering over the form and then the shadow had a huge mouth and it bent to swallow up … Ginny.

Harry screamed as if he could drive it away with his voice. He reached out, trying to grab Ginny before she was consumed, but then he felt the monster behind him and it was everywhere.

It swooped down, trying to pierce his eyes with its razor-sharp beak. He covered his eyes with his arm.

Underneath his collar he could feel the pincer grasp of an insect as it clung to his shirt, then scurried down his back. He flinched trying to shake it off.

He was on his broom now, zooming through underbrush and low hanging branches.

A potato-headed creature latched on to his toe, biting and suckling his blood. Others like it pursued him on miniature brooms as they flew through a forest of asparagus.

And then suddenly a serpent was grabbing him, shaking him, pulling him to the ground, it was slimy and scaly, and he was wet, covered in muck and still screaming…

“Harry, Harry! Would you just wake up?! Dammit!”

He yelled again, “It’s trying to get my eyes! I can’t see! I can’t see.” He recoiled from the scaly body of the snake, screaming again, and holding his arm over his eyes.

“Harry, there’s no snake! Mei, he thinks your tail is a snake. Move your tail out of his reach,” Tony was shouting.

Tony. Mei. Harry stilled. His throat hurt. He was wet with sweat and seawater. He reached out trying to get his bearings and found that he was halfway on the floor, his sheets wrapped around his legs still up on the bed.

“I still can’t see,” he said dully, resting his cheek on the floor.

“Yeah, that’s the part of the nightmare you don’t wake up from,” Arig said.

Harry sobbed and hiccuped trying to stop the sobs. Then he kicked angrily at the sheets trying to untangle his feet, then flopped to the floor.

“Arggh!”

“Hey, watch it, Potter, you’re going to crush my fins,” Mei exclaimed.

“Settle down, would you?” Tony’s voice was coming from the end of the bed.
“Is Harry okay?” Aminah’s sleepy voice came from the far corner of the room.

“Yeah, he just had a nightmare. Obviously,” Mei griped. “Geez. Is this going to happen every time we return from a weekend? Maybe you can get your own room? Or you can share with Gemma, she’ll sleep through it… no wait, here she comes. Great. It was probably the lights. Now we’re all up. Well, we can have a party,” Mei said slapping her tail on the ground.

Harry recoiled at the sound, still trying to get his feet out of the sheets.

“Settle down, it’s just my tail,” Mei groused.

“Sorry,” Harry shivered. He listened as Gemma made her way to his side, her feet slapping in water. She must have grabbed a towel on her way because she draped on over his shoulders.

“Thanks, Gemma.”

“Harry - are you okay?” Healer Jordan asked.

“Oh, when did you get here?” Harry asked.

“Just now. The wards alerted me to a disturbance. Was it just a nightmare?” she asked.

“Yeah, I guess so. It seemed so real,” Harry said.

“Okay, I’m going to cast a drying charm on you,” she said and he felt his pajamas heat up and the puddle of water he was sitting in dry up.

“Thanks, Mei. Oh wait, you have a cut on your fin. Do you want me to heal it?” Healer Jordan said.

“Um, yeah. I guess I didn’t clear the tank,” Mei said as Healer Jordan started chanting.

“You jumped out of your tank for me?” Harry said.

“Hey, you were being murdered. What else could I do?”

“Thanks, Mei,” Harry said quietly.

“Anything for the Boy-Who-Lived, ya’ know?” Mei teased as she flopped back to her area of the room.

“Great,” Harry sighed. Gemma was rubbing circles on his back.

“I’m heading back to bed,” Arig announced as the sound of his crutches moved across the room.

“Yeah, me, too. Glad you’re okay, Potter,” Tony said.

“Harry, I think this restorative potion might help you sleep a little better,” Healer Jordan said as she pressed a vial into his palm.

Harry felt the top and found no cork, so he drank it. Soon, he felt very sleepy.

“Gemma, I’m really tired. I’m going to go back to sleep, okay?” Harry said.

She tapped “okay” on his arm - she had been straightening his sheets from what he could gather from the sounds and she pulled his hand over to his bed.

“Thank you for sorting them out,” he said and she made the “welcome” sign on his hand.
“Harry, if you need anything else, let me know, okay? You know how to summon me, right?”
Healer Jordan asked.

Harry nodded. “Thank you.”

As he drew his covers up to his chin and nestled down into his pillow, he realized how many people had sprung from sleep to make sure he was okay. He was surrounded by friends. True friends. He waved across Gemma’s hand in response to her wave goodbye and let sleep take him.
Harry was chasing a bell-charmed snitch through a dense fog when he realized that he wasn’t on a broom at all - but in his bed and the morning alarm was ringing.

Another dream.

He sat up and rubbed his eyes, then swung his legs out of bed, fumbling groggily around the desktop by his bed to find his staff. He shook it out and headed over to the panel on the wall to shut off the alarm before Mei emerged from the depths of her tank.

He remembered that she’d cut herself in her attempt to reach him last night - that she jumped out of the tank and onto the floor. He imagined that she hated looking like a fish out of water in front of all their roommates - and yet that hadn’t stopped her.

“Merlin, that’s cold,” he yelped when he stepped in a residual puddle of water that had escaped notice when Healer Jordan was drying the floor.

“Oh, good, you’re turning off the bells - thank you, Harry,” Mei said.

“Hey, no problem,” Harry said as he found the panel and turned them off.

“Thank you, Mei, for helping me last night. I’m sorry I caused so much commotion,” Harry said. “Your cut is all healed, right?”

“Yeah - it was just a scratch. I suppose it’ll be my turn next to have an ear-splitting nightmare - though none of you will hear it because I’ll be out at sea when it happens,” Mei said.

“Oh, really? Where do you sleep?” Harry asked, nearing the tank.

“Just kidding. I have hammock here,” Mei said and she grabbed his hand (he suppressed a momentary panic remembering when she’d dragged him into her tank) and brought it to a wet net that was finely knotted and stretched over the side of her tank. “My very own water bed.”

“I guess my Uncle Vernon had one when he was a kid - that’s why his back gives him trouble now.”

“Oh, well, even if I weren’t Jiāorén I’d think this is the best way to sleep - though I imagine I’d want the water to be a bit warmer. As it is, it is just perfect for me. It’s one of the good things about this whole situation.”

“Sleeping is good,” Harry said. “What’d you do this weekend?”

“My family spent the weekend at our ancestral home on the ocean - on that island that … I almost took you to - er, you know, when you fell into my tank.”

“When you pulled me into your tank?”

“Details. It was nice. They had to apparate to get there - but I was able to just swim through the Egress.”

“Will you have a similar set up once you’re at Hogwarts?” Harry asked.

“Healer Jordan is working with them on it - they are, well, reluctant - but I think they’ll come around. I’m pretty sure I’ll have to continue my lessons with Hảirén anyway - so they’ll need to Egress so
that I can travel back and forth for those.”

“How are those lessons going?”

There was a long silence. Harry’s brows drew together as he tried to figure it out.

“Er, sorry. I shrugged. You can’t see that. I dunno. I thought I’d be out of that stupid muggle wheelchair by now and getting around magically and you know, being able to try my wand again.”

“So, slow going? How is Jiāorén magic different from wixen magic?”

“It’s not that so much as I’m kind of an anomaly. Usually, you’re either wixen or Jiāorén and I’m both. Hǎi rén says that it has to do with me… that I need to commit to being one or the other - that I can’t be both. But I can’t seem to decide, I guess.”

“Really? I thought that you wanted your feet back?”

“Yeah, some days. But I can’t imagine not being able to fly through the water. I can’t imagine giving that up.”

“Oh, yeah - I bet that’d be hard to give up. But you said you can’t live with the other Jiāorén …”

“I know. That’s why I’m stuck. Neither here nor there,” Mei said.

“But if you could choose, you’d be able to return to your life as a witch or go out to sea and live with the Jiāorén?”

“Yeah. Sounds simple, doesn’t it.”

“Not really,” Harry sighed. If he’d been given that choice between being a muggle and being wizard he would have given up the muggle part of his life in a heartbeat. He had nothing tying him to that aspect of his life.

“And I’m not really a witch either, more wixen that witch,” Mei said.

“What?”

“Nevermind,” Mei said. “It’s just that people expect black or white, but have no room for gray.”

“Gray? Black or White?”

“Forget it. Forget I said it,” Mei said, her tail slapping the water and sending a spray of water in Harry’s face.

“Hey - it’s okay to talk about things, Mei. I know it seems scary sometimes… Mei?”

He waited for a bit, his head cocked to the side listening. He ran his fingers along the side of the tank, trying to find Mei’s arm, which he’d been sure was draped over the edge earlier.

“She left, mate,” Arig said emerging from the toilet. “She’s not there anymore.”

“Oh, yeah - I knew that,” Harry shrugged, feeling his ears get warm. “Right.”

He turned away from the tank and paused - not sure what he wanted to do. Finally, he headed toward the toilet. He would be meeting his new instructor today.
“Hey, Gemma, I want to ask Peter about how he uses his staff, can you help me?” Harry asked as they were finishing up breakfast. Peter was sitting on Gemma’s other side.

She tapped “sure,” on his hand and then a question mark.

“I want to know what it is like for him. Hmmm. I mean I was flying this weekend and I started to really be able to understand the vibrations from my staff better than before - and it was like feeling the shapes of everything around me. I wondered if it was like that for Peter. But I don’t know how to ask that in signs. Do you?”

She was tapping his hand like she understood and like she was thinking about it. He wished that he could write braille better so that he could write a note to Peter, but then he remembered that Peter was still learning braille like he was.

*That probably won’t work.*

“Gemma, how does Peter read stuff? Does he have an anagnóstis that translated text into a morse code that he can feel?” Harry asked.

“M-O-R-S-E” space “C-O-D-E-?”” Gemma asked.

“It’s an old fashioned muggle system of communication that used dashes and dots - it was transmitted over wires - I guess with electricity or magnets or both, I’m not sure - and it used a small metal hammer that struck a metal plate - it would have vibrated in addition to making a sound, so I think someone who was deafblind would be able to understand it,” Harry said.


“I thought he was just learning braille like me,” Harry questioned.

“Yes,” Gemma tapped and then signed "good" on the back of his hand.

“He can read braille?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Gemma said.

So Harry spoke his question again and Gemma grabbed the paper and Harry used his digitus to translate it into braille for Peter.

Harry hit his head with the heel of his hand.

“I could have just used my Quick Quotes Quill! I forgot about it.”

Gemma had passed the note on to Peter and after a bit, Harry heard Peter getting up from the table and walking toward him, using the backs of the chairs as a guide and his staff. When Peter’s staff tapped against his chair leg, Harry could feel a bit of the tremor as the vibration pass up the chair leg. As Peter settled into the empty chair on the other side of him, Harry reached out his hand so that Peter could talk to him. They waved across each other’s hands.

Peter started signing into Harry’s hand - excited to share information - but Harry couldn’t keep up.
He didn’t know enough of the signs yet. He kept having to ask Peter to slow down or to repeat the signs. Pretty soon Gemma was tapping on Harry’s other hand and signing for him to get his notebook, pencil, and anagnóstis out of his staff so that she could translate. He signed “Sorry” on Peter’s hand and then got the tools out for Gemma. He felt frustrated that he couldn’t just talk with Peter directly and he sensed the Peter felt the same way.

“Peter is so excited to tell you about how to use the vibration features of the staff. I don’t even know half the signs he’s using to tell you about it. I’ve asked him to write it down for you and he’s pulled out his slate and stylus and is working on writing it down. You can read it with your digitus. He’s frustrated that he can’t just tell you. Maybe he can show you? Like if you give him your staff and he sets it up like his?” Gemma wrote.

Harry could hear the stylus sliding over the metal slate and punching the holes in the parchment as Peter wrote much more quickly than Harry was able to write with the stylus and slate. Harry heard Peter unclamp the slate and slide the parchment over to him.

Harry used his anagnóstis to read it. Peter’s hands fluttered over his for a moment as he was trying to discern what Harry was doing. He wrote a question mark on the back of Harry’s hand.

Harry signed, “Sorry, me, slow, read, braille,” and felt pretty skilled with that sentence in protactile signing. He let Peter feel his anagnóstis and wondered if it had magic that Peter could use.

Peter returned it to Harry and Harry used it to read the braille note:

“Harry, Thanks for asking about how I use my staff. The haptic signals that vibrate through the staff allow me to move independently through the world because I can feel it - the texture, how solid something is, if it is stationary or moving. It is amazing. I’m glad you’ve discovered how to use your staff that way, too. Every day I learn how to use it a little more effectively and feel more confident that I can return to my life as it was before I lost my sight. I also wanted to tell you that I’m glad to have met you and Gemma because I’ve been really lonely and that you two take the trouble to talk to me has made a world of difference.”

Harry reached over and scratched Peter’s back - like he had an itch - it was a way to agree enthusiastically with something someone had said in protactile. It would be so awful to be so cut off from people. He felt a pang of sadness for Peter and then realized that he was doing exactly what he hated when people did it to him - when they first realized that he couldn’t see and pitied him - imagining how horrible it would be to not be able to see. Yeah, he wouldn’t wish for it, but it was manageable. There were worse things. There were worse things that had actually happened to him…

Like my parents being murdered and being left on the doorstep of Number 4 Privet Drive.

He squeezed his eyes closed and tried to calm his breathing. He wouldn’t do that to Peter. He would try to bridge the divide and be a friend… but he wouldn’t let pity influence how he treated him. It was a worthless emotion.

Gemma tapped his arm, making the time sign and Harry realized that they needed to get to the O&M room for their core strengthening class with Ms. Midgeon. He passed the message on to Peter and asked if they could meet later to talk more about how to use the haptic signals, then they all got up to walk over to the class.

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Harry had stayed late in braille with Madam Flamel going over a bit of text that was giving him trouble and was now rushing to get to his class with his new defense teacher on time. He was
walking quickly through the library feeling a little harried - his fingertips raw from running over the tiny raised dots over and over again trying to make sense of them. He cocked his head from side to side trying to stretch out the tight muscles in his neck. He was making progress and it was still really slow going. He was going to have to spend more of his free time practicing braille if he was going to be able to read it once he was back at Hogwarts. Of course, he didn’t need to read braille to attend Hogwards - he had the anagnóstis but listening to something read aloud actually took longer than reading - so if he could read braille, he’d be able to complete his work more quickly (if he could learn to read braille quickly).

I wonder if I can speed up the anagnóstis - if I can make it read to me faster?

It was worth trying though sometimes the author’s voices were annoying and distracting and that might be even worse sped up.

He was so deep in his thoughts as he walked through the library, that he was surprised when his staff tinged against something wooden in front of him. He stopped short, surprised.

““You seem lost in thought, Harry,” Besel said from behind the desk that he’d just tapped.

“Oh, sorry, Besel. I was just thinking about how much more I have to learn so that I can read braille before terms begin in September,” Harry said, feeling the heat rising in his cheeks.

“From what Madam Flamel has said, you’ll be fine,” Besel reassured.

“Really? Oh, good. I’m glad,” Harry said relieved. “Thanks. I’ve got to go so that I’m not late.”

“No worries. I’ll see you tomorrow for Practical Life,” Besel said.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow,” Harry said as he turned and headed toward the corridor.

He slowed as he approached the O&M room and muttered, “Navigant map by the door,” so that he could check to see what the layout of the room would be before he entered. He ran his fingers over the tactile map and listened to the description being spoken into his afiti and was surprised to find that it was a map of Hogwarts, specifically the second floor.

He hesitated. He wasn’t sure he was ready to go back to Hogwarts just yet. He was standing there, his fingers tracing the second-floor corridor remembering his racing heart as he and Ron had tried to convince Professor Lockhart that they knew where to find Ginny, when he heard the nearby door open.

“Oh, there you are!” a voice greeted him. “Mr. Potter, I’m Professor Lupin.”

Harry turned to the voice, his hand still held up in the air. He brought it down and stuck it out - expecting that Professor Lupin wanted to shake hands. Professor Lupin grasped his hand tightly and shook it firmly, surprising Harry.

“Oh, hello, Professor Lupin. I’m sorry I’m late. I was just checking to see what the layout of the room was before I went inside,” Harry explained hastily.

“No worries at all. Well, are you ready? Let’s get started, why don’t we?” Professor Lupin said, lightly placing his hand on Harry’s elbow as if to direct him.

Harry paused.

“Sorry sir, but do you know how to do sighted guide?” Harry asked.
“Oh, right, yes. Healer Jordan showed me,” he said as he tapped the back of Harry’s hand, allowing Harry to grasp his arm just above the elbow. Harry found that Professor Lupin was taller than Professor McGonagall, but not by much and about as thin - gauging by the bony arm he was grasping. The fabric of his cloak felt thin - almost threadbare and Harry was pretty sure he’d brushed against a patch - but thought it would be rude or weird, probably both, to investigate with his fingers, so he resisted. His voice had a raspy quality to it - like he didn’t use it much. “I’m afraid, though, that I’m really new to this, so you’ll have to forgive me and let me know when I do it wrong.”

“Me, too,” Harry said with a wry smile.

“So right. Well, here’s the door,” Professor Lupin said.

“Why are we going to Hogwarts, sir?” Harry asked as they passed through the door.

“Well, I thought you might want to get used to walking the corridors there now - so that when it is teeming with students, it is easier,” Professor Lupin said as they went through the door and the pull of the Egress tugged on Harry’s navel.

Harry was hit with the familiar odor of Hogwarts - a dusty, musty, swampy smell underlying the wax of countless candles with a smokey backdrop of smoldering fires overlaid with pungent potion vapors. It was a distinctive aroma - he’d never visited anywhere else that smelled quite like Hogwarts. He would have known he was there in an instant even if he hadn’t felt the map. The air was cool, too, and a bit stagnant - but without the usual smell of sweaty teenagers that infused it during the school year - especially when Quidditch matches were in full force.

His staff hit the stone floor and the sound echoed around the corridor and down the deep hallway. He could hear the wind outside whistling through cracks in the stones and though it was mid-June, the castle felt as cold and clammy as it did in the middle of winter. Without the echoes of student voices and footsteps ringing off the walls, the place felt desolate and eerie. He wouldn’t have been surprised to hear the fleshy flapping of bat wings, disturbed by their echoing footsteps down the corridor.

He guessed that there was a suit of armor close by - he could hear it shifting slightly and took a minute to pay attention to how the suit of armor felt different in the vibration than a human body would - though it was the same shape. It was empty.

A murmuring across the hall on the wall made him wonder about the portraits - were they all watching him now? *Are they infested with nargles?* He wondered if the Center had considered the possibility that the portraits in the various institutions could be spies who were gathering information on the residents and a shiver ran down his spine quick as a mouse. He’d never really thought about that before.

He wanted to ask Professor Lupin, but didn’t know him and didn’t know if was the sort of impertinent question that would get him in trouble - so he kept the worry to himself and resolved to ask Healer Jordan or Besel when he saw them next.

“Oh, Harry, we’re going to turn left and walk down the corridor about twenty feet or so until we reach my office door which is on the right. We’ll start there - for this lesson, it is just the two of us, but we might have other lessons later with more students depending on the need,” Professor Lupin explained.

A cold breeze erupted in front of Harry, making him pull up short.

“Mr. Harry Potter! And Professor Lupin! The portraits said you’d arrived! Welcome back to
“Hogwarts!”

“Sir Nicholas!” Harry exclaimed. “Thank you…”

“Greetings Sir Nicholas. Yes, we’re here to conduct some lessons. I realize that the summer inhabitants of the castle are always eager for entertainment, but I need to remind you that our lessons are private. Also, I know Professor Dumbledore has reminded all the portraits about the need to protect the privacy of Hogwarts students and faculty, no matter how boring that is!”

“Well! I say! Can’t a fellow Gryffindor be excited to greet two of his house without getting a lecture about privacy nonsense!” Sir Nicholas huffed as he floated away down the corridor from them.

“Bye, Sir Nicholas!” Harry called after him and heard a muttered response.

“Don’t mind him. He lives for gossip. Er. Well. Dies for it. I don’t know. Here we go.”

The door creaked as they passed through it - the dense wood under Harry’s fingertips felt well oiled and dented and he wondered how long it had served as a door. He could also feel a slight pulse of magic in the door.

“Sir, are there magical protections on this door?” Harry asked.

“Sure - all the thresholds within the castle are protected by wards and other enchantments for security measures,” Professor Lupin answered. “Why?”

“Well, this was the first time I could feel it,” Harry said thoughtfully.

“Maybe you’re paying closer attention to what you feel these days?” Professor Lupin offered.

“Yeah, that could be,” Harry said. “This is your office, then?”

“Yes, very good. It is arranged differently than the previous Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher had it, though,” Professor Lupin said. “Er…”

“I used my staff to get an idea of the layout, sir, so I’m set,” Harry explained hurriedly before Professor Lupin launched into an explanation.

“Great - that’s a handy feature,” Professor Lupin said. “So, let’s get started - here’s a chair for you to sit in as we discuss what we’re going to do and I’ll just sit over here - at my desk.”

Harry settled into the chair which turned out to be a rather comfortable wing back chair with fussy doilies protecting the armrests - something that Harry would expect from Mrs. Figg’s sitting room and not in the office of his DADA teacher - but he sank into it gratefully. He ran his fingers over the lacy pattern on the doily, not sure what to expect from this professor who seemed a bit unnerved.

Is it the blindness or the “Famous Harry Potter” crap?

Whatever it was, he wished he had a spell that would make it go away. A smile played across his lips as he imagined casting an *Evanesco* to take care of it.

Professor Lupin seemed to be getting something out of his desk - papers or scrolls by the sound of it. Harry was really curious about the nature of their classes. So far, he had mentioned getting used to walking around Hogwarts - but that sounded more like a basic Orientation and Mobility lesson where he’d just be navigating with his staff. Not really Defense. And it didn’t seem as though Professor Lupin had the training to conduct O&M classes.
“So, Harry, I’m curious. What do you think we’ll be working on during these lessons?” Professor Lupin asked as he rolled out a scroll.

“Well, Healer Jordan said we’d be working on special Defense lessons - because of my … well, my history and my blindness. New vulnerabilities and all that,” Harry said.

“Right, we’re going to make sure you can defend yourself,” Professor Lupin said. “And I understand you’ve already met with Voldemort twice … well, three times really… and come away… well, not unscathed, but better than he fared at any rate.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Harry shrugged wanting to fold into himself.

_Not unscathed. That’s for sure…_

“It’s not that I did anything. I was just lucky… I guess.”

“Right. Lucky. Well, we want to improve your odds so that next time, well, you have more than luck on your side,” Professor Lupin said.

“Next time?” Harry said softly.

“The threat still exists, if not from Voldemort himself, then from his… followers,” Professor Lupin uttered the words as if they were barbed and piercing his tongue.

“So, how do I defend myself then?” Harry swallowed. This conversation wasn’t instilling him with a lot of confidence.

“Well, let’s start with basic defensive spells and work up from there. I’ve heard from your instructor Ms. Midgeon that you have a pretty impressive protection spell, even if it is unusual in its appearance.” Professor Lupin seemed to be a bit amused by this and let the parchment snap back into a scroll.

“She said that the last time I cast it, she couldn’t see it… and she said that sometimes it could be useful to have a visible spell… though I can’t really think of when that would be useful.”

“Well, while you think about how a visible protection spell could be useful, let’s move to the center of the room. I’m not sure I’ve known of another wizard who could cast it visibly. It may be that you’ve stumbled upon a new iteration of the magic,” Professor Lupin said.

“Well, I have been doing a lot of stumbling lately…” Harry said wryly.

“Ha. I bet you have. Okay, I’ve warded that portion of the room off so that we could practice some of the spells,” the Professor said as he slid his chair back.

Harry stood up and shook out his staff and followed the sounds of Professor Lupin’s steps to the center of the room. He could feel the hair on his arms and the back of his neck standing on end and he wondered if that was in response to the wards that Professor Lupin said he’d put up.

“Okay, Harry - we’re going to start working on casting protective spells in a setting when you know something is going to happen to eventually working in the element of surprise. I know your staff has the ability to cast a protective charm when there is an imminent threat - so would it be better if you set it on the desk collapsed and use your wand for these spells?” Professor Lupin asked.

“It still works when it is near me - I dropped it when I got hit by a cyclist crossing Charing Cross Road and it cast a protection charm that saved me from being run over by a lorry,” Harry said.
“It sounds like your staff is a pretty impressive magical tool - I’m interested in learning more about it,” Professor Lupin said.

“Yeah, it is pretty cool,” Harry said.

*Bang!* Just like in the Burrow, Harry was crouching down under his protective spell before he knew what was happening. He wasn’t sure if he’d thought enough to make it transparent or not. It was so instinctive.

“Forgive me, Lupin, I heard voices and thought there was an intruder. Professor Dumbledore failed to inform me that you’d be occupying these offices in the summer.” Harry was jolted by the sound of Professor Snape’s voice distorted, though it was through the barrier of his shield. And, from the sound of it, it seemed he had about as much regard for Professor Lupin as he had for Harry - perhaps even less. Harry felt some of his uncertainty about Professor Lupin fall away.

“Harry - it’s okay - it’s just Professor Snape,” Professor Lupin said. “You can Finite your charm.”

Harry hesitated. He felt a little safer around Snape with his bubble of protection around him, but he murmured “Finite” and felt the draft from the open door to the corridor move against his face.

“It is quite understandable, Professor Snape. Castle security is serious business. I believe you know Mr. Potter? Professor McGonagall encouraged me to use my Hogwarts classroom space and office for our lessons this summer so that Harry would have a chance to acclimate before he returns in the fall and she arranged for the Egress to be connected to the Perenelle Flamel Adaptation Center while she is acting Head Master in Professor Dumbledore’s absence. It was my understanding that she was informing the staff, but no harm done,” Professor Lupin explained.

“Oh, so the boy's injuries are not so grievous to prevent him from returning? I had heard otherwise,” Professor Snape said.

Harry felt the back of his neck growing warm as he was sure that Snape was now raking him over with his sharp black eyes. His stomach knotted at the suggestion that he might be too damaged to return to Hogwarts. He felt the heaviness of Professor McGonagall’s declaration that he couldn’t fly seeping into his limbs again. He was taking shallow breaths, trying to calm himself.

“Was that a rainbow-colored shield charm, Potter?” Professor Snape sneered. “I can see why you merit special lessons.”

Harry clenched his jaw and felt the heat spread to the front of his neck and his chest as he fought the desire to lash back.

“We have a limited time here, Professor, so please excuse us as we return to our lessons,” Professor Lupin said in a dismissive tone.

“Certainly. It’s obvious you have your work cut out for you,” the professor said as he swept from the room.

Harry was pretty sure that he heard Professor Lupin mutter “git” under his breath before he turned back to Harry to resume their lesson.
"Harry, don't give him a knut of your attention," Professor Lupin said after he made sure the door was securely shut again. "I shouldn't say it, but since we're technically not colleagues yet and what he said was rather mean spirited - I'll tell you that he takes pleasure in the discomfort of others. It reflects rather more on him than on the people he is trying to cut down."

"Yeah?" Harry said hopefully and a bit surprised that Professor Lupin would actually criticize a peer, but he was still feeling rankled - there was truth in Snape's cutting words. How am I supposed to do well in class if I can't even tell if my shield is invisible or rainbow-colored?

He shook his head trying to get rid of the thoughts. He'd never cast a shield charm before he lost his sight. He was learning so many things at the Center and a lot of it was way above the level it was taught at Hogwarts. Snape should go hump the Whomping Willow. And the image that blossomed in his mind's eye made him snort and he tried to cover it with a cough.

"And your shield charm was impressive. I doubt a sighted student would have had the reflexes to cast one so perfectly and quickly. And did you do it nonverbally? I don't remember hearing you mutter the incantation," Professor Lupin said. "And you're not even a third-year student yet. Amazing."

"Did I? I don't think I cast it nonverbally. I don't know how," Harry said. "I think it was my staff."

"Did you cast it with your staff or your wand?"

"Oh, I dunno," Harry said, and then realized that he was holding his wand. He must have flicked it out. His staff was in his other hand. "Both?"

"It could have been the combined effect - hmmm," said Professor Lupin. "You said your wand cast a protection charm that saved you from a lorry, right? Was it also colorful?"

"I dunno. No one said so. I don't think it was. I don't think they saw it," Harry said. "They couldn't see me, either, I was disillusioned at the time."

"Well, these are things that we can explore and work on in these sessions. Healer Jordan said that there's a reporter from the Daily Prophet who seems to be breaching the Privacy Act and that some of our work this summer can focus on learning how to detect threats as well as mitigate them," Professor Lupin said.

"Professor…" Harry paused.

"What is it, Harry?"

"Well, I'm just not sure. I mean, it seems like you know a lot, but then you haven't worked with blind wixen before… so how are you going to help me… I mean, wouldn't this be a job for someone with experience with what I'm facing?" Harry stumbled through his concern.

"That's a very good point, Harry. And, yes, it is true, I haven't worked with people who've lost their vision before, but I have had life experiences that have prepared me for defending myself and also evading detection when needed… How about I make you a deal? You let me know if I get something wrong or something needs to be adjusted and I'll do my best to give you the tools and support that you need?" Professor Lupin said. "And if it doesn't work, then we'll talk to Healer Jordan and figure out another arrangement."
"Okay, I guess we could try that," Harry said shrugging.

Harry heard Professor Lupin striding over to him so that he was standing right in front of Harry. Harry wasn't sure what he was doing. "Are you holding your hand out to me?" Harry asked cocking his head to the side as he tried to hear more clearly and stuck out his hand - just in case.

"Er, yes, and I'll remember to let you know next time. Let's shake on it, okay?" Professor Lupin said grasping his hand firmly and shaking it and releasing his hand.

"Okay, let's get to work on your shield charm - so that when you cast it when you're surprised - you are conscious of whether or not it is transparent. It has to do with intention and visualization. I'll have to do some research about what might be causing you to subconsciously visualize a rainbow now. I take it that this is a new development that came about after you fought the Basilisk?" Professor Lupin asked.

"Yes - er, well, I never cast it before… so I don't actually know," Harry said.

"So, when your staff protected you from the lorry - that must have been a strong charm, because that was a very large physical object traveling at speed. I can't imagine that a magically-imbued staff on its own would be able to protect you from that, even if a powerful wizard cast the charm. Hmmm. But you also had your wand with you?"

"Yes, Figora said that my staff, wand, and broom are all made of the same wood - holly - she said that it was unusual," Harry said suddenly remembering and wondering if that had anything to do with it.

"Figora?"

"Yes, she works at the Center. I don't know her last name. Actually, do goblins have last names? But yes, she mentioned that when we were making the silver tip for my staff," Harry said as he tapped the silver tip on the floor. "I really like it."

"She's a goblin?"

"Half-goblin, I guess," Harry shrugged.

"Hmmm. Can I see your silver-tip?"

"Sure," Harry said as he held his staff out to the professor.

"Hmmm. So, had you made the silver tip - this is goblin silver, right? - when you were almost hit by the lorry?" Professor Lupin said as he returned the staff to Harry's outstretched hand. Harry was relieved to have it back. He felt adrift without it. He tapped the silver tip on the ground again - and felt the reverberation of the sound move through his body.

"Yes, it is goblin silver and yes, I was using it then. But the rainbow stuff - that started happening while I was at the Dursleys. I cast a repair charm on a burned napkin and turned it rainbow colored - Aunt Petunia was really mad," Harry said.


Harry gulped and took a step back, raising his hands in front of his chest, palms out.

Professor Lupin seemed to inhale deeply. He breathed out slowly with a bit of a shuddering breath.
"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I was just surprised," Professor Lupin said more calmly. "I apologize. I should have asked earlier… Harry, who do you live with?"

"I live with the Dursleys - my mum's sister and her family," Harry said slowly. "Why?"

"Oh, my. Merlin. I thought that Lily didn't want you to live with them. How did this happen?" Professor Lupin muttered as he stumbled toward his desk.

"What? Did you know my mum?" Harry asked following him.

"Er, yeah. I probably should have informed you of that first thing," Professor Lupin said as his chair squeaked as he sank into it. "Here, let's sit down."

Then Professor Lupin was jumping to his feet again and guiding Harry rather clumsily to the wing-backed chair. "I'll get us some tea. I think we have a lot to talk about. More than I realized."

There was an edge to his voice - like he was almost choking on something and Harry wondered if he was using getting tea as an excuse so that he didn't have to talk for a bit. He had hurried out of the room and Harry could hear him drawing water into the echoey chamber of a metal kettle and clinking china in another adjacent room. After all, Professor Lupin was a wizard. He could summon tea.

Harry was left sitting in the cushy chair rolling his collapsed staff between his fingers and running his thoughts over the words they had just exchanged while trying to convince his heart to stop hammering in his throat. It was rather uncomfortable. He felt the prickle of sweat on the back of his neck and under his arms - it smelled rather rank.

Harry was tempted to summon his braille work out of his staff just to have something to do while he waited, but he suspected he'd just be running his fingers raw over the dots, but not making any sense of it. Instead, he summoned the bottle of dittany and rubbed a bit over his sore fingertips and sighed in relief as it soaked in and relieved the slight burning sensation residual from his braille lessons earlier.

He thought about all the times he had ignored little cuts, bruises, and burns sustained while living with the Dursleys - just having to endure the pain and now he could just summon a little jar from his staff and apply a little ointment and the pain was gone almost instantly.

*Just another example of how going blind made my life better… weird… and sad.*

He relaxed a little into the chair, though he listened attentively to the noises coming from Professor Lupin's kitchen. Harry winced when he heard a small a crash like something delicate had fallen and shattered followed by a muttered string of cursing. He sat up wondering if he should offer to help out, but then sank back into the chair, figuring that he'd just be in the way. He turned his attention to the room around him. He heard something gurgling like it was underwater and the sound of scratching on glass that reminded him of Dudley's tortoise - it was coming from behind the desk. Harry asked his staff to describe more details of the room than he'd asked for initially. The staff told him that there was a wall of shelves containing a number of books and large jars. Harry guessed that there was something alive in one of the jars and wondered what it could be. He was tempted to move closer to it to get a better description. Just as he was edging forward to stand up, Professor Lupin came back into the room - the china clattering a bit on the tray that he must have been carrying.

Harry could smell the aroma of a strong Darjeeling tea and something else … something spicy.

"How do you take your tea? I also cut some ginger spice bread. I was feeling like we needed
something sweet," Professor Lupin said, almost apologetically.

This was definitely not what Harry had expected from this lesson. Though what he expected, he couldn't quite articulate.

"So, Harry," Professor Lupin said once they were settled with their tea and ginger spice bread (which was so crumbly that Harry resorted to pinching off small pieces rather than lifting the entire piece to his mouth). "I should have told you straight out - your parents were dear friends of mine - we met at Hogwarts. I was especially close to your father, James."

"Oh," Harry said quietly as a strange resentment built in his gut.

"You look just like your dad, you know," Professor Lupin said with an unsteady voice. "Except for your eyes - you have your mother's eyes."

"Oh, well, yeah," Harry said, raising his hand to adjust his glasses on his nose and then slumping forward as he leaned over his knees - his teacup rattling.

"James was such a good friend to me. We, well, we did everything together - him and … well, we had some other good friends, too. We were a bit rowdy sometimes. And then he fell in love with Lily and they got married and had you. Those were good times. Really good times. They were so happy. Even the war didn't dampen their love… well, until…" Professor Lupin stopped - his voice strained. "Well, I suppose you know what happened then. I'm so sorry that you didn't get to spend much time with them. They did love you so much."

Harry could hear the sorrow in Professor Lupin's voice, but a question burned his tongue as he held it back.

Why haven't I met you before, then, if you were such good friends with my parents?

Maybe it was apparent on his face.

"I should have sought you out earlier, Harry…" The statement hung between them as Harry waited for an explanation… an excuse… something.

Harry finally shrugged.

"So, you live with Lily's sister and her family? And how is that?" he said with an attempt at cheer. "She has a son your age… right? I imagine you're great pals… more like brothers."

Harry couldn't keep the pain of that assumption from flashing across his face.

I wish I had a brother. Ugh. I did have a brother … or a sister…

"Um, no," Harry stuttered - his voice mired in emotion. He reached out for the desk with his left hand, found the edge, then slid his teacup and saucer onto the surface while balancing the ginger spice bread plate on his knees. Then he slid it next to the teacup. He was going to go off tea if it was always going to be the catalyst of angst-filled conversations.

"No?" Professor Lupin probed.

"No."

"Well, I guess not all brothers get along… Sirius…" Professor Lupin stopped.

"Serious?" Harry asked.
"Never mind. So, you're not hungry?"

"No, er, sorry," Harry muttered.

"It's my grandmother's recipe…" Professor Lupin offered.

"It's very good, sir, it's just…" Harry trailed off.

"No, it's okay. I understand," Professor Lupin said. "Okay, so let's go back to your rainbow-colored reparo charm. Can you show me?"

"Yeah, I guess. Do you have something broken that needs to be fixed?"

"As a matter of fact, in my rush to make tea, I did drop a teacup. I was in a hurry and figured I'd fix it later. I just left it in the kitchen. I'll summon the pieces here to the desk and you can show me your repairing charm," Professor Lupin said as he summoned the broken teacup. They landed in a tinkling pile on the desk.

"How come they didn't go to your hand?" Harry asked.

"That was part of the intention of the charm I cast - I thought about where I wanted them to land," Professor Lupin explained. "If they had gone to my hand, I could have been cut."

"Oh, Tony could use that," Harry said softly.

"So, you're going to cast the spell with your staff?"

"Yes, that's what I did the first time this happened. Of course, I didn't know I had until Aunt Petunia… well, she told me about it. But I've tried it again and people say the same thing - that they are fixed but rainbow-colored. A friend of mine is researching it."

"Go on then, let's see it," Professor Lupin encouraged.

Harry pushed his collapsed staff across the table until he heard it make contact with the shards. He muttered, "Reparo teacup," and listened as the fine porcelain pieces came grinding together and the cup rattled on the desk as if someone had spun it like a top. He picked it up and felt it for tattletale signs of having been repaired, but could find no seams or chips.

Professor Lupin gasped in delight, "Oh, it's rather superb! Even better than before. I should break all my teacups and have you repair them. This is such an improvement over the drab design they sported before. Well done!"

"So it did it again?"

"Yes. Now, have you tried this with your wand?"

"Yes, same thing. And I repaired a pop bottle and it was filled with liquid which Ron drank, but he said it was horrid," Harry retold.

"Filled with liquid? Really? Was there some in the bottle? When you're repairing the item, what are you thinking about?"

"It was just a shard of glass and I'm just thinking about it being whole again," Harry said.

"No liquid at all? You're not visualizing it?"
"Well, I thought about a teacup of the same weight and size of the one I had been drinking with earlier," Harry said.

"Well, but this one was a completely different design - and yet it maintained its original shape. Do you mind if I _floo_ call Professor Flitwick and see if he can join us? Maybe he'd have some ideas."

"Sure, I guess so," Harry said.

It didn't take very long for Professor Lupin to have a quick conversation with Professor Flitwick who ended up stepping through the _floo_, muttering a charm to clean off his clothes, and conjuring a chair that settled gently next to Harry's.

"Mr. Potter - How are you doing?" Professor Flitwick greeted him enthusiastically, pumping one hand up and down in a vigorous handshake while grasping Harry's elbow with his other hand. Harry realized that he was now a little taller than the professor - he must have grown a bit over the year. They settled into their chairs.

"I was so sorry to hear from Madam Pomfrey that the injuries you received were not all reversible. Such a terrible thing - a Basilisk in the castle. Who would have ever thought that it was lurking down there all these centuries? Amazing that you and Miss Weasley escaped with your lives. I imagine it has been a tough adjustment. Professor McGonagall has kept us all informed - she said that you're making good progress and that there are other Hogwarts students in the training as well for other injuries. Oh, this spice cake is delightful. Thank you, Remus! I'm always so impressed with the training at the Center - their students come back to Hogwarts and blend so well into the student body that we tend to forget that they ever struggled at all. I swear that most of the students are completely oblivious that they are working alongside students who are missing limbs or who can't hear or whatever it is. So very progressive, too. They've been pushing for an Egress connection between the Center and Hogwarts for quite some time. I'm glad that Minerva was finally able to make it happen - what with Albus away for the summer. I think we could learn some valuable things from that Center - for all our students, not just those who have been grievously injured."

Harry wasn't sure if Professor Flitwick drew in a breath. Maybe he knew a charm for breathing while speaking that didn't require stopping.

"Professor Flitwick, here is the teacup that Harry just repaired. Before he repaired it, the pattern was just as dismal as the one you hold in your hand. Why do you think his repairs are rainbow-colored. His shield charm also has a rainbow-sheen - like an oil slick," Professor Lupin said. "Harry, could you cast your protection charm to show us?"

"Oh, okay," Harry as he felt the tips of his ears warm. He stood up, shook out his staff, and walked to the area of the room where he had been standing earlier. He crouched down and muttered, " _Protego_."

"Ah! Yes!" clapped Professor Flitwick and Harry ended the charm and found his chair again. "Miss Granger wrote me a letter describing this phenomenon! I haven't researched it yet... I've been meaning to do that and get back to her. It's so much better to see it in person."

"So, do you have any ideas about why it is happening?" Professor Lupin asked.

"Well, I'll have to do some reading, but I think it has to do with Harry's subconscious desire to see color," he said as he patted Harry on the knee. "Your injury is very recent and you probably are yearning for color and it is coming out in your charms. It will probably go away once you've stopped mourning the loss of your vision. Totally understandable that you are grieving what you've lost... the person you were before has died and you must mourn and eventually accept the person you are now."
Or it could be that the Basilisk venom changed your magic. Hmmm. It does have a tendency to imbue objects and, well, since most people who are bitten don't have a Phoenix handy for administering tears directly into the wound, well - they die, don't they? So, what do we really know about someone who was imbued with venom and survived? Probably as much as we know about someone who survived the killing curse... which of course, is pretty much nothing. You know, I'm surprised that the Ministry of Magic hasn't quarantined you in the Department of Mysteries. I bet they are dying to get their hands on you. I imagine that Albus had to exert quite a bit of his influence and power to keep that from happening. You're lucky to have your freedom, really.'

"Er," Harry managed to say in response to all of this.

"I will just pop back to my study and see what I can find. I'm very intrigued, too," Professor Flitwick said as he hopped up. "May I take this teacup to examine?" He didn't wait for an answer, or maybe Professor Lupin nodded. His rapid footsteps clapped away from them toward the fireplace and the familiar sulfur smell erupted into the room as the professor Floo'd back to his quarters.

"Well, okay then," Professor Lupin chuckled. "Glad we cleared that up."

Harry wasn't sure he thought it was funny. The person he was before has died? That sounded rather bleak. He wasn't sure it really described his experience. Sure, he tended to think of things as before or after the Chamber of Secrets events - but had he really died? Maybe? But then who was he now? And what did Professor Flitwick mean by being imbued with the Basilisk venom?
“Hey, Gemma, do you want to go to the library with me?” Harry asked as they were leaving the dining hall.

She tapped a slow “yes” on his arm. He thought there might be a question in there.

“Some things came up in my lesson today with Professor Lupin that I want to try to research. Maybe you could help me?”

She tapped a quicker “yes” in response this time and he smiled toward her as he took her offered arm.

They greeted Besel as they entered the library and made their way to their favorite table - but Gemma slowed as they approached and Harry could hear someone turning pages - the newspaper, he guessed by the sound of it. Gemma turned slightly toward Harry and made their sign for Aminah on Harry’s chin.

“Hi, Aminah,” Harry greeted, “Is it alright if we join you?”

“Sure - there is plenty of room, and yeah, it’d be nice to have company,” Aminah said, sounding subdued. “Gemma’s with you, right?”

“Yeah, sorry. I should have said so. Thanks. What are you working on?” Harry asked.

“Oh, I’m just reading the newspaper,” Aminah said, tapping her reader gently on the table.

Gemma placed Harry’s hand on the back of a chair across from Aminah and sat at the end of the table between them - Harry guessed so that she could communicate with both of them. He listened to Aminah’s side of the conversation and decided she wasn’t just subdued, she was sad. He guessed it had to do with her father and wondered if anything else had happened over the weekend.

Gemma signed “writing” on his palm. He got the notebook and pencil out of his staff for her. He also summoned the anagnóstis so he’d be ready when she’d written her question for him. She guided his hand holding the anagnóstis to the spot in the notebook where she'd been writing.

“What do you want to research?” Gemma asked.

“Oh, I want to look up Basilisk venom - like what it does to people. I mean, besides kill them. And Phoenix tears. And I want to look up rainbow-colored Reparo charms and Protego charms, but I’m not really sure how to do that. And also, I want to see what I can find out about Remus Lupin, my parents, and even…” he paused and Gemma wrote a question mark on his hand.

“Never mind. Let’s just see what we can find out about Basilisk venom. That’s a good place to start. Is there a card catalog?” he said.

She wrote a question mark on his hand.

Of course, there isn’t a card catalog. That’s a muggle library thing.

“How do wixen know how to find the books they need?” Harry asked. “Isn’t there a record of what book contains what information and where to find it?”

I should have listened more closely to Hermione. I bet she knows.
Harry waited as Gemma pulled the notebook back to respond.

“Oh, I think my pa was talking about something like that. He goes to the muggle library sometimes and was describing a big box with lots of drawers that had slips of paper that someone had written all the information about the individual books on. What a lot of work! Is that what you meant by card catalog?” Gemma said.

Harry nodded at the same time that he tapped yes on Gemma’s arm. She jumped up and he heard her walking over to the reception desk where he could also hear Besel’s chair. Harry got up.

“I guess we’re going to ask Besel,” Harry said to Aminah who made a small noise in response as if she were absorbed in her reading.

Harry followed Gemma, not bothering to shake out his staff, but instead trailing his knuckles on the backs of the low bookcases along the aisle to the entryway since he was pretty sure there wasn’t anything in his path. He hadn’t heard anyone else in the library.

He could hear Besel responding to Gemma’s signed questions and guessed that she was answering verbally for his benefit.

“Yes, we do have a system - it is different than what muggles use, but it is very useful. Here comes Harry. I’ll explain it to both of you,” Besel responded. “Hi, Harry. Gemma was asking about how to search for books with information on Basilisk venom and its effects. She said that you were asking about a catalog system used by muggles?”

“Yes, a card catalog - that’s what my school library used,” Harry said. “Do wixen use anything similar? How do I find information about the effects of Basilisk blood and Phoenix tears?”

“Well, I’m not really sure what the card-catalog system is that muggles use - but here at the Center we have this ancient clay tablet from Sumer,” Besel explained as she tapped an object to her left. “It’s another one of the Flamel’s finds from their journeys - salvaged from the ruins of the library in Alexandria. You write what you want information about using this stylus…” she said as tapped the stylus against the clay tablet. “It’s kept to the right of the tablet in its own sheath... and it will alert you to where the books can be found in the library. You can write using standard text or braille. If you write in standard text, the books you need will light up. If you write in braille… (oh, and it’s just like your Quick Quotes Quill - just press on the word ‘braille’),” she had pressed the stylus into Harry’s hand and he found the letters she was talking about.

“When you used braille, the books will have a bell charm alert you to their location so that you can find them easily. You can also ask the table to summon the books to this bookshelf over here. If there are more than it can hold, it will let you know and once you look through the ones that are on the shelf, you can get another row of books. If you summon the books using braille, the books will be translated into braille - so that’s handy - once you know how to read braille.”

“Oh, wow - that’s so cool,” Harry said. “I don’t think they have this kind of system at Hogwarts.”

“No, they should though. I think at Hogwarts you just have to search the shelves - not the most efficient system.”

“Do they have braille books at Hogwarts?”

“Well, the spell to transform any text into braille is pretty standard - so the librarian - Miss Pince - should be able to do it, but I know that Godric and other students complained that there was a lot of reluctance to adaptive magic while he was there. It sounds like things might be changing, though. I
hope so,” Besel said - the paper slip of translations for Gemma making their fluttering noises as she spoke.

“So, I just write on the clay tablet what I want to research and the tablet will collect the books I need on the shelf? I want to try that,” Harry said and he listened attentively as Besel walked him through the process. He decided to not request the books in braille since he was still learning how to read it, and he’d be able to find things a lot faster using his anagnóstis especially since Besel taught him a spell that would open a book to the page that contained the information he was looking for (Invenire notitia).

Besel gave him a heavy piece of parchment that had a long narrow rectangle cut out of it in the center as a writing guide - to make it easier for him to keep his letters even as he wrote on the tablet.

“Oh, this is really handy. I should make one to keep with my writing supplies,” Harry said after he used it.

“Here, I’ll duplicate it for you,” Besel said as she tapped the parchment and uttered, “Geminio,” She nudged his hand with a sharp corner of parchment.

“Oh, wow! Thank you,” Harry said, tracing his fingers over the exact copy. “Hey, can I try that charm?”

“Sure, you need to have a good understanding of the object that you’re copying. So, make sure you feel it completely and then hold the idea of it in your mind and say the charm while touching your wand to the object you want to copy with the intention of making an exact replica of it,” Besel explained and she pronounced the charm slowly so that Harry could hear the intonation.

Harry tried and Gemma scratched across his back in the sign that he understood as laughter.

“Oh, wow,” Besel said.

“It’s a rainbow, isn’t it?” Harry asked.

“Yep,” Besel said as Gemma tapped yes on his shoulder.

“Great,” Harry said dully.

“Why is that upsetting?” Besel asked. “I think it is beautiful - it is like a prism.”

“Just that Professor Flitwick thought that it has something to do with my grief over losing my sight,” Harry said.

“Oh, well. I guess that could be why it is happening. But there could be other explanations. I mean, it is really an excellent first attempt at the charm. Most people don’t manage anything so close to a functional object. Did you think about what color the paper might be as you cast the charm?”

“I was really focused on what it felt like - I wasn’t really concentrating on color,” Harry said.

“Why don’t you try it again?” Besel recommended. “Think about the color - it is that kind of brownish-yellow color with a marbleized texture.”

Harry tried again and Gemma tapped a “yes” on his shoulder right away.

“There you go, you did it. It isn’t the exact color of this parchment, but it is a parchment color. It’s really close. Wow. That’s really impressive, Harry,” Besel commended.
“I guess I can give these extra ones to Aminah and Peter,” Harry said.

Gemma snatched up the rainbow-colored one and made the sign for Peter in his hand.

He turned his attention to the sizable collection of books that appeared on the shelf with information about Basilisk venom and Phoenix tears. Besel sent them to their table, so he didn’t even have to figure out how to manage carrying the towering stack of books.

“Here, Aminah - this is a writing guide in case you need to use the clay tablet to request information - and I think it would be useful in other situations - like writing a letter or signing forms,” Harry said as he gave the guide to Aminah.

“Oh, that’s useful - thank you, Harry,” Aminah said, sniffing. “You’re very thoughtful.”

“Aminah, what’s wrong? Why are you crying?” Harry asked, perplexed.

“Oh, nothing…” she managed to say and after a long pause, she continued, “it’s just that the Daily Prophet… well, they wrote a horrid story about my father. Morgana, they are so… closed minded. Everything is so black and white to them.”

Harry was put in mind of Mei and her comments from earlier in the day. It seemed so long ago.

“Everyone says that the Daily Prophet just prints things that will sell copies - they aren’t really interested in telling the truth,” Harry tried consoling.

“Well, that’s the truth. It’s just so hard to see it directed at my family. I mean… I know what my father did was wrong and … and … he scares me … but they also don’t get it. They just think he’s some religious fanatic - some deranged Paki. I don’t think he meant to hurt me. I don’t know… it’s just so complicated. And mum is really pushing. She wants us to move to the States. And I don’t know. I don’t know anyone there. We have some cousins. But I don’t know them. Everything I know is here,” Aminah said.

Harry could tell that Gemma had wrapped herself around Aminah by the way her words were muffled at the end and Aminah dissolved into sobs. He summoned one of the handkerchiefs that he’d bought when he was out with Hermione and Dr. Granger, and did a quick Geminio charm on it, then stuck the original one back in his staff. He’d thought carefully about it being a crisp white linen while he charmed it and hoped that it wasn’t rainbow-colored - though Aminah wouldn’t notice… so that was good.

“Here you go, Aminah - here’s a handkerchief,” Harry said - not knowing what else he could do.

“Thank you, you’re both so good to me,” Aminah sniffed. “I’m pretty tired. I think I’m going to go to bed.”

Harry could hear Gemma giving Aminah another long hug. He patted her on the shoulder across Gemma’s back.

“Goodnight,” Harry said.

“I’ll wash your handkerchief and give it back to you later, okay?” Aminah said as she headed out of the library.

“Sure, no problem,” Harry said.

Harry and Gemma settled into the work of looking through the books and scrolls that Besel had sent
to the table. Pretty soon they had written notes about both Basilisk venom and Phoenix tears in the
notebook (Harry using his quick quote quill and Gemma using the pencil and sometimes they were
both writing at the same time).

Harry smiled thinking about how surprised Hermione would be at his investigative skills… though
he had to admit that the clay tablet and the *Invenire notitia* made it a lot easier than Hermione’s
method of just reading pretty much every single book in the Hogwarts library and memorizing the
content.

So far he had learned - from a dusty old tome and spoken through his *anagnóstis* in the voice of an
ancient author who was as difficult to understand as the Shakespearean players Harry had watched in
Primary that the ashes of a Basilisk could be used to convert goblin silver into gold and was
suspected to be used in the process of making galleons, that the venom would imbue Goblin silver
with the same power to poison anyone stabbed with it within a minute and could damage powerfully
magical objects such as a horcrux - whatever that was.

He thought about how he’d carried that sword back to Professor Dumbledore - stuck into his belt,
letting it flop against his thigh and that any little nick with the blade by any one of them - they could
have died before they even knew they were in danger.

He learned that throughout the history of magic there were very few survivors of Basilisk venom as
the only antidote was Phoenix tears which are very rare.

*I already knew that, didn’t I.*

They found an interesting little scroll put out by the Ministry of Magic that had cataloged the deaths
of wixen (muggles were sometimes mentioned in footnotes) by magical creatures between 1708 and
1968 … it was used to justify the reasonable restriction and regulation of magical creatures within the
British Isles. Most deaths caused by Basilisks came from being caught in their gaze, long before the
beast was close enough to strike. There were 72 known deaths during that time, with 52 occurring in
between 1793 - 1794 with one rather sneaky Basilisk that lurked in an unknown cavern within the
Butterley Gangroad tunnel. It was eventually defeated by a young milkmaid who had polished a
silver platter from her mistresses’ manor to such brilliance that reflected the Basilisk’s own image
upon itself, promptly killing it and freeing the terrorized country of the beast. Sadly, her name was
forgotten, though the silver platter was still on display in the Hall of Artifacts in the Ministry of
Magic.

In fact, the only survivor of a Basilisk bite that was mentioned in more than one book was the
legendary Merlin himself who kept a Phoenix as a familiar. Harry found himself falling down a
rabbit hole of legends about Merlin, King Arthur’s court (which he had read about in Primary),
Morgana and the Roman invaders who brought their Christian religion with them - eventually
overcoming the druids and their religion of the natural forces of the earth. He had never considered
that there was a wixen version of the story that told a different tale from the one he’d grown up with.

A number of authors dismissed the story about Merlin as a trumped-up legend with no foundation in
truth. While some wixen proposed that the story had been started to make Merlin out to be more
powerful than he was, others thought it was started to discredit Morgana. She was a controversial
figure - lauded among wixen as a witch with considerable healing power who had been trying to
protect magical communities from the Roman invaders. The Christians who came with the Romans
were fearful of the wixen community and tried to equate their pagan religions to devil worship and
didn’t try to understand the delicate balance between dark and light magic. In the stories circulated at
the time, the Roman sympathizers in King Arthur’s court suspected that Morgana was nurturing the
devil beast in her caves that sat on the belly-button of the world and then set it upon Merlin, whom,
they supported even though he was a powerful wizard.

Harry wondered if these same books were available at Hogwarts - he didn’t remember ever coming across anything like this. Of course, when he, Ron, and Hermione were scouring the library for information about the creature who lived in the Chamber of Secrets, they didn’t know they were looking for a Basilisk. He was tempted to call Hermione on the phone to talk about all the things he’d found out, but he thought that it was probably too late tonight and at any rate, she was coming on Wednesday anyway. He’d be able to talk to her in person soon.

Harry wanted to spend more time researching - they’d only found that there is only one Phoenix at a time in the whole world and that it can live to 500 or 600 years old - so the fact that he knew Fawkes was really incredibly rare - but he could hear Gemma yawning next to him. She had stopped researching and had started working on her homework - practicing signs related to astronomy. Harry had a brief moment wondering how he’d take an astronomy class - if it even made sense for him to continue the study. They had done more than just look at constellations - they had studied the effects of the position of the stars on the lives of creatures on earth. He closed the book he’d been reading and turned to her, “Let’s put the books back and… wait, where do we put them when we’re done?” He heard Gemma writing in response.

“We put them on the shelf next to the one where they appeared when we requested them. I think it sends them back to their spots on the shelf,” Gemma said.

“Do they fly through the air or do they disappear and reappear?” Harry wondered.

“Disappear and reappear. Flying through the air sounds chaotic and hazardous,” Gemma said.

“Yeah, and so magical!” Harry said imagining a library with books flying around with their covers and pages spread out like wings.

Harry made a stack of the books, touched his staff to them and said, “Wingardium leviosa,” then guided the floating stack to the shelf that Gemma had described. He set the stack down gently on the shelf and ended the floating charm. He listened as the books popped off the shelf and he could hear them popping back into existence throughout the library. He imagined little puffs of dust as they reappeared in their spots, but then thought that the library must have charms to repel dust.

*I should learn those charms to that I don’t have to dust at Privet drive anymore.*

He mentally kicked himself for the thought.

Gemma guided his hand to the notebook and placed the anagnóstis in his hand, tugging him to sit down again.

“Tomorrow after classes, let’s try flying brooms again, okay? I practiced some at home this weekend and I want to practice more,” Gemma said.

“Okay, that sounds good. I learned some stuff, too, when I was at the Weasley’s yesterday - about how to use the vibrations better. I want to do some more flying, too. Maybe this time we won’t get locked out of the Center!”

Gemma tapped “yes,” on his arm, then made the “let’s go,” sign on his arm. He put away their writing tools and all the notes they’d gathered about Basilisks.
As they were walking back, Harry thought about Mei and how she’d just left in the middle of their conversation… and he really didn’t get what she was trying to tell him - she’d said she was more wixen than witch ( aren’t those the same thing?) and they were talking about things being black or white and she felt more grey. He felt dense. He wondered if Gemma knew - but they were walking now and it was nearly impossible for them to carry on a conversation while they were walking because she couldn’t see his Scribunt loqui notes. He sighed and for some reason, he thought about the Sorting Hat and how it spoke inside his head. How does it do that? Could we figure out a way to use that kind of magic to communicate?

He hoped that Mei wasn’t still mad at him. He thought about Aminah - how distraught she was over the story in the Daily Prophet. Part of him was tempted to read the story and learn more about what had happened to her… but he resisted the urge. She’d tell him when she was ready.

He was also thinking about how Professor Lupin had said he’d been good friends with his father. Maybe he was in the photo album? He picked up his pace - he had slowed thinking about Mei and now he wanted to get back to their dorm so that he could look through the photo album. He felt Gemma twist to look at him.

“I just was thinking - Professor Lupin said he knew my parents. I wonder if he’s in the photo album,” Harry told Gemma. He heard her snatch the paper. She put her hand over his hand that was resting lightly on her arm and squeezed. He smiled weakly at her.

He thought about the photo album that Hagrid had made for him. He hadn’t looked at it yet with his digitus. It took a really long time to look at the photos tactiley … but maybe he’d pull it out tonight.

Harry’s schedule on Tuesday was pretty similar to his Monday schedule - except that he had just an hour with Godric for working with his staff and there was an hour added in to work with Besel in the herb garden. He was nervous about the time slotted in the afternoon with Professor Lupin.

He had stayed up a bit too late the night before looking through the photo albums and found several photos of four boys who seemed to spend a lot of time together - it was clear that they were the best of friends. They ran in and out of the photo frames and it was hard to keep track of who was who - except for the short, stout boy who stayed on the edges more - the three taller boys were constantly pushing each other, wrestling, putting each other in headlocks and casting playful hexes on each other. When they were standing still, Remus Lupin seemed a bit more serious than the others - and he made half-hearted attempts at trying to reign in their rambunctious behavior. Harry could tell Remus apart from the others (a Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew from the scrawled captions) because he had scars etched across his face as if a bear had swiped at him. They were less prominent as he aged in the photos. Harry wondered what had happened to him. Maybe that’s why he was more serious than his friends.

Harry had used the Indica color charm to learn that they were all Gryffindors and figure out their hair color. James and Sirius had dark black hair - he could tell them apart by his dad’s glasses and the length of their hair, but other than that they seemed almost like brothers in their appearance. Harry memento’d all of the people he came across in his photo album with his staff - even the ones he knew were dead - in case he came across them again in a Mirror of Erised or a pensieve.

People kept telling him that he looked a lot like James, but he wondered until now how much of that was actually true. Before now, he’d only seen photos of his dad as an adult. This was the first time he could tell how similar they were at the same age. They had the same black hair that stuck up in all directions (though it seemed like his dad liked to make it stand on end - constantly running his fingers through it and tousling it) and they both wore glasses - but Harry was a lot thinner than his dad and
his dad seemed to always be laughing and joking around - snatching Peter’s hat or transfiguring his shoes into bunny slippers were some of his favorite pranks.

From the photos, he could tell that his father had grown up in a well-to-do wizarding manor. He wondered what happened to their manor. His parents (Harry’s grandparents!) were pretty old - they died shortly after James and Lily were married and before Harry was born - and in all the photos with James his parents seemed to really dote on him. James had been loved by his parents in a way that Harry could barely fathom… it kind of reminded him of Dudley and that made him a little sick to his stomach.

He was soothed though, by the realization that it seemed that his own parents had loved him deeply by the way they held him and played with him in the photos.

And Remus had been in some of the early photos of Harry with his parents and it was clear that he had a fondness for the wriggly little boy with a flopping mop of hair who ran through the photos and pounced on him when he wasn’t looking. While Sirius would grab Harry and throw him up in the air, catching him and laughing in delight, Remus was the one who’d soothe him when he’d been hurt and distract him with a book. Peter didn’t show up as much in the photos with Harry, Lily, and James - but when he did, Peter would offer Harry sweets from his pockets.

All these images of a happy family surrounded with loving friends made going through the photo album about as gut-wrenching as his sessions with Besel. After staying up far later than he should have, Harry fell into an exhausted sleep that was filled with technicolor dreams that he couldn’t make any sense of. He awoke feeling just as spent as he had after playing his first Quidditch match.
Harry tried to catch Mei before went to breakfast, but she had already left when the alarm had sounded. He did a *Reveleo memento* charm just make sure she wasn’t just hiding from him - lurking under the surface of the water - hoping that he’d go away. She wasn’t at breakfast either.

“Have any of you seen Mei?” Harry asked his roommates at breakfast. Gemma tapped “no,” on his arm.

“No, she wasn’t in the room last night when I went to bed,” Tony responded.

“Actually, I haven’t seen her since she was helping you during your nightmare,” Arig said.

“You know, she didn’t attend Council, either,” Aminah mentioned. “I’m worried about her.”

“I’m going to go ask Healer Jordan,” Harry said as he pushed away from the table, leaving his hardly touched eggs and sausage on his plate. He shook out his staff and walked swiftly through the dining hall.

His imagination went to Mei hurt in the ocean somewhere. She could literally be anywhere… there were sharks and killer whales… submarines or fishing nets… and who knows what other magical creatures lurked in the depths of the ocean. He’d found out nearly three years ago that dragons, trolls, and goblins were real, what about the muggle myths featuring sea creatures such as the Kraken, the Loch Ness, and that giant squid from 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea?

There were probably things he’d never heard of before, too. Like that creature that Professor Lupin had in a glass jar in his office. He didn’t even know what it was - but it lived in water and had nails that were sharp enough that it sounded like they’d eventually make their way through the glass - given enough time. He shuddered at the thought and wondered if such creatures could emerge from Mei’s tank while they were all asleep in the dormitory.

He shook his head trying to dislodge the thought and reminded himself that when all the wards had closed their dormitory was flooded - the Egress in Mei’s tank was protected, too. Anything that so much as stuck a tentacle across the Egress would probably be zapped just like the bug in his shirt collar had been.

Harry tapped lightly on Healer Jordan’s door and waited as he heard her footsteps approaching from the other side. He was pretty sure they were hers.

“Oh, good morning, Harry, what can I do for you?” Healer Jordan greeted him.

“I’m worried about Mei. None of us have seen her since yesterday. Do you know if she’s okay?” Harry asked in a rush.

“Oh, come in, Harry,” Healer Jordan said and there was a quality to her voice that made his heart jump into this throat. She offered him her arm and Harry felt compelled to explain as she led him to the familiar chair by her desk.

“It’s just that she said something to me yesterday that I didn’t understand and … well, I still don’t understand it… and then she got angry and left… and I haven’t seen her since,” Harry said.

“Well, you know what I mean,” Harry added, thinking how Mei would respond if he’d said that to her.
Healer Jordan had settled into the chair next to him, rather than behind her desk.

Harry sat on the edge of his chair, with his hands on his knees, leaning forward and listening carefully. The hairs on the back of his neck were standing on end and his fingertips felt tingly.

“Harry, Mei is taking some time to be with family - Mei is okay - but needed some time to figure some things out,” Healer Jordan said.

He felt the air leave his body - he hadn’t realized that he’d been holding his breath until he let it go.

*Mei is okay.*

Though in Healer Jordan’s voice, Harry could hear a heaviness that didn’t match her words and his eyebrows pulled together as he tried to puzzle it out.

“Do you know how long she’s going to be gone?” Harry asked.

“No, Mei doesn’t know how much time is needed,” Healer Jordan responded.

“Can I send a message to her? Write her a letter or something?” Harry asked.

“I’m sure Mei would really like to hear from you - especially if you’ve already started to discuss some of the things they are thinking about,” Healer Jordan said.

“They?” Harry asked.

“That Mei’s thinking about,” Healer Jordan clarified.

“Okay, I’ll go write a letter, then. I think I have some time before class starts,” Harry said.

“Yes - it is only 7:15 am. Did you eat breakfast? You look a little pale,” Healer Jordan said.

“Oh, well - I wasn’t hungry… I was worried about Mei,” Harry said.

“Here, let me summon the nutrition potion. You really need to eat, Harry,” Healer Jordan said as she whipped out her wand and summoned a glass vial that slapped against her palm when it arrived. “Here,” she said.

“Thank you,” Harry said as he drank the delicious potion and licked his lips.

“Is there anything else you’d like to talk about?” Healer Jordan asked.

“No,” Harry said, though he felt the manifesting fog about Professor Lupin prodding him to speak; it was nothing that he could articulate.

“Okay, well, I hear from all your instructors that you are really working hard on all your work. I know it isn’t easy and I appreciate that you’re doing your best,” Healer Jordan said.

“Er, thanks?” Harry said, not really sure how to respond and he got up to leave. He paused at the door, turning back to Healer Jordan. “Thank you, Healer Jordan, for … well, everything. A safe place to learn… er… to get used to things.”

He hurried out - smacking the doorframe with his elbow in his hast to leave - before she had a chance to respond. He felt as though he’d muddled it up. He felt the heat rising up his neck, burning in his ears as he walked toward the library.
Harry pulled out his Quick Quotes Quill to compose a message to Mei - he’d cast a little bubble of silence around himself - the one he’d learned from Healer Jordan - so that he wouldn’t disturb anyone in the library and also so they wouldn’t overhear what he was writing to Mei.

But he sat with the QQQ in his hand hovering over the parchment, not knowing what to say. He was worried about her… remembering what she’d said when he’d first met her about harming herself. What if she was doing that again? What if she was doing that again because of something he’d done or said? He’d tried to dictate the letter, but it all sounded wrong when he read over it with the anagnóstis. He’d used the ink removing charm so many times that the parchment was beginning to feel fuzzy. When was nearly time to go to his class with Ms. Midgeon, he blurted out a simple note and listened as the QQQ scratched against the parchment. He listened to it, decided that it was okay, and then tucked it into his staff and hurried off to class - he’d have to send it with Hedwig later.

As the day passed, Harry realized that he was getting more and more anxious about the lesson with Professor Lupin. His fingers tingled with the memory of the forms that had danced under his fingertips - that of Professor Lupin horsing around with his father and their other friends, Sirius and Peter, as well as the images of all the happy people at his parent’s wedding and then playing with him as an infant. Why had they just disappeared from Harry’s life when his mom and dad were killed? Why was he left to the Dursleys when there were clearly people who had loved him? An ache to know was forming behind his belly button with tendrils of sadness and anger that seemed to be reaching into all his limbs making him feel jittery.

Time spent with Hedwig before he sent off the small scroll to Mei helped bring his heart rate down, but he still felt shaky.

“You’re in a right state today,” an oleaginous voice startled Harry as he was leaving the owlery.

“The portrait,” he sighed to himself.

“Yes, I’m the portrait. But I would prefer if you would address me by my name,” the portrait huffed.

“Oh, right. Well, we haven’t been properly introduced, have we?” Harry replied.

“Oh, remembering your manners, are you?” the portrait sniffed. “Well, since we’ve only the owls in here, we’ll have to do it ourselves, won’t we?”

“I am Harry Potter, sir,” Harry said, making a slight mocking bow toward the portrait - he thought that it was pretty rich for the portrait to be commenting on his manners when the archaic git was constantly haranguing him.

“And I, Mr. Potter, am Lord Jimbo Blishwick,” he said with a blusterous voice.

“Nice to meet you, Lord Jimbo Blishwick,” Harry said suppressing an urge to giggle at the ridiculous juxtaposition of the name Jimbo with the title Lord. Harry turned slightly and muttered the Memento charm to his staff to add Lord Blishwick.

He felt his wand warm up against his arm and wondered if it also was remembering the people he’d Memento’d. He’d have to test it later.

“Is there any chance that you’re a descendant of Charlus Potter? He married a cousin of my wife - Dorea Black. Funny bloke - he also had an unruly head of black hair. Had a life of its own, that
hair,” Lord Blishwick asked. “You resemble him.”

“I don’t know… my parents are dead - so I don’t know much about my family history,” Harry said.

“Well, that’s a shame. A blind orphan, eh?” Lord Blishwick said, reeking of insincerity.

“Yes, well,” Harry said and then muttered, “I’ve got to head to class,” and left quickly before the pompous ass could say anything else. He considered asking Healer Jordan about moving the portrait to another location as he walked briskly past her door, but decided to leave it for another day.

He arrived at the O&M room for his lesson with Professor Lupin with just minutes to spare and paced back and forth in front of the map for a moment, trying to get a handle on his emotions - the phrase “blind orphan” doing laps in his head.

When he felt as though his heart wasn’t beating as audibly, he paused to feel the map assuring himself that the Egress was going to take him to the same spot on the second-floor corridor near the DADA professor’s office.

He walked through the Egress, feeling the familiar tug and paused for a second to familiarize himself with the sounds and odors of Hogwarts. He could hear the portraits muttering in surprise at his sudden appearance - some of their voices nearby and others farther along the corridor. The tip of his staff tinged on the stone corridor floor and bounced off the walls - he remembered how high the ceilings were in this part of the castle and could feel a warm breeze that made him think that the clerestory windows were open.

He navigated to Professor Lupin’s door and used his staff to knock on the door. The door swung open slowly, hinges whinging.

“Hello? Professor Lupin?” Harry asked as he stepped forward so that he was hovering in the threshold. He put his hand on the swinging door and felt the slight zing of magic travel through his fingertips to his elbow. He swung his staff in an arc and took another step forward.

“Hello? Professor? I’m here for my lesson,” Harry said again.

Harry cast the *Reveleo memento* spell to see if anyone was in the room - but the room seemed to be empty. He stood just inside the door wondering what he should do. He decided to look at his schedule again - maybe there had been an update since he got it that morning. He summoned the schedule from his staff and ran his fingers over the braille - he was getting better at reading it, but then he chided himself for thinking that he could read it standing up without a firm surface under it. He found the chair by Professor Lupin’s desk, sat down and got his *anagnóstis* and read the schedule again. It hadn’t changed.

He decided that Professor Lupin must just be running behind schedule and leaned back into the chair to wait for him. He pulled out his braille work and practiced recognizing common words by touch. He checked the time. Five minutes past. Ten minutes past. He heard a cloak rustling in the hallway and turned his face toward the door.

“Hello?” he said. He was pretty sure that someone had entered the space - Harry had left the door open all the way. The breeze brought in a pungent odor - it reminded Harry of the dank closet that housed all the potion ingredients. The hair on his neck stood on end.

“Professor Snape?”

“Ah, well. It seems you’re not quite as dense as you appear, Potter,” Professor Snape said much nearer to him than Harry expected and he jumped. “Though you’d be dead if I were an opponent. I
suppose you haven’t had much time to work on your defensive magic. Pity.”

“Professor Lupin hasn’t arrived yet… Professor,” Harry supplied, trying to reign in his unease. He realized that he was clenching his fists and shook them out - accidentally shaking his wand into his palm. He decided he felt more comfortable with it in his hand anyway and made as if that had been his intention.


Harry ground his teeth together.

Harry heard robes swirl near Professor Lupin’s desk and then there was a resounding thud. Harry jumped again. Professor Snape must have dropped a stack of books on Lupin’s desk. Without really realizing what he was doing, his braille work clattered to the ground and he had risen to the dueling stance they’d been practicing in the self-defense class. He knew he must have cast the protection charm because he could feel it around him and the sounds of the room were muffled.

“Twitchy, aren’t you?” Professor Snape said almost gleefully. “Well, it seems you have been working after all… a transparent shield this time and nonverbal. Still, you would have been dead long before now at any rate. Much good it will do you, were the threat real.”

Harry bit his tongue to keep from yelling and tasted blood. He heard Snape’s robes rustle, but not his footsteps. Harry wondered if he had some sort of silencing spell on the soles of his shoes.

“Please inform Professor Lupin that I’ve returned his modest collection of tomes on Lycanthropy that he so urgently requested. I trust he’ll find everything he needs for his research,” he said from the doorway.

There was another swish of robes and the odor of potions dissipated. Harry was pretty certain that Professor Snape had left the room - but he muttered Reveleo memento before he let down his shield and summoned his fallen work from the ground.

“Rancid git,” he muttered as he found the chair and sat down again.

His heart was still thundering in his ears when footsteps echoed off the corridor walls and a tapping, too.

“I’m so sorry I’m late, Harry,” Professor Lupin said breathlessly as he entered the room. “Oh, was Professor Snape here?”

“Yes,” Harry said between gritted teeth.

“And how did that go?”

“Fine,” Harry said shortly - his jaw tensing.

“I see… Well, Aminah Khan will be joining us for these sessions. I believe you know each other?” Professor Lupin said.

“Oh, hi Aminah,” Harry said trying to tap down his disappointment - he was hoping to talk to Professor Lupin privately. “I was wondering why Professor Lupin was using a staff.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s just me… and, er, hi, Harry,” Aminah said.
“Great. Shall we get to work? I am late because I was securing a Boggart - Aminah was early to class and came with me. I think the Boggart may come in handy for future lessons and I didn’t want it to get away,” Professor Lupin explained.

“What’s a Boggart?” Harry asked.

“Oh, it’s a creature that lurks in dark spaces and takes the form of your deepest fears to feed off of them,” Professor Lupin said as he shifted the books that Professor Snape had dropped off.

Harry frowned - that didn’t sound like a fun session.

“But we’ll wait to tackle that for when you both have more experience under your belts. Today I thought we’d work on leveling the playing field so to speak,” Professor Lupin continued, moving scrolls around on his desk. “There are spells that you can use to remove the light from an area - even outdoors during broad daylight. If you were threatened, it could give you the advantage you need to get to safety. These spells are tricky - so it makes sense to start working on them now and give you time to practice them.”

Harry put away his braille work and stood up.

“Let’s move to the center of the room,” Professor Lupin said walked away from the desk. “The incantation is ‘Nox profunda’ and you have to think about the area that you want to cast in darkness. My understanding is that this is challenging if you don’t have an idea of the space around you… if you can’t see it.”

“But both of us have some light perception - so that should make it easier, right?” Aminah said.

“True - that should help.”

"But I don't have that kind of light perception. I can only tell if is really bright out or dark, I don't see any shapes," Harry said.

"Oh, I didn't know, Harry," Aminah said.

"Okay, I’ll cast it first so you can get a feel for the intonation - there is some wand movement with this spell that helps - it is a motion that mimics the shape of the room or the area that you’re plunging into darkness. The stronger the arm movements, the stronger the spell and larger the area that it covers. If you’re in a wide open space and you cast this spell, people who are far away may notice a shadow area where they can’t see what is going on. It could draw attention from a great distance - so that is something to consider,” Professor Lupin explained.

Professor Lupin clearly enunciated the spell, “Nox profunda,” and the light was snuffed from the room. Harry blinked his eyes - he realized how much more comfortable he was in total darkness.

“Was that a sigh?” Professor Lupin asked.

“Yeah, it is just such a relief - the light, even low levels, hurts my eyes, my head,” Harry explained. He wondered how much it would weird people out if he just cast that spell around himself all the time. He imagined an inky black hole of nothingness moving around the world - going to classes, eating in the dining hall, flying around on a broom.

“Is that why you close your eyes so much?” Professor Lupin asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said. Maybe he could just cast it around his eyes - and then had a visual of himself with dark holes where his eyes should be and shook the thought out of his head.
“How about for you, Aminah?”

“I actually feel more comfortable with some light because I get a lot of information about my surroundings - even if I can’t see details, I can usually tell where things are,” Aminah explained. “This total darkness makes me feel more blind and kind of off balance.”

“Okay, I’m going to lift the spell, Restutio lumen,” Professor Lupin said. “Let’s work on the wand movements. How about you each stand here with your fingertips on my arm and I’ll do the wand movements for this space. Later we can move to a different space.”

“So, I could cast this spell with a simple swirl that would just encompass the space around us for as many feet out in a sphere as I imagine - that is how you would do it outside,” Professor Lupin said as his arm was bent so that it pointed toward the ceiling and his wrist was rotating in tight circles. “Or I can trace the dimensions of the room like this.” His arm bent at the elbow and moved counterclockwise in jerky movements.

“So are you ready to try?” Professor Lupin invited.

“Just a sec,” Harry said as he dropped his hand from Professor Lupin’s arm and then started walking around the room paying close attention to the vibrations from his staff.

“What are you doing, Harry?” Aminah asked.

“I hadn’t really paid attention to the edges of the room when I first arrived - how there is this curved section where the tower goes up and then more angular walls and alcoves. I’m trying to get a better sense of the room,” Harry said as he made his way around. He heard Aminah following him.

“Is your staff talking to you or vibrating?” Aminah asked from a bit of a distance behind him.

“Vibrating - I hardly ever using the voice anymore,” Harry said.

“I haven’t really figured out how to use the vibrations,” Aminah said.

“It took me a while - it was actually flying that helped me understand it more,” Harry explained.

“Oh, I can’t imagine flying now. I mean, maybe on a flying carpet - but on a rickety old broom!” Aminah said.

“It’s actually so great, Aminah. You should try it. Do you have a flying carpet?” Harry said enthusiastically.

“Yeah, a small one - big enough that I can lie down on it,” Aminah said.

“We should try it sometime…” Harry said.

“Yeah, sure, I guess,” Aminah sighed.

“Good, very good - so you’ve got an idea of the dimensions of the room, right?” Professor Lupin asked as Harry returned to the center of the room. “Are you ready to cast the spell yet?”

“Yeah, I’ll try it,” Harry said. “Should I do it with my staff or my wand?”

“Try it with your wand first,” Professor Lupin suggested.

Harry transferred his staff to his left hand and shook out his wand. He made the wand movements as Professor Lupin had - drawing out the space in the room with his wand and then clearly incanted, “
"Nox profunda." The light around him was extinguished.

“Oh, that’s weird,” Aminah said from across the room.

“What’s weird,” Harry asked.

“Well, half the room is still light and I can see shapes, but the other half is dark… it’s kind of like it just dropped off - like it doesn’t exist anymore. That’s where your voice is coming from,” Aminah explained.

“Oh, so I didn’t do it?” Harry asked.

“No, you did, Harry. You did remarkably well, actually. You just missed a pocket of the room. I can step between them - from absolute darkness to light,” Professor Lupin said. “Of course, you may not always have time to map out a room before you need to cast the spell - but even creating a dark space for yourself - you could effectively hide and cause confusion. It could be a very useful strategy in a skirmish or duel. Harry, go ahead and lift the spell. Aminah, are you ready to try?"

Aminah had a harder time creating complete darkness. Her spells made the light in the room dim significantly for Harry, but didn’t cut out the light completely.

Harry tried several more times and was able to push the darkness into all corners of the room.

“I think it is because I really don’t like the total darkness,” Aminah sighed after several attempts. Harry could hear the frustration in her voice.

“That can definitely impact a spell - intention is 9/10ths of the success of any incantation, potion, or rune work - I think it was Gamp who said that. Awareness of your intention will help… keep trying, I think you can do it,” Professor Lupin encouraged.

Aminah drew in a deep breath and Harry thought he could almost feel her concentration. She cast the spell again and he whooped in delight, “You did it!”

“Yeah,” Aminah sighed in relief. He heard her collapse into a nearby chair.

“Well, I’d say that was a very succ… oh, ow,” Professor Lupin said as there was a thud and a crash of breaking glass.

“Are you alright, Professor?” Harry and Aminah said nearly in unison.

“Yeah, just fine,” he said weakly. “Aminah, how about you say the counterspell - clearly I need some O&M lessons before I start wandering around my office in the darkness.”
Hi Friends,

Thanks so much for reading, following, reviewing, and commenting on my story, Basilisk Eyes. I really appreciate all of your feedback, encouragement, ideas, and thoughts. And that's why I'm writing this author's note in the place of the next chapter. I need some feedback from you.

So, first off - I'm not sure everyone read the author's notes that I put at the end of the last chapter letting you know what was going on and why I wasn't posting on my regular schedule. Nothing catastrophic - just normal busy life at the end of the school year for both me and my children. And then at the same time I received some really valuable feedback from BrailleErin about Chapter 78 Hard Landing and Harry's reaction to flying for the first time after he lost his sight (she also sent a bunch of videos and photos of blind skateboarders and other athletes) and I decided to re-write that scene and all mentions of it in the last 32 chapters of the story. So that took a while. All of those updates have been posted. If you haven't already checked out BrailleErin's stories on fanfiction.net you should, they are great.

I started working on picking up the story again this morning and in my research, came across a timeline for the end of Chamber of Secrets and realized that I made a major mistake in my timeline. Apparently, the events in the Chamber of Secrets happened on May 29-30th (I knew that), then exams were canceled and I (mistakenly) thought that students would return home that week - the first week of June, but they didn't go home until June 25th. What did they do in that time? Why would they have exams three weeks before the end of term? I'm not British; American schools end near Memorial day typically. So, cultural snafu. I could keep writing the story and ignore that bit of information ... it is magic after all ... there's already a suspension of reality going on.

But apparently, I can't let it go. What I'm thinking of doing is re-writing the beginning of the story so that Harry is at the Dursleys for a lot longer before training starts at the Center at the beginning of July. Rather than fill in a lot of days, I'll just write in time skips. My story needs more of those anyway. That would put the timeline closer to the beginning of Prisoner of Azkaban... so that might make this story work better anyway.

What do you think? I value your opinion. Thank you.

Update: 6-23-19

Thanks so much for your patience! I've been editing all 109 chapters and have posted the updates. Things I changed:

Harry returned to the Dursleys on May 31 (that stayed the same), but the end of term was actually
June 25 - so he was at the Dursleys for a month, not a week. I just updated that with time skips and changing references from days to weeks and weeks to months. I cleaned up some things...typos and the like... I also clarified a few things that readers had questions about.

I added a day into the first day of training because that was just too much stuff to be happening on one day. Many of you commented on it.

The shift in time meant that Arig's transformation into a werewolf (sorry - spoiler alert!) happened a week after training started on July 4th. He spent the weekend in Healer Jordan's office. It was uneventful.

I think you don't really need to read it again if you don't want to. If you want to, great! If you see things I missed and should change, even better. Let me know. I'm working on Chapter 110 and will have it up soon. I'll figure out a way to let you know it is up.

Thanks again for all your encouragement and support.

End Notes

I love your comments and kudos! Thank you for letting me know what you think and when I've made mistakes.

May 12, 2019: My usual schedule is to post on the weekend and on Wednesdays - but I'm a little off my schedule right now due to the end of the school year events and demands on my time. Soon it'll be the summer break and we'll see how that impacts my writing schedule! I'm hoping it means more frequent updates and a beginning to connecting this story to the events in HP and the POA.

May 27, 2019: Okay, just one more week and then I'm off for the summer. My regular schedule has also been disrupted because I received some really valuable feedback from BrailleErin over on ffnet and I'm re-writing some sections so that they are more accurate. She is a really gifted writer - you should check out her work. I'll let you know when those are posted.

June 5, 2019: I'm off for the summer, I've edited chapters 78 through 109 and reposted them, and I'm working on chapter 110. If you're not wanting to re-read those 32 chapters, I'll tell you what I changed. BrailleErin gave me some really good feedback about how she thought it was really out of character for Harry to be afraid of flying - she backed it up by sharing some great videos of blind teens skateboarding and photos of other athletes. So, I rewrote that scene and then any references to it in the following chapters.

This story is cross-posted on fanfiction.net if you prefer that platform, search for Basilisk Eyes by Hegemone.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!