The Ground Beneath their Feet

by afullrevolution

Summary

Licking the Philosopher's Stone was perhaps not something Harry would have done if he'd known what it was. But that act, along with so many others, started him down his path to building a library with Hermione and Millicent while Tom lurked in the background. So, he was happy with how things turned out.

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Editing for grammar in April 2019. My great thanks and respect for Tazzm for their rather phenomenal work.

Notes

Really, really loose adherence to canon. Also experimenting with some of the language associated with gendered magical beings.

I'm likely to update once monthly. Ish. Very ish.
See the end of the work for more notes.
Starting the Story at the End with the Library

Chapter Notes

I find the lack of access to knowledge in a lot of magical systems horrifying.

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Note that the invaluable and rather amazing Tazzm agreed to fix these early chapters. Note that they are making these chapters incomparably better for catching my rather egregious oversights and errors. Note that I may have broke into gales of laughter when I saw the first "minor" corrections. I know I have issues with editing, but my graciousness, I didn't realize I was that bad. My thanks to you all who've been plodding through unpolished writing. And my respect to Tazzm, who's work will make the experience better for all.

This one is re-loaded on 18 April 2019.

In the Witching World, during his 202nd year, one Hadrian Potter became part of the team of architects renowned for building the great Witching Library of the British Isles. The building’s towering central spire would steal the breath of those who beheld it and inspire waves of wizards to try and revive Witching architecture across the Isles. Over the two hundred years leading up to Hadrian's birth, the practice of magical architecture had gone rather out of the common way in England. The time and effort magical architecture required were hardly possible during periods of warfare, when magic was unstable due to the disappearance of both the world’s people and its lands. Hadrian and his two partners (three, sometimes three, depending on how one counted) Millicent Bulstrode and Hermione Granger each had their own goals, which remained hidden from the Witching World until a great many years had passed. Their work, however, would unintentionally reignite the Witching community’s ties with the earth and their passion for property and family.

For Hadrian, his main reason for contributing to the library was his love of earth and stone – particularly the stones. Hadrian somewhat unintentionally began a love affair with the ground beneath his feet when he was just beginning the first class of his local school at the age of five. Although first chosen as a deflection, his love of stones became so rooted in the core of his sense of self that by the time Hadrian learned about magic, his passion for them did not abate but rather flourished alongside his magical development. That love seeped throughout his life, fundamentally altering both it and the lives of those closest to him. By the time he—and they—had reached full maturity at the age of forty, almost his entire magical skill set was grounded in solid stone and the living dirt that rests beneath all people’s feet even if they pay no mind to it. It was natural that, as they grew and matured together, Hadrian’s closest friends since Hogwarts had developed complementary skills. The three (four sometimes, four depending on how and when you counted) were well on their way to becoming architects. Once they realized it, they spent the next century perfecting their craft with the goal of calling a magnificent citadel of knowledge—a Witching Library—into being. They didn’t know it, didn’t think of it, but the structure would be celebrated as an architectural marvel for centuries after. Once the magnificent structure was brought into being, one could certainly say that they had done their public duty. They thus promptly vanished from most, if not all, people’s knowledge.

Three hundred years after the Library’s construction, people still told myriad stories and spread
rumors about it. To actually build the library, some claimed that the three partners ordered the ground to heave itself open in order to pull the stones out, just as the founders of Hogwarts had done a millennium and a half prior. The story went that, working as a triad, Potter the Geomancer had joined hands with Bulstrode the Charmer and Granger the Neuromancer to raise the earth and build a spire as a tribute to knowledge. To lend the tale even more romance and drama, the three supposedly vanished not long after, supposedly subsumed by their own creation. Some claimed that the rooms spelled to protect those learning some of the darker arts had eaten them. Those books did, after all, bite. Others claimed that the three had tied themselves too deeply to the building and into wards, dying there and becoming ghosts. The three were known, after all, to have dabbled in some darker blood magic. The three had tried to push the state to lift bans and restrictions. They had built their library around the idea that people should be able to study and collaborate on almost any subject, if under certain restrictions for the more questionable ones. And their existence as ghosts would have explained why the three’s group portrait in the library entrance simply did not respond. People whose ghosts lingered simply did not have responsive portraits. But most people believed that the three in the portrait were just sleeping peacefully after more than two centuries of labor.

In truth, though, almost all of the public record about the three partners and the construction of the library were incorrect or entirely fantastical, even if some was partly grounded in kernels of truth. The stories’ embellishments were pure fiction as the three had not died - neither having been consumed by the newly-born Library nor having sacrificed themselves to their own wards. The portraits were not, of course, sleeping as none of the three were dead. The rumors that the three were ghosts were more accurate, although still off the mark. For the purposes of the Witching world, they were ghosts. And those rumors abounded in part because the friends still stopped by the library, where they were, on very rare occasions, recognized as disembodied heads sticking out from under invisibility cloaks or as translucent, pearly specters as disillusionment charms started wearing off after hours of research. The truth of the matter was that, at more than 500 years of age, none of them had died at all. But none of them felt the need to let Witching society know that they had far outlived the usual old age of 220. For most, 500 years was an infeasibility. Rare was the person who lived to 220. To live to 500 necessitated outside influence to escape the bonds of mortality. Magic contributed to long-lived beings, sustaining its hosts far beyond non-magical capacity, but Hadrian and his two friends lived longer than most.

In Hadrian’s early life, most in the magical community saw 200 has a ripe, old age. Indeed, most in the Witching community held that 17 was the age of maturity and 100 was a good, old age to reach. That belief was largely due to the imbalance created by two centuries of wars including the two Dumbledore Wars against Grindelwald and Voldemort. Those centuries of violent conflict devastated the population, resulting in the life expectancy of the British Isles’ magical humans sinking from around 200 to a mere 45 years, which was in truth an age when a witch was barely out of their adolescence. Killing children does tend to lower average life expectancy. And children have short memories, but often assume that what they do know encompasses the expanse of reality. With so many people dying, the English Witching Government decided to try channeling more people into the workforce and more people to produce new children quickly. With that view, the English government dropped the legal age of adulthood to well before actual mature development. Non-magical humans can have children when they’re still barely more than children. Magical humans can too be it however unwise.

Furthermore, dropping the legal age of majority meant children were now positioned to lead. Children are cruel and—understandably—childish. For those very reasons, children should not run a government. But in England, children were the majority of the population. The childish leaders who took over, electing themselves into power, set about trying to shape the world to their preferences with almost no knowledge of how that world actually functioned. Youth and age
should go hand in hand in leadership, the generations listening to one another for a synthesis of new breath and aged wisdom. Between the two, society could handle new issues based on healthy consideration. But without access to wisdom, the young English government decided to obliterate problems rather than balance the system. They wanted to remove disease in order to alleviate symptoms of discord. In theory, the idea made some limited sense. In practice, the government’s youthful hands forgot that the world was not divided into discrete systems. In practice, forbidding entire branches of magic like blood magic was a little bit like cutting out someone’s heart to prevent a small cut from bleeding. The bleeding would, in fact, stop but at an inexcusable cost.

Hadrian had the simultaneous benefit and disadvantage of spending his infancy removed from the Witching world. In consequence, he shared none of the fallacious perceptions of blood magic or the all-or-nothing mentality of many of his peers. That removal both gave him perspective which served to his advantage and harmed his development by impeding his understanding of matters which the magical-raised seemed to grasp instinctively. He shared none of the privileges of those raised with magic within the Witching World. For him, blood magic was neither good nor bad. It was simply a form of magic one could learn and practice. Because so few spoke about it openly, much less to Hadrian, he was unaware of the associated stigma of the practice. Hence, in the long run of hundreds of years, that removal did benefit his development as an architect. Yet, it would have been better for that removal, that distance, to have never happened. In the Witching world and without, it children should not be abused for possible benefit.

For Hadrian, blood magic was a part of his focus on earth and stone almost from the beginning. Stable magical architecture is, after all, not only about construction but also about function, which includes protection. The most common and perhaps securest forms of protection were usually based in runic warding tied to blood magic. Most magic architecture included extensive use of Witching space both to capitalize on location but also to protect from non-magical interference. Witching space is not stable for non-magical beings as for them the space does not actually exist in the standard four-ish dimensions most non-magical beings operate across. Even for magical beings to operate in witching space, those spaces need an anchor in the four-ish ‘standard’ dimensions. Usually, the magical beings act as those anchors, with wards tying family bloodlines to a place in order to keep magical properties rooted in reality. In order to tie the family, the individual family members usually fed themselves to blood wards. That feeding, however, did not usually include lasting harm or death. Usually, women do not die when they menstruate. Nor do non-menstruating women and men perish upon finger pricks with needles. Indeed, before those two centuries of war, for most families, blood magic meant lavish feasts with candied sweets and a sense of renewal.

But communities forget in part because most children do not have the information in the first place to forget about it. Most children in Hadrian’s childhood had no experience with blood wards or buildings bound into Witching space. Most children in Hadrian’s generation had only seen a few such buildings, if ever. That absence was due in part to the downside to blood wards serving as the anchors for witching space. Blood-based wards meant that if those tied to the wards were, say, killed in a war, then the property folded into itself and was lost. Over the 200 years before Hadrian’s birth, hundreds of properties across the Isles and the Continent simply vanished when their tethers to the living, breathing, non-magical world snapped. The mansions and castles behind the illusions of broken huts melted away leaving only the huts behind as memorials to once grand magical homes. For those who looked, who knew enough to be interested, there were often records of those properties. Sometimes beautifully illustrated portraits hinted at the majesty of those lost spaces. But the properties themselves were irretrievable. Even when the children in government passed a series of laws stipulating that the properties without clear heirs should revert to the state, the properties rarely did. The law could do little to retrieve a property that had ceased to exist.

With the number of magical people slaughtered over the past century, several once famous places were gone, leaving witching places like Hogwarts Castle bereft, all too lonely as they watched their
fellows vanish. Most properties, however, were only tied to a few people instead of a whole bloodline. Some were jealous of their wards and refused to tie them to the whole family. The subsequent loss of those hundreds of properties meant that when Hadrian first attended Hogwarts, the Castle was in deep mourning. Her friends, her companions of centuries, had been vanishing across the Isles.

The remaining properties watched one another carefully to see who would survive these massacres. Because another effect of that blood, of the life and magic that filled those Witching spaces, was that the spaces would absorb all of that blood and life and magic into themselves. The true head of an established family was often the house. English magic had been spun and developed as a dependency to the earth. Without that tie, the family could not be rooted in the Isles. Other groups bound themselves to the air or the water but here, in this dimension, upon these Isles, the English had made their homes in stone and dirt. And the children; those young, foolish children who did not even have an inkling what they had never known, what they had never had a chance to forget, all unknowingly severed those ancient ties as they brandished their decorative sticks of wood and forgot the call of the earth. Hogwarts seethed at the foolishness of the children who left her much too early even as she yearned to protect them.

Hogwarts did not vanish or even diminish despite the new laws, despite the delusions of the English magicians, in part because of the children who ran through her halls and stumbled up the stairs of her spine. Witching law was all well and good for those who wished to live by it, but magic was not only intent based. The children’s knives slipping in potions, falling from brooms, pricking their fingers with needles, burying their first moons’ blood under the perimeter trees all resulted in a stream of blood, of life, pouring into the Castle’s wards. All of those children, those accident-prone children, unintentionally practiced blood magic. And in so doing, the children almost all tied themselves into Hogwarts’ wards. Hogwarts’ architects had built her with just that in mind. She was supposed to be their safe haven and they her protectors. It was hardly the founders’ fault that people forgot to know what they had never learned.

For Hadrian, Hogwarts was his first home and part of the convoluted series of reasons he became a Witching architect and one of the three masters of the Witching Library. The Castle’s desire to speak with friends would eventually inspire him to build places Hogwarts could commune with. But then he also did it to thumb his nose at the Ministry of Magic as well as society’s elites. Adding to that, which likely would have already sufficed, his inheritance of multiple properties with family libraries pushed him toward architecture because he wanted a public, British institution to donate them to. Combine all of that with his friendship with Millicent Bulstrode and Hermione Granger and there was reason enough to build a fortress for knowledge.

Hadrian hadn’t enjoyed watching Hermione’s hair spark with rage when she’d learned the results of Grindelwald’s reign of terror. Grindelwald had set out to claim the public Witching library of England as his own. Grindelwald, like Voldemort after him, was technically still a child when he started his reign of terror. He had not understood the results of murdering each of the librarians tied to the property. The moment the last librarian stopped breathing, the public Witching library in England had folded itself away. But, just as the government was learning, Grindelwald could only tear his hair as he failed to bring back what no longer existed. Neither Grindelwald nor Voldemort actually possessed the breadth of knowledge they believed. In their ignorance they both, as so many children do, destroyed much of what they claimed to admire and love. Only with age does one usually appreciate how much one does not know.

Hermione had raged to know that while there were Witching libraries on the continent, in Britain semi-public access was limited to the government’s library in the Ministry and the Hogwarts library in Scotland. There were some in Ireland, but crossing large bodies of moving water with magic was simply not feasible for most unless their magic was tied to water. Hermione declared
that a school library was not supposed to be one of the best libraries in the country. For Hadrian’s part, he wished that Hermione should be happy (and she was most certainly not happy with a school library being one of the best in the country) and tentatively felt that knowledge should be accessible to all.

But, really, at the heart of Hadrian’s decision was his love of stone. Long before he saw Hogwarts or met Hermione and Millicent, a great love of earth and stone had formed in his breast and rooted in his stomach. Long before Riddle ended up bound to him, Harry had looked at the earth under his fingers in his aunt’s garden and loved the small, grey stones he had to pull from her flowerbeds. For him, it was sheer providence that those sensations developed early, because magical architecture takes decades to master. Mastery, after all, necessitated connections to earth and sky both, as well as a solid basis in charms, transfiguration, and arithmancy. And, as Hadrian would learn, it required a team of friends who trusted one another enough to allow them to dip into one another’s magic.

It was good that Hadrian had those decades because his work necessitated spending more than ten years walking the Isles in order to tell them about how he wanted to build a library. The speech of the earth and the stones is slow, after all. Hadrian had to slow himself down in order to convey his requests to the stones beneath his feet. He had to tell the whole of the Isles about the idea, with Riddle trailing along behind. He had to convince them to form the library as part of themselves. Hadrian didn’t want to command or compel the earth as rumor suggested. He wanted to tie the library’s Witching space to the earth itself. So, he asked quite nicely if the earth would be willing to follow Hermione and Millicent’s chanted blueprints and consume part of their beings.

This library was not supposed to vanish with the disappearance of its librarians, it was not supposed to belong to any handful of people but serve as an edifice of knowledge for any who desired to learn. It was supposed to enable the desirous to flourish. It would house at least one copy of every text magical Britain produced. They ensured legislature that the edifice be open to all, regardless of affiliation and background. Knowledge, the three argued, was for the people.

Most knowledge was for the people, at least. There was one piece of knowledge that the friends chose not to share with anyone but themselves: the bit about their access to the (or possibly a) philosopher’s stone. Instead, they remained quiet about their possession of the famous but-all-but-forgotten-stone and charmed their faces to look aged. And, after the Library stood tall, the three (or four, perhaps) chose to vanish. The Witching world was already used to the three disappearing for years. After decades of absence, most people in the Witching community believed they would never come back, particularly after rumors about ghostly apparitions of the three spread across the Isles.

Any who could see the library were welcome to enter and use the material there but not to remove it. Millicent had worked hard to develop charms to return each book to its shelf-spot at precisely 1:25am no matter where the book in question might be. The system carried problems for researchers who worked through the night as their tables, overflowing with books, would suddenly empty, their notes fluttering to the now-bare table surfaces. But then again it also served as a difficult-to-miss warning that the unionized house elves were soon to sweep through at 2am. Best to clean up and step down to the cafeteria to digest the reading material with a cup of tea.

The three architects loved their tea. Generations of house elves passed down their preferences as part of young elves’ apprenticeships. To be a unionized Library Elf was quite something among the Elves.

And, at least partly, it worked. The system had flaws, which the three attempted to solve whenever they stopped by for a visit.
All of this - the library and the stone and everything that would eventuate from it, tied back to a fundamentally important and little known piece of information: Hadrian was a stone thief. And that thievery had resulted in Hadrian licking a philosopher’s stone when he was eleven. He hadn’t known what it was at the time, but a teacher at his primary school had mentioned, and some library books confirmed, that taste was one way to identify stones. He’d verified the technique with his small store of stones from his aunt’s garden and the school playground. So, when he’d snatched an intriguing package with a mysterious red stone inside and failed to recognize it with his eyes and his fingers, he’d licked it. Each of those things—the love of stones, the view of Hogwarts as home, his two friends, the thievery and the licking—would change the entire course of his life from what it might have been. Thus, although very few would ever know it, did Harry become set upon the path that would result in ‘Harry’ becoming Hadrian Potter, geomancer and architect.

This story, though, is about how he got there.
Chapter Summary

Harry learned as a young child that he was a thief. In the first class, he finally learned what that meant and determined to be the best thief possible.

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Before Hadrian Potter stepped into renown; not too long before the licking incident but more than a century before the Library, he was simply a boy who lived in a cupboard under the stairs. He was hardly ever happy there, rarely ever smiled, and scarcely even dared to breathe a calm breath. Sometimes he sang to himself in the dark space. His aunt and uncle called him lots of names, but they never called him Hadrian or even Harry. Instead they favored epithets such as "little thief" and "cheat."

For his first year of school, Hadrian’s guardians met with the teacher and told them all about it while Harry sat quietly at a table, drawing. "He's a little thief," his aunt and uncle told the teacher. "We're so very sorry, but if things go missing, check his bags first." His aunt assumed a mournful expression and added sorrowfully “And always makes sure to monitor his behavior during texts. He’s a cheat.” Harry wondered what those words meant.

What those words immediately resulted in was a teacher who spent the year eyeing Hadrian mistrustfully, glowering at him out of the corner of their eye. And, after the first few days, as Dudley spread Hadrian’s (alleged!) reputation around, his classmates would shift uneasily whenever he passed by. Hadrian felt cornered and frustrated, unsure what he had done to earn this widespread condemnation and even more unsure how to address it. During recess he would clench his fingers into tiny fists in futile frustration. As the smallest child on the playground, the other children towered over him in sneering disdain.

Dudley broke his nose that first year, claiming the fist to Harry’s face had been in response to the boy trying to dig into his pockets. The pain had been stunning, temporarily consuming Hadrian’s entire focus. At least he’d been at school where the nurse had patched him up. Her touch had been gentle even as she lectured him on stealing. She had run careful hands across his nose and given him an icepack. Hadrian couldn’t remember someone ever touching him so tenderly and he had treasured the moment even as she adjured him not to be a “sneaky, little thief.” She had tilted his head carefully this way and that to survey the damage and Hadrian had all but melted at the gentlest touch he could recall in his short life.

Dudley spent one day in detention for inappropriate use of violence. Hadrian had felt pleased at the punishment for an all-too-brief moment. But then Dudley punched him again at home for it, in full view of his aunt and uncle. And this time there was no nurse to apply ice to his face and gently tilt his head this way and that.

In those first months at school, Hadrian heard over and again about just what a little thief he was. He didn't know what precisely made him a thief, but he did learn that people were not to be trusted. Adults were dangerous creatures with tendencies toward nasty, spiteful behavior. And they seemed to believe almost anything another adult told them, as well as most anything a child (who was not....
Hadrian) told them as well. Hadrian wondered if he could come up with a story to protect himself from them.

Later in his life, Hadrian would be disgusted that the teachers had ignored and thereby condoned his abuse. That they had believed he deserved the black eyes and bruised ribs because "boys will be boys." He would be relieved decades later, when he had just started to become old, that several countries across the world would start anti-bullying campaigns. Educators would acknowledge the harm done to both the abused and abuser. But that would come years later and did nothing to help Hadrian as a child.

At the time, the constant repetition about Hadrian's identity changed his world before the philosopher's stone ever could. Beneath persistent, stifling pain and a layer of dirt, the boy was clever. He was becoming cunning, although he would not hear that moniker applied in relation to himself for another five years. It did not occur to him at the time to make a list of his own attributes.

What he did do was take advantage of the resources available to him. That first year, those resources expanded significantly with class library day. That day, he learned what, precisely, a “little thief” was. Hadrian rarely spoke, trained out of it through his family's liberal use of swats and screams, but he listened closely as the librarian explained about dictionaries and encyclopedia. The class teacher nodded along, encouraging students to look up answers to things they didn't know in the reference collection.

Hadrian’s aunt and uncle hadn’t thought to warn the school librarian off him and his teacher was too busy trying to stop Rosemary from climbing the stacks to pay him any mind. Hadrian would revel in that introduction to books.

That first day at the library, during that first visit, Hadrian carefully pulled out an encyclopedia volume for “t.” Taking the book to a quiet table, in clear view of the teacher so they wouldn’t look for him, he quietly sat with his hands in full view. He carefully, slowly paged through the volume until he reached the entry for ‘thief.’ Evidently, the concept involved taking that which was not initially yours, but the techniques, goals, and value varied. There was robbery and pick pocketing, there was burglary and larceny. And, there were great thieves like Robin Hood in some story named after him and Jean Luc from Les Miserables.

Harry read the entry and then closed the book. Looking at it solemnly, he stroked his fingers across the cover. If someone had seen him at that moment, they might have declared him cute. But no one was looking and not one called the under-sized child cute.

The child pondered his situation as he felt the texture of the cheap binding under his fingers. At that particular moment, Hadrian could not think why he was called a “little thief”. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever taken something that wasn’t his, although the Dursleys often claimed that he had.

Hadrian opened the book and read the entry again. He decided he wanted to know more.

What he learnt was that there were good thieves and bad thieves. Apparently, the two were often contrasted against one another, with good thieves stealing for moral purposes and attempting to avoid unnecessary harm. Bad thieves stole simply because they wanted something someone else had and often did not care if they harmed someone during the theft. Good thieves stole based on need and only from those who had extra. Good thieves stole cleverly and didn't get caught. Good thieves took from the rich to give to the poor. Good thieves did none of these things, and inevitably seemed to get caught and sent to jail (or, Hadrian would note as he got older and read more mature books, had worse things happen to them).
The ‘little thief’ thought, rather sensibly, that if this was who he was then he would at least be a good thief. Robin Hood was a hero to the people - a model of solid, English values. Hadrian felt he could emulate those values.

So, Hadrian learned from Robin Hood and Jean Luc. What Robin Hood did, Hadrian learned (first from picture books and then from chapter books in the school’s library) was a form of redistribution of wealth. Taxes, the taxes that Prince John collected, were going to pay off a ransom for King Richard. They should have gone to people instead. Hadrian learnt that a government was supposed to support and protect its people. He found he felt quite strongly about that. He would like to have feel protected. It wasn’t fair, he thought, that some children went hungry while others ate cake just because of an accident of birth. The tiny, five-year old child seethed at the injustice of it all.

But he kept his vitriol behind his teeth and considered. A good thief did not just jump into action. That got one caught. Instead he plotted and planned. And, that year during Dudley’s birthday he began his foray into stealing. Feeling defiant, he filched a broken cookie from the tray when he was cleaning up the remains. There was no cake left to be had. Nonetheless, Harry took his pilfered goods that night with him to the cupboard and felt triumphant.

Hadrian’s reasoning followed a child’s assumptions. He was, as the reader knows, quite clever, but he was still a child. He knew that children had to be good for their families to be able to love them. He knew his family thought he was a thief (though he was not quite sure why they thought that). It followed that he needed to be a good thief (though he was not quite sure why they thought that). It followed that he needed to be a good thief for his family to be able to love him. But he kept that desire locked tight in his chest. He’d already begun to suspect that this family would not love him no matter what he did.

Hadrian started spending lunch in the library. Initially, he went to find out more about how to be a thief. But then, as the librarian saw him a second and a third time, they started giving him a half smile before ignoring him. He reveled in that half smile. It drew him back again and again even if he avoided speaking to them. If not for that half smile he might have stopped coming. But it existed and so he came.

Coming back again and again, Hadrian opened book after book and learned about being a good thief. In those children’s tales, good thieves rarely got caught. He learned it was a tragic thing when a young boy had to learn how to steal but that sometimes it was necessary and sometimes people deserved it. Sometimes. But not everyone and not all the time. That would be cruel. Perhaps about that last thing, Hadrian got his messages crossed, for Robin Hood often stole from the same person or persons. But Hadrian was, after all, only six and Robin Hood was one of the more accessible stories about thieves. He wished that he too could be friends with Little John and Maid Marion. He wanted to meet Will Scarlet. But in many of those stories, friendships began later, often only after one excelled in their craft. He held that idea as a hope.

It was justice then, Hadrian thought, to take from those who had not earned what they had. Slowly, carefully, the little thief Hadrian learned to pinch more things than the odd, broken cookie. He lifted little things at first. His cousin's unwanted, broken toys; a coin here and there from his aunt's purse, and then a small bill from his uncle's wallet. The books suggested taking small things, things that were usually overlooked and wouldn't be missed. Hadrian started taking food. He would snatch slices of bread from the fridge, particularly after his cousin had just opened the package and his aunt could see Dudley’s fingers wrapped around the slices.

Harry followed the tales' advice and learned to lighten his step and to pay attention to where the floor creaked. He practiced sleight of hand for hours alone in his cupboard and learned about hiding things in the bathroom loo. Slowly, very slowly, he also learned to open locks. That one
took him some extra time as he didn’t initially realise he needed two tools and not the single hairpin he had filched from his aunt. He would only realise later that the two pins shouldn’t have worked any better than the one.

At school, Hadrian began taking chalk and boxes of raisins. He only took from children who appeared with new shoes every few weeks, whose clothes never had holes in them, and whose backpacks were stylishly new.
In the following two years, learning about being a thief led Hadrian in a rather unexpected direction. The books said that he should learn to be unremarkable. Hadrian, in the long nights alone in his cupboard, thought through what that might actually mean for him in terms of his life. Practicing sleight-of-hand with a small, smooth stone he’d picked up from the street, he considered the options. He didn’t have the clothes to be unremarkable. But he did want to learn about, and hopefully master, hiding in plain sight. To be dull and easily forgotten.

In deciding to hide behind a façade, though Hadrian didn’t know it, he was drawing himself closer to the once-man who had given him his scar. That once-man had done something similar in choosing to hide his first years at school. That individual, however, had learned to hide behind charm instead of obsession. But the once-man’s techniques didn’t matter as Hadrian sat in his cupboard. Hadrian had no idea that the once-man even existed. Tom Riddle was far from a conscious concern even as the little thief’s subconscious kept that valuable—but-horrific possession safely tucked away. He didn’t think about it as his body slowly chipped away at that foreign object.

Even if Hadrian had known, the knowledge would not have helped him. Hadrian was not immediately charming. He was sweet in an understated, need-to-get-to-know-him sort of way. The kind of charm the once-man had wielded was, for Hadrian’s own purposes of being unremarkable, not particularly useful. And anyway, he was unaware of his particular brand of charm and consequently unprepared to wield it.

The slowly-growing thief decided to hide behind people’s boredom. If he could redirect people’s attention elsewhere, make himself into someone who did not concern people, then maybe his life would be easier. He could rely only upon himself to learn how to best be a good, unremarkable thief and in doing so become a better thief all around.

At school, Hadrian watched his classmates out of the corner of his eyes, trying to determine the best way to appear uninteresting, to be mostly forgotten. He decided his best bet was to emulate the children with minor obsessions. Usually, those children had their heads down in books focused on their chosen subjects. They were occasionally teased, sometimes mocked, but most people made quick assumptions about them, misunderstood them and proceeded to ignore them almost
completely. Most people became bored with those children and failed to care about those children’s nuances. Usually.

Back inside the classroom from recess one day, Hadrian sat in his chair, listening to the teacher talk about volcanoes. Hadrian decided he too wanted an obsession with which to bore other people, to present a front and turn them away. He ran his hands across his desk, feeling the lines of the sheet, pressboard grain. He listened to the teacher talking about how lava flows solidified into igneous rock. She passed out samples for the children to touch.

Harry, like the other children, handled the pieces of rock as they passed him. He liked its sharp edges and the light feel under his fingertips. He briefly considered taking one. The texture was interesting, so very fascinating. He could imagine comparing the texture to the smooth stone he used to practice his sleight-of-hand. But he passed these stones on like the other children did. The teacher was watching and she would be inclined to blame him if any of the stones went missing. To be a good thief, he couldn’t draw attention to himself.

Hadrian watched the tray of rocks move on and thought about how he’d enjoyed that feeling. As the lesson continued on he continued contemplating how interesting it would be to run his fingers across those points and edges in the dark of his cupboard.

Hadrian ran his fingers across the screws holding the pressboard to the metal, curved legs of his desk. The teacher was talking again, outlining the difference between the pebbles the children might find in the playground and volcanic rock. ‘This,’ he thought, ‘might work.’

As Hadrian saw it, standing out in the playground the next day, his options were few. Most things were too hard for him to obtain. Most things had too much value and his cousin might take an interest in them just because he had. But rocks were all over the ground. Harry already knew they bored his cousin. They wouldn’t be new, wouldn’t be special.

Hadrian bent to the ground and picked up a rock. He’d never really thought about them before, about the lines and texture. He thought back to the teacher’s lesson. It would be interesting to know something about the rock he’d just picked up. They were such simple things on the surface but so very complicated and fascinating if you only scratched just a tiny bit below the surface.

Hadrian knelt to the ground and picked up another rock. He thought about his position and decided that it added to their appeal. If his knees were in the dirt at recess, he presented a smaller target. If he were sifting for rocks, he had a reason to be on just this side of bedraggled. He thought it would be ok for a boy with a rock obsession to be dirty as long as he didn’t stink.

That afternoon, Hadrian began to implement his plan. At lunch in the library, Harry pulled a picture book about rocks off the shelf and doggedly set about learning. At first, it was slow, slow going. It was difficult to understand what the book was talking about with minerals, molecules, and atoms. But Hadrian was a stubborn creature and he stayed at it. It was, after all, part of his charm.

Within weeks he had a basic framework for his knowledge. Within months he could talk like a boy obsessed in part because he had become obsessed. It felt good to have something special, a thing that was all his, a thing which he could hold to his chest and not fear it being taken away for being too valuable or too special or too, well, too anything really. The Dursleys were not inclined to let him have much of anything after all.

That knowledge changed the way he saw the world. The concrete in the school building began to be more than just concrete and the decorative slate in the garden was a fascination.

And at night, alone, Hadrian would run his fingers across the edges and plateaus of those first three
rocks he’d collected. He memorised their contours and counted their differences in the dark. They were soothing.

Without dolls and toys, those three rocks took on meaning for him. Petrus was the steady one, the calming one. He took to holding Petrus when he was nervous or frightened. He felt steady with Petrus in his palm. Ignatius, in contrast, was for courage and bravery. Holding Ignatius was like a warmth in his hand that traveled from his palms to his chest. He could speak to people with Ignatius in his fingers. And then there was Aquila, his very first rock. Aquila made him feel fast and changeable, like he could make split-second decisions and act quickly. Petrus was for heavy thinking and planning. Aquila was for action. Holding Aquila, its water-smoothed surface soft against his fingers, made him feel like he could fly.

Hadrian took to holding the three rocks in his cupboard at night and talking to them. During the day, he kept them in his pockets.

As months wore on, Hadrian sometimes felt as if the three would grow warm in his hand when he spoke to them. Some days, he felt like they reached for him in return. He supposed it was a bit pathetic, but Hadrian began to feel a desperate sort of affection for the three. By the time he was ten, he became curiously convinced that they listened.

Hadrian didn’t know at the time that they felt sympathetic because he was making them so. Speaking with them, holding them, pouring concern into them was a form of wild magic. Lacking friends, he desperately wanted the three rocks to be his friends. That passionate desire transformed into wild magic, which he had been funneling along with slivers of himself into Petrus, Ignatius, and Aquila, coating their very molecules. But here, again, Hadrian didn’t have that information even as it affected him.

He was careful never to speak to the rocks in front of Dudley or his uncle. He never ever twitched to touch them when his family was about. Dudley would have taken them just because Harry cared. Instead, when they were around Harry would focus on thinking about the composition of rocks. First, he imagined burrowing safely into the ground beneath his feet. Eventually, he started building stone fortresses in his head, composing rooms of sweeping stone.

As a result, he was shoved into his cupboard for lack of attention instead of beaten. There, he rolled his growing collection of rocks in his fingers, telling his three companions about the inert pieces of rock. For each new stone, he ran his fingers in the dark and began to identify the different kinds of rocks by sight, touch, even taste. His companions were good listeners.

Cultivating rock friends had not been part of Hadrian’s initial plan when he set out to build an obsession but it was one he was happy to support. He liked the feeling of having three sympathetic friends, friends who reached back. Who started slipping into his hand if he moved his hand to his pocket.

Outside his home, his obsession also ended up helping him. As his aunt started sending him out for chores beyond the garden, his reputation began to change. Without her hovering, people started taking him for him. And he would answer every question with information about rocks. The grocer told him his purchases’ cost and Harry would start talking about the composition of the asphalt outside as he handed over the money. The florist greeted him and he would blink at them before starting in about rocks. At school, his teacher asked about his home would and he would tell them about white chalk and glacial deposits. He became the Rock Boy. Sweet, but so very **boring**.

Hadrian was very pleased.

Perhaps the most curious part of all was that it was an obsession that didn’t disturb his aunt. When
the teachers mentioned that he was just short of failing everything but science, she agreed that he
was obsessive about rocks and rock-related subjects. Curiously, it was something the teachers
seemed to understand and sympathise with. It made him seem freakish, but in a normal sort of way,
a combination which pleased his aunt greatly. It was alright for the teachers to encourage her to try
and interest him in other things. All she had to do was put on a little performance when speaking to
his teachers; nodding and claiming she had tried everything to get him interested in things unrelated
to rocks. “The boy is just too focused on his rocks.” She could say. It was a weirdness, but an
acceptable one. It wasn't her fault the boy was hopeless and her Dudley was much more
accomplished.

And, while busily rolling their eyes at his rock obsession, the teachers didn’t see the tiny bits and
pieces vanishing. Why would he, the Rock Boy, be interested in such things as raisons and apple
slices? But while he was bent over his library books about stones, Hadrian watched people to see
who was absent-minded; apt to leave things behind. To see who knew where all their belongings
were; and to see who carelessly let things slip from their bags.
Chapter Summary

Wherein Hadrian encounters the magical world and thinks it might be inherently violent.

Chapter 4:

The day Hagrid showed up at the Dursley household, one Hadrian Potter, called little thief or that-rock-boy, was not the child he might have been under different circumstances. This Harry had rocks in his pockets and a small, brightly-colored bag hanging from a string around his neck, hidden in the folds of the large shirt covering his gaunt frame. This child had a deep-seated mistrust of adults in general and guardians and teachers in particular. This boy, in learning to lie, cheat, and steal, trusted the people around him even less than he may have otherwise. People, Harry included, were not reliable. But this Hadrian had a very carefully thought out moral code.

Hagrid, of course, did not know any of that. His casual violence against the Dursley’s both appealed to and appalled Harry in almost equal measures. Vernon had raised the gun, but Dudley paid the price for eating a cake. Harry frowned. For a boy used to reading into the world around him, for a child without enough information to reach accurate conclusions, he unconsciously began to build a mental image of a magical world filled with violence and people preying on one another with little provocation.

Harry mentally reached for and clutched Ignatius, his fingers slightly twitching at his with the desire to reach into the pouch around his neck.

Harry had pinched that small pouch from the back of his aunt’s closet. It was a gift just on the wrong-side of too colorful that had ended up in a box in the back of the closet with the other gifts his aunt lifted her nose at. After a year, when it had been buried beneath other things and ignored, Harry removed from its box and hung around his neck under his too-baggy clothing.

Curiously, from there, his snatching became easier. Bits and pieces seemed to spring to his fingers when he reached for them. Sometimes, he suspected that the very act of wanting somehow assisted the process. When he focused his desire and thought hard, his fingers burned slightly—as if he’d run them through a match flame—and the things he wanted seemed to slip out of pockets and backpacks.

With Hagrid’s appearance, Hadrian had a burgeoning suspicion that all of that wanting and thinking might be magic. HE also knew that little of that would help him at the moment. He did feel safer, however, feel safer, calmer, with his brain with rocks and his mental fists with stones, as the large Hagrid towered over him with an apparently jovial smile.

Harry had gotten used to filling his brain with rocks. Many people find that understanding a subject makes it interesting. Know enough about something and it’s hard to find it dull. Harry had picked rocks as a front, hardly considering that he might learn to love them, but nonetheless soon did. Rocks made more sense than people. People hurt one another and failed to understand that sharing
wealth meant more for all while hoarding led to gross poverty. Rocks, in contrast, lived their quiet lives, existing and weighing on the world around them in accordance with communal rules. Sandstone crumbled and granite stood solid.

Part of the appeal for Harry went beyond the basic knowledge that rocks followed the rules and into the idea that this knowledge was his. Most other people did not have it, even if they could have. No matter if his aunt smacked him with the frying pan, she couldn’t take his understanding of the iron in that pan, the knowledge of its density and mass. Perhaps, he sighed in his cupboard, he would be a geologist. He comforted himself to thoughts of volcanoes erupting, fell asleep focused on images of the earth’s plate moving over one another, causing ruptures that leaked molten stone. The dream of the earth swallowing him whole into its understanding embrace was comforting.

The pub Hagrid took Hadrian to was not comforting. He disliked the crush of people trying to touch him. As they whispered and stared, Harry made sure to answer every inquiry with rock-related information, mentally palming Ignatius in his hand. Grounded through his rocks to the earth below, Harry filled his mind with layers of sediment and information about limestone. The crowds looked at him strangely and Hagrid gave him a quirked glance in confusion. What, after all, were the thoughts of rocks to a person who preferred the living breath of creatures? Hagrid, warm heart beating in his chest, could not imagine that the press of people around them would not be welcome to another being.

Hadrian found the bank on the other side of the wall much more appealing. Not only was it a curious edifice of rock, but the sign over the bank caught Hadrian's eye. He appreciated the warning to thieves. It was kind, Harry thought, of the goblins to make their stance clear. And Harry determined that he would not pinch anything inside the bank. At least not this time.

Inside, he paid attention to security as a good thief should and felt aggrieved when Hagrid produced the Potter key. It was supposed to be Harry's. The boy felt robbed. If Hagrid had been looking his way, he might have seen the flash of indignation on Harry’s face. The goblin teller saw it, noted it.

Harry was displeased with Hagrid. A kind man, a foolish man, a man not to trust. Who seemed content to hold things that didn’t belong to him, yet he didn’t seem to worry about being caught out or challenged. Suddenly, Hagrid reminded Harry briefly puffed out his cheeks in frustration and then told his face to relax into light confusion. The goblin behind the counter took note.

Harry briefly forgot his anger and distrust in the cart down into the vaults. He loved the feeling of plummeting into stone. It reminded him of his dreams. Here again, Hagrid might have been too sick to notice, but the attendant goblin paid attention as the boy mumbled about lignite and sandstone. They watched as one Potter, Hadrian, stroked his fingers against the walls after they stopped. They noted that Harry was less interested in the piled gold in his trust vault than in peering at the structure of the limestone around them. After catching his breath, Hagrid tried to hurry the child. But Harry's attention caught on the wall’s carvings. He ran fingers over the runes carved into the walls around the vault door, noting the pattern and organization. Petrus, tucked in his sleeve, seemed to whisper to him.

Hagrid failed to see, his stomach still churning, but the goblin escort watched quietly and would later add Harry’s behavior into a report. The "Potter, Hadrian" folder would grow thick over the years. Geomancers were, after all, a potential danger or help to those who lived underground. It was important to take note of which magicals had affinity with the walls.
Hadrian would eventually see that folder. He would, five years hence, begin to actively build a relationship with the goblins in exchanges of favor. In another two decades after that, he would begin to contract with them and learn about the bedrock of the magical community. But that was 25 years in the future.

In his eleventh year, Hadrian was not concerned with building his relationship with the goblins. He was mostly interested in remaining as unnoticed or misunderstood as possible. He was also interested in his key.

He remembered that key as they left the bank, his fingers switching Petrus for Aquila. He eyed Hagrid from the corners of his eyes, noting the man’s gait and pace, as they moved into the open air. He didn’t ask about that key, knowing better than to draw attention to his interest. He knew from long experience that people lied and adults thought they knew better. It followed, Harry knew, that adults were far from trustworthy. Adults felt good about cheating you because of their certainty that they were right and you were wrong.

So Harry waited until he and Hagrid were in the street, the keeper-of-Harry’s-key looking peaked. Only then, in the press of people, with distractions all around them, did the child take the opportunity to flinch his key. But as Harry’s hand darted into Hagrid’s pocket, the rumpled brown sack Hagrid had taken from the other vault felt strangely warm against the back of his hand. It felt curiously like a rock through the paper twist. And the cover that had become an obsession prompted his fingers to twist and grab the brown paper instead of his metal key. The paper-covered stone disappeared into Harry’s pocket. A block later, it shifted into the pouch beneath his shirt.

Hadrian didn’t check it, just felt the weight draw on the tie around his neck and around his ribs. He knew better than to look, to draw attention to himself about this. Instead he kept his eyes peeled and fascinated until Hagrid walked away from him to find a pint and settle his stomach.

Harry made sure to wait until Hagrid had moved away before he wandered into a few shops. Harry didn’t try to lift anything more that day. He felt it would likely be a poor showing, resulting in his capture. It was bad form as a thief, after all, not to case a place not to understand this society’s tricks and traps, before he could tell what was safe and fair. After all, he didn’t know who had enough to share without the asking. And he certainly did not condone casual violence or imbalance.

So Harry contented himself with watching particularly as his lack of knowledge bothered him. The world around was too dangerous to navigate without as much information as possible. So he noted how the people around him moved in and out of buildings, he paid attention to who touched who and how. And he carefully mimicked what he saw as he moved.

So it was that in a shop for trunks he began to practice interactions. Harry made sure his hair fell across his forehead. He made sure to ask the right question. And he made sure to pay attention to the attendant’s sales pitch about trunks be-spelled with extra depth and locks. Harry asked about charms (found out about charms) as he looked at the runes carved along the lips of a trunk’s interior as the man told him about possibilities for extensions and preservation. And Harry remembered the carvings in the bank, how Petrus has seemed to almost vibrate with possibility. These, Harry thought, he wanted to try.

That information paid off in the bookstore where Harry made sure slip a volume on rocks and another on runes into his pile. In a dark corner he made sure to slip those two books into his waistband and not into his trunk. Those volumes were not supposed to be seen. There were, he felt, possibilities that he was not sure he wanted anyone else to know.

In each space, noted the way people walked, how they wore their clothes. He paid attention to the
hang of their robes, which people wore girdles, and how their shoes pointed. He saw bags of coins in pockets, rings on fingers, wands in holsters. He wondered about trousers beneath the skirted flow of the robes and the likelihood of underclothes. He tried to watch for pockets.

By the time he actually entered the robe shop, he'd already picked up a portion of that normalcy.

And by the time he met back with Hagrid, the man was slightly tipsy. Harry frowned as the man strapped his trunk to the back of the motorcycle. He said nothing, however, as Hagrid took him back home and gave him a ticket for a September train.

Back in the house, Harry’s trunk went under the stairs as expected. But his aunt didn’t see the books in his waistband or the bad under his shirt.

It took until sunset for Harry to pull the bag from under his shirt and examine his purloined gains after he was closed in his-now-bedroom. The stone glowed red in his hand, burning painlessly under his fingers and he wondered what kind of rock it was. It didn't match any of the stones he knew. He licked it, trying to gauge at least part of the chemical make-up. Whatever this rock was, made his body buzz down to his toes. He still had no idea what his new stone was but he felt better for holding it. As if it warmed him and eased his hunger.

Harry considered the stone carefully, thinking about the possibility the giant would come and ask about it. He didn’t. And, in the following days, Harry put the possibility from his mind. The stone was his, payment for keeping his keys from him. And he liked the new red stone, it got on well with his beloved three. Harry decided to call it Marble.

Harry quietly read his book on rocks. It expanded wonderfully on the magical properties of stones. It spoke of carved rock and gargoyles. But it did not say a word about gently glowing, red rocks.

He turned to his book on runes instead. Harry’s reading taught him about crystals and healing, protection charms carved into stone, and protection against dreams.

Harry didn’t feel he needed protection against dreams. That desire would come later. What he did feel he needed was protection against the now. And, possibly, likely, protection at Hogwarts. His brief encounter with the magical world had seemed violent. Society looked like it was steeper with casual insults and attacks that one was expected to protect themselves against.

So Harry focused carefully on figuring out how to defend himself. With only two books and chores that summer, he learned those two books well, turning the information over in his head.

Drawing with his stolen chalk on the floor boards of his new room. He practiced the symbols over and over until the lines were right. But they didn’t seem to do anything, thinking of his burning fingers, he tried to push desire into the marks he had drawn on the floor. The chalk dust shifted, but they didn’t do anything. Until the night he chalked a passage for light on one of his many stones. That night, the patterned marks illuminated his small room. Little did he know that he had already begun attuning his magic to rocks.

Weeding in the garden he imagined what he could do with those runes carved into stone. At night he took a nail and carved Elhaz (protection) into a piece of flat stone in his pocket, imagining his will pouring down the nail, its metal compound vibrating and heating as it poured his intention into the small stone. To his surprise, the nail glowed red and the stone accepted the rune without complaint. Its slight magical pulse reminded him of his red stone.

Harry compared the two, taste and touch, vibration and heat. His carved stone had changed somehow. It felt like a bit of energy under his fingers, a hint of warm electricity. The red one
seemed like lightning in a bottle. He liked to hold the ball of power in his hand, pretend that that it was shooting up his arm. Sometimes, he thought maybe it was.

He found his protection worked for small things. His uncle would reach for him and seem to become distracted. If his uncle became too angry, however, the blows still landed.

Two books for the summer and he had something to think about, the information seeping into his brain as he obsessed over the formation of carbon atoms and the color of iron. He began to gather protection, trying to imagine possibilities and futures. By September he felt as ready as possible to head off to Hogwarts.

But his red rock remained a mystery.
The Sorting that Happened While a Castle was Being Built

Chapter Notes

My thanks to all of you who've commented and thrown your kudos in my direction.

Note that this chapter is half of what I'd initially intended with this one. Here, Harry (Hadrian, etc.) starts to make friends and build castles out of chronological order.

For Hadrian, years later, memories of his first two years of Hogwarts would focus on meeting Millicent and then Hermione. Riddle would become a feature later. But only later.

Millicent, in contrast, became a close friend early on. In the first month. He had started visiting the library early on because they had books on rocks. And, one day, when reading in the library, a shadow fell over him. One Millicent Bulstrode stood by the table looking not at him but the charms book sitting closed on the library table. Her eyes flicked from the book, to him, to the chair across him and back to him. Harry nodded and she took the seat before warily pulling the book toward her. He gave her his approbation by turning to his book on transfiguration. There was a chapter later on transfiguring stone that he wanted to understand. He wanted to know where mass went when he reshaped things. If a transfigured object retained any of the properties of the original. The entire idea of transfiguration, which he’d only known for four weeks, threatened all he knew about stone’s stability and he needed to know of the limits of the idea. It made him feel shaky.

Hadrian didn’t really understand why a young girl, his year, in green trim sat down across from him in the library one day. He didn’t know why she met his eyes, nodded, and then opened that charms book. But the silence he could work with. They sat. The table between them. Over the next weeks she began to remind him of stone, solid, reliable, and able to hold magic. When he told her a month later what he thought of her, she smiled at him and told him to call her Millicent.

And with that, Harry inadvertently made his first human friend.

Years later, she would tell him, cup of tea in hand, that she sat down with him because he was acceptable to her and to most others. He was something important but mostly boring, he studied quietly, spoke more to the rocks than the teachers. It was calculated. He would make her seem normal in comparison and not drag her down.

Hadrian privately expected that charms, her beloved charms, would fit somewhere into those figures.

Aloud, Hadrian would smile at Millicent, that slow smile that filled the lines barely etched in his face, and he would tell her he was glad her calculations had led her to his table.

But that talk was years later, a conversation that could not have been had back when two eleven-year old child lacked the confidence to speak of such things aloud. They would have had to trust one another beyond what their primary school experiences permitted.

What they could do was continue to work with one another. Millicent kept joining him. Soon taking a seat without flicking her eyes at him in question. Her silence reminded him of pumice, punctuated by bubbles of speech, and her solidity of a rich, green marble. He felt that she'd
probably crack in the heat, so the comparison was apt. And, behind his mental walls of stone he was warily pleased with her presence. He'd never really had a friend before outside of his three rock companions. Here was a human one who fit his pace and preferences. The two might have been in different houses, but they complimented one another beautifully.

Neither had succeeded in making immediate, fast friends in their own houses. Harry was too suspicious and too obsessed. Millicent too careful and distrustful.

Yet, by early October, Harry found himself nurturing a new fear that she would somehow become angry with him and vanish into the ether. He found himself wanting to be a good friend when he wasn't sure how. From his first contact with these other children, he semi-intentionally pushed them back and away.

Hadrian had done that from the get-go. Dropped off at the train station, Harry had looked for the stipulated track. He’d found the sign and reach forward to feel the warmth from the pillar stones. He was momentarily horrified to find they weren’t real. The bricks that were supposed to be solid weren’t. They were a lie. He pushed to find the truth underneath and instead tumbled through. Part of him was appalled. He paused, looking around this place full of people similar to those in the Alley Hagrid had taken him to. He didn’t want to stand about in his clothes. They were too different and he'd be noticed.

Harry boarded the train quickly, but not too quickly. He lugged his luggage along until he found a random someone in blue trimmed robes hidden behind a book. He nodded, stowed his trunk with trouble, and then stayed behind his book too. Another silent reader who desperately didn’t want to speak. Harry imagined Gringott’s bank with its deep, cavernous underbelly. He began to build his own caverns, imagining hewn stone passages ending in giant caverns. At the sight of the castle in the distance, Hadrian began using the stones he’d carved for those tunnels to build a soaring edifice atop.

By the time a tall, domineering woman called his name, he had filled his mind with the beginnings of a stone building. He'd constructed a series of walls to block out the sounds and whispers around him. He imagined being the castle, cut stones piled one on top of the other, smooth from care and time. He imagined hiding in alcoves and watching as people walked by. He thought about reading behind a tapestry. He was so successful that he didn’t outwardly react, barely noticed as the hall went quiet, as whispering began. Then he was on a stool, the hat descending, calling *Ravenclaw* without a pause, and the boy was on his way. The hall’s inhabitants looking startled. Some disappointed. Harry didn’t particularly notice.

What Harry would never know in this dimension was that the hat took one look at his obsession with rocks and his desire to be unnoticed and placed him accordingly. That hat, after all, was about desire as much as about who the children were. And to give an eleven-year old their desires was often a terrible thing. Although perhaps in this instance it was kindness.

Reader's will know that in a different universe Harry wanted to friends and to have a family. Here Harry had no experience with friendships and believed family was prone to abuse and abandonment. He’d read too many books. He knew that according to children’s stories parents died in order that children could become heroes. He was aware that, according to those books, families were dangerous and teachers failed to protect, while the established elites lied and abused. He’d never really gotten over Robin Hood and his lived experiences suggested that only the stones remained true. The possibility of that fundamental belief being undermined was part of what terrified him about transfiguration later in the year.

In this world, the hat's willingness to give him the silence and space he craved would eventually
lead to the dissolution of the social world around them. Although that was hardly the hat’s fault alone. Harry would fail, over the years, to find almost anything enough about the social system in place that was worth saving. It was part of the reason he would eventually support an eventual government coup and structural reorganization. It was part of the reason he threw his backing behind one Luna Lovegood eventually become Prime Minister of a semi-autonomous part of Britain tied to the magical spaces Hadrian and his friends would construct.

But that was in the future. What Hadrian did know that evening of the sorting was that when he glanced back at the head table as he moved toward the table in blue, he felt a strange, external push at his mental battlements. His brain already caught on stories of castles and ramparts, Harry interpreted that mental touch as a preliminary assault. In response, he made sure to shore up his walls, beginning to transform his structure into stalwart fortifications. He started building ramparts.

Feeling attacked, Harry would sit down among the eagles on edge and distressed. Disturbed, he would respond to his fellow students’ greetings with explanations about sandstone. When the eagles around him asked about his scar, he raised his arm to point to a scabbed spot where he’d scrapped his skin against some rocks. He described the kind of stones he had seen. He didn’t mention that his cousin had shoved him into that stone wall on the walk home. He focused instead on the way the rock had felt against his skin.

When someone pressed, pointing to his forehead, he scrunched said forehead and told the table that that scar didn’t have anything to do with rocks that he was aware of. The students at the table knew the signs of obsession and turned away. Patel continued occasionally glancing at him, clearly sizing him and the rest of their year up. But most of them began to leave well enough alone.

The evening would tumble forward with the Headmaster making a curious announcement about a third floor during his speech, with food appearing. But Harry was too busy adding to his mental fortress of stone to notice the dire warnings or the concerned eyes from the head table.

Harry didn’t know that he was, perhaps, supposed to care what was down that third floor corridor. He was unaware that the missing thing that caused the Headmaster such concern sat in a bag against his chest. Lacking that knowledge, Harry failed to look guilty or concerned. Focused on his stone fortress, Dumbledore’s attempt to look in his mind met only a wall.

Harry had with his stone fortress unintentionally done stepped on the paths both toward occlumency and architecture. The best lies are often what people believe as well as close to the truth. Harry had grown used to having a quiver of stone-facts at hand to fire as necessary. They brought him comfort now. Rather in awe of Gringotts’s caverns and Hogwarts’s soaring structures, he combined that comfort and interest into protection.

The headmaster let it go. He only briefly wondered if the child could have taken it. The child had been there that fateful day of the loss, but he did not imagine it possible. So, the old teacher did not press after seeing the solid building in the boy’s mind and occasional flashes of the periodic table of elements. The boy was obsessed with the castle and his non-magical science. It was unlikely he would have nicked something he didn’t know existed.

If anyone had possessed enough information to ask, the old man was hiding nothing down that third-floor hall but a concerning absence behind a dangerous series of tests. It remained a trap, but one with only the tease of bait. The old man worried over where that bait could have been. Only the subsequent attempted break-in reassured the man that his greatest fears had not yet been realized.

Hidden behind walls of stone, Hadrian, meanwhile, would not let the trembling fear of this new
place come to the surface.

Instead, he focused on the castle and his own walls. He told the castle’s stones that they were
beautiful. He complimented their fit and the beauty of their masonry. The castle purred beneath his
fingers. Students so rarely paid more than fleeting attention.

In his room, he would unpack half under his roommates’ eyes, who half-watched as he placed
small piles of stones under the four corners of his bed. They couldn’t see from their own beds, but
each of those stones was carved with runes. And, as the placements took effect, the other students
found themselves turning away. They were only first years and didn’t understand Harry’s crude,
carved attempts. But taken together, those stones demanded peace and asked for privacy. It was
hard to keep paying attention when the stones asked so nicely for them to move on and turn away.

In his bed, curtains drawn, Hadrian listened to some of the wobbling cries of the younger students
as the night wore down. But they, probably, had family to turn to. He had rocks that he could call
to himself now. There, in his bed, Ignatius sat warm in his hand, filling his chest with bravery. The
other two snuggled under his pillow to guard his dreams, Aquila ready to fly. And Marble, his
strange, red stone, seemed almost to sink into his chest. He found its properties baffling, but
pleasing. The four seemed to warm him as he fell to sleep.
Chapter Summary

That in which one Millicent Bulstrode works up courage to sit in a chair.

Chapter Notes

Well, this is going slowly. Eh. Whatever. We're working our way to gargoyles and getting caught on people's conflicting and complicated reasons.
I'm poking at the question of manipulation and the idea of informed right to the sanctity of one's mind here. At what point is giving a child a calming-draught acceptable? I keep wondering how far we should go to protect ourselves from potential harm when that protection often infringes on other people's bubbles.

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Text beta'd and replaced on 27 April 2019. My ongoing thanks to Tazzm for her brilliant work.

Chapter Six:

Millicent’s Charm

For Millicent, in contrast, the hat took a mere fifteen seconds. The brim descended over her eyes, considered her family and her conflicting desires. Like so many other students, the hat told her she would fit in multiple houses, that there was no clear delineation for her. She was complex, ambitious, knowledgeable, and clever. Like so many other students, Millicent would keep the hat’s quietly mumbled revelations close to her chest for years without a single hint of them passing her lips. The possibilities that the hat said were open to her didn't matter, she decided. Other options would have been alternate histories and they didn’t happen.

Because, in the end, no matter what the other options might have been; no matter what paths might have unfolded if she’d gone to Ravenclaw (where Hadrian ended up) or Gryffindor (where Hermione would go), it was ‘Slytherin!’ the hat called out in the end. The hat placed her in Slytherin, spelling out her saving grace – having ended up precisely where everyone expected and approved of - and her destruction, for the paths not taken that might, perhaps, have benefited her just as much as Slytherin would.

Millicent had walked to her house’s table to a light, polite applause. No one at the table was surprised. No one in the room particularly cared. And, in meeting their expectations, she disappeared into the crowd. She, neither overly wealthy nor poor, neither weird nor charming, neither beautiful nor ugly, failed to stand out in any way and therefore for most people simply passed from mind, without any effort on her own part. In primary school, Hadrian would have wished (in fact had wished) most fervently to have just that ability.

Millicent appreciated her abilities. She was prone to self-reflection and knew her parameters better.
than most eleven-year-old children. So, she kept her tongue behind the fence of her teeth in order that she not disrupt that social invisibility. She didn’t tell the others around her about her fascination with the charmed ceiling. She didn’t communicate how much she liked the good cheer and loyalty woven into the banners around them, how she appreciated the faint feelings wafting out of them as they moved in the intangible breeze.

As she sat, Millicent wanted to vibrate with excitement. But she kept her feelings in her stomach as her mother had taught her and simply sat placidly. Later when the food appeared, she ate just as placidly. Early training had taught her better than to exhibit too much, to show her cards too early. Her mother would have been furious if she’d done anything else but charm those around her or disappear from their notice. In the Bulstrode household, those were the options. One controlled, one manipulated, or one charmed; as according to their own abilities, inclinations and current needs. Throughout, whatever one did, they acted with intent.

For the rest of the student body, Millicent remained all but invisible in the following weeks. That invisibility meant that most people failed to notice her walks in the halls after class. She liked the silence and found that the movement and change of pace helped her think. And those thoughts usually focused on charms. She pondered the weight of them, considering the intent and visualisation behind the various charms (and there were a great many) about Hogwarts. Charms depended heavily on knowing your goal and wanting to achieve it. The desired effect, the eventual success, had to be properly represented, which was where the use of wands and materials came in. But the greatest challenge to charms was the intention.

Materials helped the caster focus by providing a framework of clear boundaries, or by physically delineating the intent. Like those banners in the great hall – they released faint feelings of good cheer and loyalty as they waved; their intent, presumably, to help calm the young newcomers to Hogwarts’ halls, and to reinforce the older students’ loyalty to their house and the school itself. But the charms were bound into physical objects, which provided a clearly defined trigger – the banners only released their charms when they waved.

Focused on intent and effect, thinking about those banners, she strolled on.

Only to stop near a certain Hadrian Potter, crouched near the base of a wall, apparently intently examining some aspect of the stone skirting. He was, as far as she could tell, petting the stones that were part of the skirting. His wild hair stuck out and he didn’t appear to be aware that she was there. She noted all of that in the corner of her mind, but the oddness of Potter wasn’t what captured her attention. What did snag her interest was the weight of the atmosphere around him. Focused as she was on the idea of intent in magic, she could the taste an effort to shape intent in the air hereabouts. There was a light cloud of feeling that suggested she move on. She licked her lips to taste the magic, trying to identify the source. She took a step forward, toward Potter and noted the feeling, the light taste in the air, intensified. It prompted in her a desire to step around the person in front of her, to not notice or disturb him. She felt it, stroked it by running her tongue along her teeth.

Millicent blinked and was intrigued. She carefully stepped back. The feeling receded. She moved forward again and the sense returned. The closer she moved, the stronger the sense that she should just step away and be on her way became. Millicent felt a smile in her stomach, where she stored her feelings. The sensation bubbled and tickled her throat. Her face remained impassive. The twinkle in her eye might have reminded people for a moment of the school’s headmaster if they’d bothered to look at her. It would take most people more than one hundred years to actually pay attention to her. Some, a few—including Flitwick—would see her sooner than that.

But that would be later.
In the particular present of Millicent’s school years, her natural invisibility allowed her to observe the world around her without people notice her doing it. Where Potter had to deflect because he was too visible, Millicent was able to wrap people’s unconcern around her. She was able to test that sense-taste of difference around him without anyone particularly noticing her behaviour.

Millicent started hanging around Potter’s periphery when she saw him in convenient hallways. She began testing when and where that feeling of please-move-on returned. It didn’t appear in class, not when he was under a teacher’s watchful eye, but it reappeared when Potter was elsewhere. It prompted other students to leave him alone in the library and the halls. No one else seemed to notice. The feeling wasn’t strong, after all. It merely politely suggested. And most students had had little reason to develop empathy, focused instead on their own selves and places in the school.

Millicent was aware that she was in the same boat as those other students on the empathetic front. But where others moved on, Millicent’s own sense of self-interest trilled.

Millicent, like Potter, was inclined toward obsession when she found a subject that sufficiently enthralled her. She had, as a small child, leaned unintentionally toward charms and never backed away. Her father was charming. He could twist words and shift his body just so to communicate a wealth of information the target rarely realised was even being conveyed. Her mother also charmed (after a fashion), but as an abrasive force. She overwhelmed and compelled. People listened to and believed the words that came out of her mouth. The pair worked in tandem to enforce their wills on others. Millicent was awed by the two but knew she had a talent for neither form of manipulation. She could charm people … just not with words.

Millicent tended toward obsession and her small, tiny, unformed mind seized upon charms; albeit a different kind of charms than her parents practiced in most of their persuasive conversations. There were charms for everything, after all. Charms for calming, for notice, for appeal, for floating and for transformation, for illusion and disillusion. There were simple charms and complex charms and endlessly varied combinations of charms to make creations like the Great Hall’s ceiling and banners. It was all so fascinating that she had never seen any reason why she should back away from her obsession with them.

Which made Potter intriguing. Potter was clearly using magic to influence and convince people to move around his personal bubble. Millicent knew it had to be at least somewhat intentional. But Millicent was unclear towards precisely what end he did it. And the effects were quite crude, unpolished. The subtle sense Potter was somehow exuding was not as precise as many charms could be. It was more of a general idea, almost like Potter was somehow telling a story that somehow unobtrusively rewrote itself even as the reader read it, in order to make himself blend in more, to draw less attention to himself. Millicent thought his affect was rather as if he was adding adjectives to his own weaving.

Thus reasoning, Millicent was almost positive the origin of the feeling wasn’t a charm. It was too stable, too generalised, and too unpolished.

Fascinated, she fell back, as usual, on observing and charting what she observed.

Millicent saw how Potter’s fellow students exchanged rather few words with him, seemingly bemused by, but uninterested in, his obsession with stones. She noted in class that Potter didn’t seem to expect anyone to talk with him and furthermore wasn’t bothered by it. She watched how he appeared to throw himself into his own projects. She tracked how often he reached into his pockets, the twitch of the fabric making it clear that he was clutching something. Then she noticed how often his fingers would curl around nothing in class and wondered if he was imagining that whatever was in his pocket in his hand.
Finally, at the beginning of October, Millicent began to think maybe she would try to be a person in Potter’s bubble. She wanted to know how he would react to someone breaching his semi-intentional field of please-leave-me-be.

Her desire extended beyond the intention of just probing at Potter’s magic. She knew there was more to discover. Millicent, however, rarely chose to do anything for only one reason. Potter seemed safer than most of her housemates. He didn’t seem like he would poke and press. She thought he would let her work in peace, so long as she returned the favour. And, even with his social isolation, he was mostly acceptable. People around him increasingly considered him to be very much a typical Ravenclaw; a boy like any other as opposed to the yet-unformed hero many had perhaps been expecting. And maybe, having a true obsession of his own, he would better understand her, the way that she was obsessed with charms and charmed things.

These were her considerations the first time she sat down. Potter was interesting with his not-charms in effect, and safe with his social isolation in the event they should be noticed in each other’s company.

Even with all her reasoning and guesses, with logic assuring her that her decision and conclusions were sound, the actual act of pulling out the library chair and sitting in it that first time were terrifying. She was relieved when he simply looked at her and spewed rock related information instead of telling her to piss off. It was easy, in that relief-filled moment, to permit her face a small smile, and even simpler to express a small but genuine interest in this thing that so obviously consumed him. She nodded and told him about her parents’ own work with enchanted jewellery, some of which had stones – gemstones – of various kinds set in them.

Now, Millicent’s parents were hardly uninterested in her. They loved her, even if they did not express it in a way most would recognise if they were observing the family interacting. But Millicent did recognise it, knew her parents cared very much about her and that even if they did not, necessarily, understand her obsession they were willing to support her with it, so long as she went about her obsession in a seemly fashion that would uphold their family’s values. But even with that amount of familial understanding, it was for the first time in her young life, with Potter’s eyes riveted upon her, his face nakedly expressing his true, unvarnished, unselfish interest in what she was saying about her own obsession, that Millicent felt a small glow of something that had been quite unfamiliar to her. Was it pride, perhaps? No, it was not pride. It was pleasure, that for the first time in her life someone could truly understand and empathise with her own obsession, because he had an obsession of his own.

She had sat down and truly listened to him pour out his information and had then responded in kind, telling him things he might not have known about his own obsession (things to do with enchanting gemstones with charms) and had woven the topic of her obsession (charms) into the conversation without taking away anything from, or overwhelming, his own conversational contributions.

Millicent felt a great deal of simple pleasure at this unanticipated point of commonality. At the camaraderie created only by a shared understanding of something few others understood, and were all too often not even willing to try and understand.

Over the next months, the two rarely spoke about themselves but instead focused on their work. She began bringing him rocks he might not have found otherwise and he started expressing some interest in charms for their own sake.

Their first collaboration happened after the first time he didn’t hide his protection rocks as he placed them around the library table, effectively setting up a field that encouraged people to move
Millicent was enthralled and intrigued to finally get a proper look at exactly what created the gentle please-move-on field. She shared her limited knowledge of such things and how they could work together with other kinds of magic – like charms – to produce many different effects, and much more powerfully. The pored together over the possibilities of tying runes (the proper name for his primitive, uneducated – but still quite effective – scratchings) into charmed stones for a combined effect that was stronger than either category of magic might achieve on its own. When she tentatively suggested looking into creating a more precise field that they could control and manipulate, his responding hand movements and smile made it clear he was down for that.

Millicent gave him a small twitch of her lips as she listened. And while she smiled and shared, she refrained from asking Hadrian about why he kept stones for protection. She didn’t ask why a child raised by magicless people felt the need to distract from himself, to protect himself with magic. There were too many possible reasons, none of which were happy thoughts. She wondered why the teachers didn’t speak with him about his rocks, which might violate the Statute of Secrecy or something of that sort. But no one else seemed to pay attention to the Rock Boy’s rocks closely enough to note that those pieces of stone weren’t passive lumps of mineral.

(Later in their lives, both Hadrian and Millicent would wonder at this strange blindness – almost anything could be used to scribe a rune into, after all, and thereby enact some simple magic.)

But for now she kept silent. It was to Millicent’s benefit that those gentle, magical, attention redirectors remained unnoticed and she wasn’t going to alert others to what was happening to them when they approached and risk others breaking into the notice-me-not field. She might have fit well into Ravenclaw with her love of knowledge, but she was also well matched to Slytherin and she would employ her quiet cunning with pride, knowing she was upholding her house’s values.
Chapter Summary

That in which Harry begins to understand the world around him a little better and Ignatius provides some comfort.

Chapter Notes

The assault is canon typical and not something that should bother much at all.

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Beta'd by the inestimable Tazzm and re-uploaded on 27 April 2019.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A solid, magical building consumes slivers of the wizards who construct it and later inhabit it. Those structures draw on the donations of blood and spirit. They are watered with tears and grow on laughter. Those homes absorb the moments and memories, the accidents and the spells. All that dust—the dead skin cells, the fluids, the waste—that accumulate in a mundane home are not a problem in a magical one. A magical building will eat its inhabitants alive.

Yet, that magic is not dark and certainly not lethal. Those structures consume their inhabitants, certainly. But those people live the longer and die the happier for it. There is a reason many students feel happier at Hogwarts than almost any other period in their lives.

Part of that symbiosis is that, after absorbing enough of those inhabiting them, those buildings eventually become their own beings. Readers know this. Readers are aware because they've walked the halls of their family homes and walked through rooms constructed by the three great architects. Readers are a part of the generations that returned to celebrating the spaceship called earth that carries them, enabling Readers to feel the caress of their homes around them.

Readers also know that enchanted structures are not the only inanimate objects who become animate after feeding off a magical beings’ life.

Hadrian did not know about inanimate sentience during his first year at Hogwarts. Later, of course, Hadrian would become one of the leading scholars on the subject. In his old age, Hadrian’s knowledge would be hard won through research and experience, only superseded by Hermione and Millicent’s. And, by that point, Hadrian would have splintered his being so many times that there was more of him outside himself than there was housed in his actual person. Building across the British Isles had eaten bits of him, not to mention the wing* of gargoyles, who viewed Hadrian as their progenitor.

Hadrian did not begin the process of carving his own spirit into pieces intentionally. The first few times, he didn’t begin to splinter himself on purpose. Hadrian didn’t know that all those years spent shoving his emotions away and down forced them to go elsewhere. A magical home would have absorbed them. But Hadrian, of course, did not live his first few years in a magical home. As
it was, Hadrian spent his early childhood clinging to three stones—eventually four—which he unknowingly all but drowned in his accidental magic. The magic in the stones caught the splinters he unknowingly shoved at them like so many flies in a spider’s web, and then slowly absorbed them. Over time, those splinters coalesced, like drizzles of rain, increasing in power until they have at some indefinable point they became a clear pond. As Hadrian kept up his unknowing splintering each time he pushed down a little more emotion he couldn’t afford to show the ever-hostile Dursleys, the stones’ inner magical ponds were widened and deepened until, like intangible crystalline tree roots formed of magic and emotion, they tapped into the world’s wellsprings of power and were able to replenish their own energy, independent of Hadrian. At that moment, the stones thought themselves into Being status. After all – ‘Cogito, ergo sum’; ‘I think, therefore I am’.

Hadrian, in unknowingly splintering himself, had unintentionally used those splinters to good effect.

The reader will already have guessed that the human child Hadrian arriving at Hogwarts was of course his own person. They may have also realised that Petrus, Ignatius, and Aquila were also individual rock-Beings. Readers will have also guessed that Marble, the strange red stone that Hadrian had earlier licked, was not destined to remain inert.

Hadrian didn’t know any of that, not during those first months.

The first true understanding of what he’d done in his first years would come later, towards the middle of his Hogwarts stay. That knowledge would slowly solidify into a tangible thing to examine when he dismantled a certain, apparently-blank, embossed black book in his fifth year. That would all be later in his life.

The initial inkling of such things, though, crept into the ramparts of Hadrian’s mental fortress during his first year, as he went about his explorations of a certain beautiful, stone castle. He could feel a certain tone to the castle, like an absent-minded but benevolent caress. Hadrian didn’t think, not at first, that the sensation was to do with Hogwarts as a building. It didn’t occur to him because he didn’t think about it at all. Magic was still a very new thing to be explored and considered. He didn’t know the parameters and limits it (supposedly) had. Hadrian had not considered the possibility, at that time, that the building might be a Being unto itself.

What Hadrian did do was think about the possible connections between his classes and his stones. It was hard not to think about his classes, as Hadrian’s first months at Hogwarts featured rather a lot of time spent in classrooms. There were teachers to listen to, frowns to ignore, excited squeaks to consider. There were moments of clear connection, such as those horrifying books from transfiguration. And there were the classes, which were to be got through. Potions class was particularly gruelling. That classes were not, after all, about stones in any tangible way made Hadrian less than keenly interested in them… although with Millicent’s prompting Hadrian did come to acknowledge that the magics they taught might potentially have something to do with his beloved stones.

Potions, as Millicent indicated, would eventually be important in their lives. Before Millicent’s wisdom found Hadrian’s ears, however, Hadrian had found value in potions class for another reason. That class was where Hadrian started back on the temporarily-abandoned path of pinching bits and pieces. Hadrian had thought that, perhaps, being officially magic meant his family had mislabelled him. He wasn’t, perhaps, a ‘sneaky, little, lying thief’. Perhaps he was just magic and his aunt had simply misunderstood. He had thought that perhaps his Marble could be his last acquisition as a thief.
The Hadrian in this Ravenclaw-blue world might not have been the same person he would have been in a world coloured Gryffindor red-and-gold, but he was still himself in a way a knower of this theoretical other, Gryffindor-Hadrian would recognise. This alternate universe didn’t change his temper. In response to a professor singling him out to ask about plants and potions with a sneer in his voice, Hadrian retreated to his internal fortress, inscribing the walls of his mental castle with notations about which plants clung to rocks in the soil.

It might have ended there, with Hadrian looking his professor in the eye from behind his stone walls and answering his acerbic questions with dull “I don’t knows.” But as he looked into those eyes, Hadrian felt like the man was trying to assail his mental fortress’ stone walls. There was prickling pain, a strange sense of scraping that made it hard to think properly. Hadrian rubbed his forehead, automatically mentally reaching out for Ignatius, who sat snugly in the pouch beneath his robes.

Hadrian felt a surge of comfort. He broke eye contact with the professor, connected with his stone and the feeling of assault ceased. And Hadrian, who had not yet found anything to be cross about at Hogwarts, felt a surge of temper, which became a flow of words. By way of retaliation (even if he did not quite think of it like that) he launched questions about what kind of cauldron the ingredients would be brewed in. His interest in stones, so near the surface already, slipped off his tongue and he asked the professor if the cauldrons were enchanted to change the temperament of the metal. He wanted to know if there were magical potions for separating the different elements in metal and stone. The professor swept away with a glare and without offering any answers. Although, strangely, the man’s eyes seemed to glimmer with interest. After that, the potions room became a prime place to slip a blossom or a wing into prepared satchels and powders into envelopes beneath his robes. Vials of his acceptably-finished potions vanished into his pockets.

This opening soon meant Hadrian was taking bits from his peers as well. In response to sharp, biting words, to insults towards a dead mother he couldn’t remember but whom he did honour for her sacrifice, Hadrian took things. His eyes did flare with anger at these provocations, even if nobody noticed – except, perhaps, for Millicent, if she was present for such happenings. The speaker’s quills would vanish into Hadrian’s bag when the other child wasn’t looking. Penknives, inkwells, parchment, ribbons and similar unobtrusive miscellany followed over the subsequent weeks.

Hadrian had been labelled a thief by the Dursleys before he could even speak. Upon learning what a thief was, he’d trained himself to be the best thief he could be. And here, in the now of his first year in such unfamiliar surroundings so distant from anything he was accustomed to, he fell back into the grooves he’d carved for himself back in Little Whinging, Surrey.

Without a conscious awareness of those grooves, and a conscious effort to leave them behind, Hadrian instead wore them deeper.

And, too, Ignatius felt strangely content as items simply slipped into Hadrian’s palms. And now that Hadrian new some of the magic world’s possibilities, he wondered at that ease. He began to ask himself about cause and effect.

Hadrian also wondered what he should do with his stolen things. He already had enough of those things, after all. He didn’t need extra quills. He knew better than to store them in his trunk or keep them openly. Instead, he took to practicing his transfiguration with them. He experimented with the boundaries of the transfigurations professor’s claims that objects reverted when only exposed to small amounts of magic. He wondered about her comments on changing like things into like. And he found if he transfigured a stone thing into another stone thing, it didn’t seem to mind the
change. A stone block could become a stone pot without much issue. Feather to stone, however, slipped back to feather. He still needed to do something with those quills and ribbons.

Experimenting, Hadrian talked a block out of the wall. He didn’t know that the stone came because Hogwarts was intrigued. He didn’t know he’d captured their attention and that they’d begun actively watching him work.

Hadrian didn’t know that, just like he didn’t know so many other things. So Hadrian didn’t ask Hogwarts’ permission before he transfigured a space in the middle of his stone block, put the feathers and ribbon inside, and then allowed the block to reform around it. He did pat the wall appreciatively when the block slipped neatly back into the wall as if it’d never left.

With all of this practice, Hadrian began to excel in his transfiguration class even as he struggled in potions.

Between those experiments and his freedom of movement, the between-class moments were filled with delight in part because Hadrian could explore a giant, stone castle that felt welcome despite the hallways’ constant chill. He could walk the halls considering the stones, moving with stairs down and up again. He could run fingers across the castle wall in awe as he examined the stones’ veins. He wondered at the seams and welds between the blocks. He walked up the halls and down the stairs. Down, Hadrian passed Millicent, who followed him and became a friend.

Up, he met a gargoyle, who changed his entire perception of inert objects and magic. That meeting was important. It was Hadrian’s first inkling that perhaps enchanted stone could be more than the atoms making them up and the magic coating their molecules. He realized to his horror and delight that stone could do more than he had first expected.

On that particular day, the gargoyle on the seventh floor answered when Hadrian spoke to it in startled delight. They responded to question after question with bemusement until the transfiguration professor came along and shooed him away. The halls were not for loitering. He should ‘be outside,’ she said, ‘on such a nice day.’

Hadrian disagreed, personally. But outside he went. It would not do, after all, for the transfiguration professor to become more interested in watching him than she already seemed to be. Besides, the implications of an apparently sentient stone-being was something to consider. He sat on the grass and looked at his three constant companions, keeping the red one tucked inside his robes. He turned them again and again, realizing for the first time that he was not simply imagining the fondness that seemed to emanate from them.

Millicent found Hadrian later, spread out on the grass, his fingers clutched around Aquila, his eyes flashing with possibilities.

Chapter End Notes

* In attempting to find a word for a group of gargoyles, Tazzm found a reference only in my D&D Monster Manuals, which used a “wing” of gargoyles for the group designation. Then another person told me that a group of gargoyles is an audacity. I was going to call them a shrewdness because multiple apes together is a shrewdness. Language is super awesome.
This is a story about events that already happened, a history if the reader will. The story explores sheets of sediment rock, examines the different layers of earth beneath Hadrian’s facade and the sand in his joints. The tale is particularly interested in how that sand ground the delicate lens that colored his world. It wants to find the color in Hadrian's perception and intention.

As readers have likely already seen, early, formative years can have a decisive impact on later life and development. For Hadrian, that was decidedly true. Readers can speculate how Hadrian’s life could have gone. They likely have opinions on the matter and have even explored realms of other possibilities. But, in this universe at this time here is the way things were, both in terms of what Hadrian knew and what he didn’t:

Hadrian had loved his stones and, in his way, become friends with them. That love was part of what shaped what Millicent later called the Day of the Gargoyle. But it was his growing respect for Millicent that prompted him to place Ignatius in her hand for the first time when she came upon him lying in the grass.

Taking that stone, Millicent had expected a rune-carved rock to examine. Instead, she felt as if a raw, ball of curious magic had been placed in her palm. Millicent exhaled her breath sharply in shock. Years later she would compare it to being handed an infant without expecting it. She felt a concentration of magic and what felt a well of conscious all condensed into a hard, breathless stone.

That day, Millicent was fascinated by Ignatius sitting in her hand. She turned them over and over, ran her fingertips over its uncarved surface and tried to find the catch. She looked for the enchantments and felt for the charms. There didn’t seem to be any. Moreover, the stone seemed to be reaching back. For every push she made, she felt a response.

Millicent was observant. She watched and listened to the world around her. The two people who had raised her had believed that the world should not be hidden from children. That obfuscating reality would stunt her development. Her specific exposure—between a sharp mother and a charming father, both of whom were brilliant in their own ways—meant that Millicent had seen quite a bit more than she’d actively thought about. But, now, holding Ignatius and seeing Aquila and Petrus sitting in Hadrian’s hands, Millicent had a small inkling of what these stones were. She, after all, had conversations with door knockers and guardian statues in the past. These, however, did not feel as if they had been created with specific intent.

Millicent asked Harry question after question about the substance of the stones, the intent he’d had with his handling. If he’d known what he’d done. If there had been intention at all.

But of course, Harry’s realizations were based on inspiration and guesswork, not based on knowledge. He hardly knew how to express himself and his suspicions. He tried to explain himself but words sat beyond his reach at that moment. He didn’t have the vocabulary to discuss the issue effectively.

The two reached an impasse, looking at one another as the magic of their expectations built up between them.
Hadrian, so uninformed in those early years, unintentionally caught ahold of that magic and asked, voice almost caught in his throat, whether Millicent would be interested in figuring out how to create a gargoyle. Or, perchance three or four, he mumbled, glancing the two beings sitting in his hand. Harry wanted, he told Millicent in a small voice, to give his friends a way to communicate.

Millicent looked Hadrian in the face with those sharp, thoughtful eyes set in an impassive face. She felt that magic build and the direction he’d given it with his question. She asked if he realized how long such an undertaking might take. She pointed out that such an endeavor would mean working together for years. They were, after all, children. There were myriad bits of information they’d have to learn before attempting such an endeavor. They hardly wanted to hurt his friends.

They sat on that grassy lawn underneath the autumn sun and looked at one another. This friendship they had had been previously unexplored and tentative. They’d focused on work and classes. They’d implied dreams without discussing them. Now, here, Hadrian felt his heart was on the table and Millicent knew the weight of a magician’s promise.

For Millicent, it altered her understanding of Hadrian. That moment refined her view of him from fond convenience to investment. Her slow movements shifted their deep tracks and included Harry in her orbit. Hadrian would later compare them to two moons continually drawn by the other’s gravitational pull.

Millicent agreed, clasping his forearm and pulling him lightly forward to rest her forehead against his in a movement she’d seen her parents make time and time again. Aquila felt warm, perhaps interested, between Hadrian’s fingers. The magic around them intent around their wrists.

The two friends looked at each other again. That was the moment, if there was any one moment, they both saw each other as friends as opposed to passive allies. That certainly was the moment where both hearts swelled with a proud, fierce joy that passed between them, heightening both their own feelings. Neither were yet so paranoid to quash the feeling immediately.

And there, the ripples emanating off of that friendship ground and shaped Hadrian’s world view and his understanding of people. There, in Hogwarts, unlike in his first school, Harry had a friend he trusted. Just the one during that first year, but she was enough to fundamentally change the way he understood humans around him. Thinking of her like a rock, he managed to accept her as a reasonable being. That perspective stretched his understanding of humans, opening up the idea that some humans were in fact capable of acting as empathetic connections and working for more than themselves. That friendship gave him hope for humanity and would consume his focus for the rest of the year.

Even if he wasn’t looking, however, life went around him and shaped his existence whether he was aware of it or not. One of the events that had a significant impact on Hadrian’s life even if he wasn’t looking had to do with what happened on Hollow’s Eve, during those moments when as the barriers between the physical and immaterial plains weakened. Readers will likely expect it a certain troll, who was not actually in the dungeons. For all that Hadrian, for his part, only heard about it later.

Hadrian was in the castle when the troll went on its violent rampage. But he was tucked with Millicent in a quiet alcove surrounded by stones carved with peace and inattention as well as a bit of privacy. They were conducting carefully texts on small bits of stone.

Millicent, saying an internal farewell to the feast, had suggested the isolation. She paid attention and knew his silences. Based on her own, careful calculations, she considered the give and take of those silences’ values. Like everything, she viewed their friendship partly in terms of its impact on her and how it would shape her. With the expectation that he would stand by her someday for her
traumas, she anticipated his now. And, she quietly asked if he’d be interested in reading about stones instead of attending the feast. He’d agreed.

Not being at the feast, the two friends did not hear the warnings about trolls. They sat comfortably, quietly, in that alcove surrounding by Harry’s carved warding stones and eating their scavenged meal from lunch. They had no inkling of the panic rippling through the Great Hall.

The two friends only heard the next day about how their potions and transfigurations professors had played heroes. They listened as their fellow year-mates embellished an account of how the two professors had valiantly fought a troll and saved a lone first year. That first year was not someone either Millicent or Harry knew, but a glance they knew that she was not look pleased with her lot. The other students were not particularly interested in that first year. They unintentionally viewed her as a stand-in for themselves. They stared instead at the two heroic professors in wonder. The popularity of those two classes soared.

Millicent and Hadrian barely noticed. The two had already struck out on a different path that shaped their engagement with their education. Classes became a means to a specific end instead of a necessary life-stage moving toward an amorphous future.

Hadrian began experimenting with his magic and rocks, carefully funneling bits of attention and magic into a certain red stone Unbeknownst to him, the composition of this stone meant it was a trade instead of a one-way exchange. He didn't know at the time, but it worked in part because of Petrus. That stone full of the wild magic of his youth cared about him. When Hadrian worked with the red stone, Petrus and Ignatius contributed. Much like they had learned to do for themselves, when Hadrian poured himself into the red stone, they turned the red stone’s magic into his body could digest. Hogwarts began to watch that child carefully.

Millicent, meanwhile, tentatively began exploring the process of cutting herself into tiny pieces. She threw herself into the possible charmed applications to the same issues, testing the scope of charms on the stones. She wanted to understand how like humans they were or weren’t. She tried combining techniques for humans and for scrying stones. She tested some of her theories on a small bag over the Yule break, gifting the hideous but effective bag to Hadrian upon her return.

Harry flushed red when Millicent handed him that bag, his tongue tied in his mouth. There had been the strange package over Yule with the cloak but this was personal. It felt like the first gift from a person who knew him and cared. He was, in a tentative way, happy. The cloak was put aside for summer experimentation. They already had enough to do for the next months, already a planned schedule of research. They weren’t stupid children, they didn’t trust strange gifts. Not with the stories Millicent had heard about enchanted objects. They hid the thing in the castle wall instead of using it.

Summer rolled closer and closer, much to the two friends’ delight. They had plans about what to try and experiment on. And, for Hadrian, there was the tentative hope about a summer escape and a new place. Millicent had told Hadrian she wanted him to visit her toward the end of the summer. She had informed him that her family lived in a stone building. She had then suggested she would be quite possibly hurt if he chose not to come. Technically, each word she said was true. They were, however, carefully chosen to enable Harry to come without issue. Millicent, like Harry, was not overly familiar with having friends. She wanted him to come and had shaped her request in such a fashion as to make acquiesce easy for him. She was not doing him a favor with the invitation, but rather he her.

As those two made plans and planned research, a certain something happened that would shape the rest of their lives. Here, again, they wouldn’t know about it for years and then only in fits and
starts. Two professors emerged as heroes that Hallow’s Eve past. One, emerged as a figure of even
greater scorn than previously. And, in direct contrast to the rising popularity of potions and
transfiguration, defense class’s reputation sank. It didn’t help that the class had a foundering
professor who seemed to be ill and getting worse. The professor's body trembled. His fingers
shook. By the spring, he was almost impossible to understand as his words sunk underneath his
breath.

The course of events meant that Hadrian and Millicent were invested in their own projects and not
in rumors about third floor corridors. In this world, that corridor held no treasure, but was still a
trap. And, at the end of the year, Quirrel sprang the trap by making his way into and through the
third-floor testing grounds that did not hold the stone. Quirrel and his burden found the mirror, but
it held naught but images of his own desire to be home with a cup of tea. The withered, sliver of a
soul was stalled in front of a mirror. But the headmaster, far from the castle, did not hear his alarms
go off in his office. He did not make it to the trap before the bird had flown.

Making it back to the defense room, Quirrel felt broken. He felt done and tired. Hope and intention
had been driving him onward. But now he felt a need to be safe. He was sure he just had to be safe.
Addled, he longed for protection. Unsure, he wanted to be secure. There was someone yelling,
giving him a headache, but he couldn't concentrate enough to understand. He felt like he could feel
the taste of a silvery blood on his lips like poison.

He remembered that there was a home. He had a home. It was small. But. He wanted to be home.
He stepped through the floo and was gone. Far away.

The body housing the slivers of Quirrel and Voldemort kept them going, managing a sort of half-
life with tea and biscuits. Quirrel had already been half-dying for months. But mostly dead is
hardly all dead. And the part of Quirrel that was aware gloried in survival.

If Hadrian had been in that third-floor trap, Quirrel might’ve died. Imagine for a moment Harry
hadn't snatched the stone. Imagine the half-giant made it back to Hogwarts with it. The possible
differences are endless. Perhaps there might have been a call for protections. Hadrian might have
destroyed Quirrel's body. Perhaps Harry would have killed him and suffered the trauma for the rest
of his life.

But, as the situation stood, the body was still half-alive and desirous to keep on living even its half-
life. His desire shaped his magic, grasping at anything it could to keep itself going.

With the body still alive, Voldemort stayed trapped as a wraith on the back of a professor's head.
The slip of Voldemort hadn't counted on being stuck as part of the crumpling man’s existence
beyond the school-year’s end. Voldemort felt cold, drained as the body fed upon him to make up
for its own loss. The drain meant Voldemort couldn't think properly. He knew he might once have
been great and knew that he was reduced, but the memory of what he had been and how was
slipping.

Back at Hogwarts, the year ended with rumors of the defense professor gone to receive medical
treatment. There were also whispered comments of a theft gone wrong. Harry only noted the later
incident in terms of a theft gone wrong. He internally rolled his eyes, thinking about how the thief,
whatever they might have been aimed at, had clearly failed in their planning. He started wondering
about magic detections. He thought about the different kinds of burns and pulls that magic made.
He started looking for the glimmer of magic under his fingers in transfigured objects.

The old headmaster smiled at Hadrian when he called him into his office to ask him about his year,
to ask if he was looking forward to his summer. Sitting there, suspicious behind his mental walls,
Hadrian peered around the room out of the corner of his eyes. He did his best to remark on each of
the objects there without focusing on any one in particular.

The old man asked his kindly phrased questions and Hadrian felt his mental fortress under attack. Harry felt himself bristle and did his best to keep his face passive. The old man twinkled and Hadrian hid behind his own walls. He had summer plans, quietly made and not shared beyond himself and three other people. He did not feel the need to share that knowledge here, did not even truly think of it here. He talked instead of his fascination with the rocks around the lake.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not perfectly happy with this chapter. But it was sticking and preventing me from going on. I might revise it later. Particularly the end.
When Millicent said goodbye to Hadrian after disembarking from the train at the end of their first year, she didn't tell him she would see him back at Hogwarts. Instead, she introduced him to her parents and informed all three that Hadrian would be joining them for a few weeks directly before the next school year’s beginning. Millicent had mentioned this possibility to Hadrian offhandedly over the last few weeks. Laid out small thoughts in order to prep him for her intent. And in the now, she told her parents that they would be owling Hadrian a portkey in three weeks’ time. She had, as they well knew, a series of experiments to conduct in preparation for the new school year. She would prefer to do those in the privacy of her own home. Hadrian was instrumental to the process as he had agreed to partner with her in research.

Millicent’s mother looked at the two children sharply and her father smiled charmingly. Hadrian found it curiously novel to cover nerves born of hope instead of fear. He waited for denials, for refusals.

But Millicent’s two guardians did not question their daughter, they did not ask about her surety or request a meeting with Hadrian’s guardians. They simply believed her because that was what the Bulstrode family did: they trusted family, if almost no-one else. They were a stalwart group who stood by one another. They had done so under Madame Bulstrode’s mother and continued in tradition under the current Madame as well.

In this case, it helped that the two elder Bulstrodes were aware from Millicent’s bi-weekly school reports that their daughter had befriended Hadrian Potter. They had received hints leading toward Millicent’s train-side announcement. Millicent may have been clever, but she was still a child and her subtlety needed work. They had approved of her efforts. They, however, expected the declaration. And the two had already discussed the issue among themselves and determined that her decision was well reasoned. Thus, there was no need to question her now. Certainly not so publicly.

Millicent, for her part, stood in stoic confidence under her father’s pleasant agreement, her mother’s sharp eyes, and Hadrian’s quiet nerves. Her stoicism carried the day, which was already hers but nonetheless felt like victory. The four negotiated a time to send the owl, Millicent bid Hadrian a farewell with two carefully placed kisses on each cheek, informing him that she would see him soon. She advised him to carry out a few of the experiments they’d discussed. Madame Bulstrode’s eyes snapped from Hadrian to her daughter.

Hadrian inhaled sharply, nodded, and fortified himself with the knowledge that he could manage three weeks with his ‘family’, particularly if those experiments bore fruit. Although, seeing the
Dursleys standing outside the train station, he wished he didn’t have to go at all. But he reminded himself that he was a crafty thief and a magician. He was built to survive. He gritted his teeth and focused on the pebbles in his pockets, felt the comfort of Petrus and company in the bag around his neck. He assured himself that all would be well.

That mantra was at the forefront of Hadrian’s thoughts as he arrived back at the Dursleys. It was on his mind when he slipped nervously out of his room that night and began carving on doorframes with his old nail. He formed tiny runes up the frames to channel and transform energy in the walls. He might not be able to use his wand or cast a charm, but he and Millicent figured he could write magic. It wasn’t doing magic. It was just channeling ambient energy. Now, he needed to chart the effects.

That summer, the Dursleys would find it increasingly impossible to stay angry for any length of time. The Dursleys would not reflect on their behavioral changes over the weeks that Hadrian watched. If the Dursleys had reflected on their own behavior, they might have noticed that their anger drained away every time a member of the household stepped through a doorway. Tempers would pound and build and someone would step into a new room only to feel the frustration, the red vision, drain away. It was peculiar and very obvious if one knew to look. It had the bluntness of childhood experiments written into it, rather than the refined subtlety that Millicent and Hadrian’s later work would include.

But, for the Dursleys, the lack of subtlety did not make much of a difference. The rune work, in contrast, made a world of difference. With all that rage drained away, the home became a place of rest and peace. They would find themselves taking deep breaths and finding their peace. They didn’t change their opinions but without the rage, they found space for disagreement instead of tempers. The family started holding conversations. And those conversations sometimes brought understanding or tolerance.

As Hadrian noted the effects of his work, he reflected that Millicent was really a useful sort of friend to have and felt a jolt of pleasure at the thought that it was rather as if he’d stolen her friendship. It was a silly thought even if it made him feel more comfortable with the possession. He didn’t trust good things to come his way, but he did believe in his ability to take what he wanted eventually. There was a part of him that believed that if he’d stolen Millicent’s friendship, then it was far more likely that he truly did have it.

Hadrian ruminated on her friendship now, partly out of boredom but partly because of her role in the whole endeavor. He wasn’t supposed to cast magic and he didn’t know how to make himself safe from his family without it. It was Millicent who had suggested the runes in that roundabout, questioning way of hers. “Perhaps …” she had said slowly, her voice rhythmic like the ocean against the shore, “you could manipulate the house itself.” When Hadrian had lamented not being able to just leave stones about the house, for Petunia if not Vernon or Dudley would just throw them back outside. “Why not,” she’d asked, “have the house speak for you?”

Following her suggestion, Hadrian had thought on it, and then acted accordingly when he was back at Privet Drive. If the Dursleys had known what to look for that summer of Dudley’s 12th year, they would have seen temperance runes carved into the bases of the doorframe, designed to draw away high emotions and store the energy.

If they had looked in future summers, they would have found that the lines of runes grew, becoming more complex. Eventually, they moved into precise guidance and manipulations. They danced along the baseboards, telling stories of peaceful afternoons and calm nights. A particular bathroom suggested a smile. A certain window whispered suggestions for deep breaths. But, eventually, the Dursleys would not have been able to see even if they had looked. Those runes
turned invisible for non-magical eyes long before they climbed the walls.

Years of exposure to such magics eventually changed who the Dursleys were. For his aunt and uncle, that house was their home and the continual emotional manipulation altered their behavioral patterns. The Dursleys became curiously calm people, rarely given to temper or flights of passion. Trained away from anger at home, Dudley would become a calming presence at school, an even-tempered boy well-liked by his teachers and classmates. He couldn’t have helped with homework, but his calming presence was a boon to almost any study session.

Those runes did drain Harry’s high emotions as well, but he was only there for three weeks before he packed his trunk and informed his guardians that he was leaving for the rest of summer. His uncle thought of preventing him, his fists clenching. But when he’d passed through the doorway toward his nephew, his raging anger fell away. He still didn’t particularly want his nephew to go off, but it just didn’t matter all that much. He didn’t wave goodbye but he did turn and walk away.

Years and years later, Petunia would touch Hadrian’s arm and express, in a roundabout way, regret for his treatment in earlier years. Hadrian would look at her in masked surprise and allow her to change the subject. His eyes would flick to the baseboards and he would wonder how much he’d changed his relatives.

The Dursleys never really would really think through what happened to them. There would be a moment, years hence, when Dudley would mention to a friend that he’d been a very angry child. But, sometime in his early teens, his anger had seemed to dissipate. He couldn’t say why.

But in the now, Hadrian escaped to the Bulstrode’s. Their home was a different world for Hadrian. He liked the stone house, almost a castle, built with foundations stretching deep into the earth against an ocean that beat the coast. Millicent and he greeted each other formally and spent most of the summer reading and working on their runes. Unable to practice charms or transfiguration, they embarked on the projects available to them. They did their runes practice and analyzed Hadrian’s summer findings. And the two stalked the halls in Hadrian’s invisibility cloak, testing out sound and sight. They sprinkled water and dust over the cloak, tested physicality. They played as they worked and would never have admitted their games. Millicent’s mother nodded at the two approvingly.

Hadrian found Millicent’s parents intimidating and but also calming, in part because of their carefully cultivated expectations. Madame Bulstrode had expectations of daily dinner reports, and quizzed the two on their knowledge. She explained problems that arose and encouraged them to excel in part through the simple expectation that they would. Millicent would nod her slow nod in acceptance. And Hadrian, Hadrian felt approved of. He ate better than he had in his life and felt cared for.

Out of respect, Hadrian took nothing from Millicent’s parents except a rock from their garden, and a turquoise bead that had rolled under a sofa in an unused room. They were souvenirs rather than retribution. They were memory and appreciation. Millicent blinked her eyes when she saw the new additions to Hadrian’s pile of rocks and said nothing. When his head was turned, she touched the bead in consideration and thought hard.

Hadrian’s respect for Millicent’s parents shaped Hadrian’s willingness to stand by the Bulstrodes in Diagon Alley not very long later, inadvertently beginning his public political career. Little did he know that he’d already taken a political stance with his sorting and his friendships. This, however, was not about school houses. This was adult politics and he visibly placed himself placidly next to Millicent and by proximity with the Bulstrodes. The family walked through the Alley for all to see.

The “all” who saw them included the Malfoys. The father and mother stood with their son and Mr.
Malfoy sneered at Madame Bulstrode. Mr. Malfoy sneered at almost everyone who did not meet his standards of fashion. Mr. Malfoy loved clothing and felt that everyone should adhere to his highly specific, somewhat arbitrary, and extremely exacting standards. None of the Bulstrodes met those standards, so Mr. Malfoy sneered. Millicent’s mother had sneered right back at the man and Millicent appeared not to care.

But Hadrian felt the slight deserved more attention, deserved, perhaps, more action. When Mr. Malfoy’s eyes swept scathingly over Millicent, he sealed his fate. Hadrian’s hand darted out. He lifted a small, black book from the unpleasant man’s possessions. Within the space of a breath, the book was in Hadrian’s own pocket, with the Highly Fashionable man none the wiser. He thought that the book had buzzed slightly under his touch. He would ponder the issue all the way through the Alley.

Hadrian would never know the panicked horror Mr. Malfoy experienced when he later tried to find that book to slip it into another child’s cauldron. This horror left Malfoy at a disadvantage, and it broke the argument he was masterfully conducting with another man. The consequences of this would leave another boy in Hadrian and Millicent’s year feeling proud of his father. He would go on to have an illustrious Ministry career, following in the man’s footsteps.

Hadrian didn’t know the first part at all and would only ever be tangentially aware of the second through Luna.

Here, again, Hadrian and Millicent were focused on other things. They would have their school work for the next year to get through. They had a mysterious cloak that seemed to genuinely be an invisibility cloak (an extremely rare and thus extremely valuable item), even if Millicent claimed it felt like being covered in a funeral shroud. They had their long-term goals regarding gargoyles. And now, they also had a strange book that felt like dank mold in the corners of a moist room.

After a whole year, the two children were familiar with how an inanimate object felt when it had enough of a spirit and consciousness to have its own well of magic, even if the two didn’t know the possible implications. They supposed that this object had been well used or well-loved or perhaps the book had been carefully sculpted to be exactly as it was. Whatever it was, whatever caused it to have a sense of self, it was certainly more than just a book.

Hadrian and Millicent poked at the thing and then built a stone box with runes for peace and impenetrability. Neither tried to write in the blank book that had someone else’s name on it. It didn’t do to test potentially dangerous artifacts without proper precautions and neither felt they knew those yet. But, it was a magic object and Hadrian had stolen it. They couldn’t just leave it out and about without understanding the object. That would be the height of irresponsibility, Millicent informed him.

Back at Hogwarts for their second year, the two friends went to Hadrian’s hidey-hole in some of the castle’s wall blocks. He showed Millicent how to remove a stone from within the wall. The two turned it into clay and placed the book in the middle. They returned the stone to its original substance and replaced it in its original position. The two friends agreed that they’d do something about the book once they had a better handle on just how object sentience worked.

So began their second year at Hogwarts, which proceeded in many ways much as their first year had: with the continuation of their learning, and the deepening of their friendship.

Hogwarts, noting what they did, hummed in interest, and inside Hadrian’s mind the stone walls of his castle soared.
Chapter Summary

Hermione joins the crew.

Chapter Notes

This story does not feel the need to progress chronologically. Or perhaps it's me.

The first Hermione would learn about Harry’s pilfering tendency was more than a year after a certain diary had been placed in a wall and nine months after Hermione had become part of the group. For Hermione, the conversation would mark her inclusion as opposed to tentative acceptance.

In its content, the conversation was mundane and mostly uninteresting. The memory of the conversation would be consumed my later events and collapsed into a large sense of impressions. Looking back, the three friends could theoretically pensive the memory and mostly-accurately reconstruct the scene if they ever so desired. We do not have access to those memories, so we can only loosely reconstruct what happened. And, in the manner of many adults, place adult words in the mouths of children. The precise wording here, however, is less important than the content and the consequences.

Upon return for a third year at Hogwarts, Millicent laid her hand on Hermione’s arm while Hadrian went off to greet the stone snakes carved into the castle’s walls. He had missed the castle and Millicent’s home did not feature carved snakes.

“You,” Millicent said in her lovely, slow tone, “have stuck with us. And,” here Millicent’s age snuck into her voice for all that she tried to surpass her extreme youth. She was reflective and thoughtful, but she was a young teen, which for the magical world meant she was the equivalent of a toddler. Nonetheless, she still had those miserable fluctuation of hormones. And she was experiencing most of her emotions for the first time. Puberty is kind to very, very few children. Thus, at that moment, Millicent found her throat suddenly dry with nerves she barely acknowledged to herself.

“And.” Millicent had to clear her throat to keep speaking. “I like you. So, you need to know now so as not to react badly when it comes up. Because it will come up.”

Hermione looked at Millicent curiously, her eyes narrowing a little, thoughts spinning out possible topics and ideas. She wasn’t quite sure where Millicent was going with this, which was unsettling as Millicent was rarely unclear.

“Hadrian, you see, is dear to me. If possible. I will not allow him to be harmed, however unintentionally.” Hermione nodded carefully, feeling nervous.

“Hermione,” Millicent said, “you seem invested in rules and legality. You appear to want to
understand the world as a puzzle that fits tidily together. I think you might imagine magic as a kind of code that you can use to manipulate the core of existence.”

Hermione smiled, prompting a curious, fluttering thrill in Millicent’s stomach.

“You are aware that Hadrian did not grow up in a happy home.” Millicent paused, waiting for Hermione’s acknowledgement. “Part of his unhappiness stemmed from his lack of security. The social contract most people can rely on did not apply to him and he could not rely on authority figures to ensure justice. I think he decided to create his own justice.” Millicent’s mother had begun introducing her “important people” and permitting her to sit in on conversations during the summer.

Hermione had a deep-seated desire to love and be-loved in return. She had not found that affection at Hogwarts before joining Millicent and Hadrian’s tiny group and now felt the stronger about them on account of the limitations of her circle. She found the rage that had been banked beneath her skin for two years simmering closer to the surface. Hermione blinked her eyes closed. It wouldn’t help her to express her frustrations toward Millicent. It was precisely not Millicent she was angry with.

“Hermione,” Millicent said her name, drawing her back. Her voice soothed Hermione’s wrath. “Somehow or another—I’ve yet to discover why—Hadrian developed his way to balance justice’s scales.” Millicent looked at Hermione seriously. “From what I’ve observed, he evens scores by stealing from whomever has slighted him.”

Hermione’s breath burst from her chest in a moment of disbelief. She agreed that there was injustice in the world. That, the 14-year-old child did understand. But to steal seemed like an injustice in turn. And then she cringed.

Because, once upon a time, Hermione had trusted in the idea of justice and truths and she didn’t care to let that go. She had believed books knew what they were talking about. She had thought adults guided children with best interests in mind. She had thought her peers were honest-if-poorly-informed. But, increasingly through her first years at Hogwarts, Hermione felt betrayed first by her teachers, then by her peers, and finally by books.

Arriving at Hogwarts, Hermione had implicitly trusted the world around her in part because her parents had taught her to believe in reason and authority. They had consistently asked for her to show proofs for her claims based on books and teachers’ lessons. Adults and books were supposed to be reliable sources. In her first years, they were.

But then there was the troll. The troll. Hermione’s frustrated ball of horror and anger raged at the thought of trolls. Not at the trolls, however, but rather toward the human responses to the troll incident.

Hermione’s faith in the system had cracked and splintered during the troll incident her first year at Hogwarts. Unlike Hadrian, who never trusted the magical world’s goodness, Hermione had entered the magical world believing in unicorns, beauty, and justice. Out of the three, the unicorns were real. She checked up on the question in the library. Years later, she would see one in her care of magical creatures class.

In contrast, Hermione’s belief in goodness and justice ended up like those symbolic flowers crushed under the heavy heels of those around her. Worse, for Hermione the crushing was not only metaphoric. Despite what the students around her later believed, during that troll incident, there had been no one to save her. The troll had brought down that heavy cudgel on her head. As the cudgel descended, her desire to live bubbled up inside her so strongly, her magic latched onto it.
The power of her desire lashed out of her small body as a scream. That accidental, lucky scream, crashed against the troll’s impervious skin, spilling around it and cracking the bathroom mirrors.

But as readers know, the troll’s eyes were no as impervious as its skin. Hermione’s magic crushed into the troll’s face, smashing the being’s eyes in their eye-sockets. More of her magic rushed up the troll’s nose, destroying its brain.

The teachers found Hermione alone with a dead, bloody troll. She hadn’t had enough time to make herself leave. She had just enough time to stand on wobbly feet and begin contemplating just what she’d done. She’d had time to understand what she was capable of. Her face was blank, her brain full of horror. It was the worst moment they could have entered.

Perhaps if the teachers had provided kind, comforting words, Hermione would have cracked in front of them. Perhaps she would have cried and they would have handed her over to the school nurse. But the child didn’t cry, she didn’t have any visible would, and she was standing on her own, two feet. Together, those three points suggested the child must be fine. Beside, these teachers were not the sort to offer sweet words. Instead, they had scolds and scowls, questions and demands.

For Hermione, raised by parents who hugged her when she was upset and gave her cocoa before gentle interrogations and explanations, those teachers’ behavior exhibited an apparent lack of concern. All she heard was the teachers asking if she was alright and why she was there in sharp, pointed terms. Her tears had still been trapped behind her eyes and her throat was ravaged from her own power. She nodded to their questions but barely answered.

If Hermione had had more exposure to a harsher world, she might have seen that her head of house was in fact concerned. That professor had been horrified by what she saw in front of her. But that professor had long learned to bury her concern under bluster when scared. A war veteran with sorrow under her skin, that professor knew better than to let terror slow her down. And she had been terrified for what had happened and relieved that the child was fine.

Hermione had not seen that concern or relief. She saw only antagonism as she was sent off to bed. So it was that Hermione was alone to mull over the incident and watch those around her. She didn’t have new friendships to take her mind away in another direction. Instead, she had banked horror in her chest that slowly turned to anger in her gut and fear in her toes. She found herself afraid to be alone in the halls and corridors and hated the constant insecurity.

And the teachers didn’t appear to care and even took credit for the troll’s death with their silences on the subject. They refused to the tell the students what happened other than that the troll had been “taken care of.” Although, Hermione could admit that she too was complicit in that widespread belief. She did not even try to tell the other students what had happened. Not that anyone tried to talk to her beyond basic gossip.

Confused, Hermione started paying attention to that which she’d previously taken for granted. She found that adults equivocated and lied.

In later years, Hermione’d see how overworked the professors were. And how callous. Almost all of those professor were war veterans who expected their charges to grow up and move on with almost no adult oversight. She fumed that these guardians failed to guard and her fear turned to mistrust and doubt. For these teachers she was not a primary concern. She might excel but most of the professors’ eyes consistently turned in other directions, away from the students. These teachers, she found, did little to protect their students from assault or humiliation. Just look at that poor Longbottom child who looked to constantly be quacking in his robes. Hermione seethed at the injustice of it all.
Looking around her, Hermione realized that this was a violent world she had entered. Hadrian had suspected that fact from his first brush with institutionalized magic in the form of Hagrid. Hermione, introduced to the magical world by her future head of house, had believed magic to be rational. The unexpected surprise of the revelation made the lesson painful for Hermione.

Thus, Hermione spent most of her first year in isolated, fuming anger and frustrated research between the library and classes. But, Hermione was reasonable. Toward the end of the year, her fury cooled and she banked her frustrations. She was, perhaps for the first time since Halloween, able to see glory in the world around her.

It helped that the first thing her parents did when they saw her step off the train was pull her into a family-hug. It helped that they asked about her. That they listened to her. That they cared about her.

Those reasonable, rational, loving people sat down with their beloved daughter and tried to help her work through her concerns and her fears. When she expressed her concern that they had coddled her, they explained the idea of simplification for educational purposes and the complexity of growing up. They said that they hadn’t lied, they’d simplified to help her build a platform off of which to grow. They’d trained her to have tools for later nuance. Hermione felt both grateful and betrayed.

Hermione fumed for an hour before her anger burned itself out. She’d throw her arms around her parents and tell them she loved them. And then she’d trust that they did their best through her entire life.

Nonetheless, Hermione steamed as she tried to rearrange her understanding of the world around her, as she reordered herself. She despised the knowledge that her parents had only been partly honest. But she loved that they’d tried. She struggled to accept that that her parents could be perfectly imperfect. She hated the idea that they could not be perfect.

They had tried their best.

And the best was rarely enough.

In later years Hermione would know her parents could not be enough because, like most parents, they were human. They were simply non-magical humans who did their best until their bodies gave out and they. Magical children age slowly and live long. One of the tragedies of children born to non-magical parents is that those parents are, for all their love or lack thereof, possessed of short lives.

Years later, Hermione would always look back with fond love and an ache in her stomach where Millicent had taught her to store her emotions away from her face. Long after her parents passed, Hermione’d hold Millicent’s hand to her side and whisper out her feelings before they became so bottled they filled her throat and spilled out her mouth.

In the interim, Hermione knew her parents were reliable as they could be in their limited, human, mundane, wonderful way. But, she found little evidence that other people were reliable. After the troll, even after speaking with her parents, Hermione would never trust the world at large. Even if the troll event was, in the grand scope of things, rather small, it cracked her illusion of security. And, a child herself, she had little sense of proportion and a rather over-the-top commitment to acting on what she learned. She firmly stood by a policy of once-burned-twice-shy. So, people had to earn her trust in their reliability.

But once earned, Hermione tended to believe. Which was why, years later, Hermione could touch
her fingers gently to Millicent’s wrist and wrap her arms securely around Hadrian. It’s why she trusted them even when they were out of her sight.

Readers might wonder how Hermione moved from killing a toll in her first year to voluntary conversations about Hadrian’s secrets in her third.

The answer, as far as the records show, had to do with the Millicent and Hadrian’s reliability.

Sitting alone in the library through most of first-year, Hermione had noticed the students around her but not put much thought into the individual faces. She’d raged at the collective.

Coming back her second year, however, Hermione remembered what she’d seen. Through all those days, there had been two small children in her year, one green and one blue, ensconced at a table day after day. They appeared to be working together, books passed back and forth. The blue one waved and gesticulated. The green one smirked and spoke at a measured, rhythmic pace, in tones Hermione found soothing.

Day after repetitive day the two talked and worked. And in the second year, Hermione found her attention captured, her heart slowing to the reliable tones. Here was something she felt she could trust at least a little.

Hermione, like Millicent, had caused the hat to pause. Hermione had a brain in her head and a great love of knowledge. But even greater than that love was a fiery courage barely banked in her chest. She could have been a Ravenclaw. She’d become a Gryffindor instead.

Drawing on her inner, courageous fire in her second year—months after a certain diary had been given over to the castle for safekeeping—Hermione decided to take a chance. Allowing that fire to flare, she made her way to the two-children’s table with grim determination pressed into the corners of her mouth and her heart in her throat. She felt the desire to move on as she approached them but she pushed her fire down into her legs and made herself step forward. The two children were discussing charms.

Her passion for knowledge got the better of her, resulting in a lucky accident. “I overheard you’re working on charms” left her mouth instead of a politer greeting she’d planned. Flushing, she tried to backtrack with “My name is Hermione Granger” and then “I’d like to study charms with you.”

Hermione didn’t know that her unintentional words about charms caused Millicent to pause and look at her. With almost any other topic, Millicent would have likely turned her away. But at that moment, running her constant cost-benefit analysis, Millicent considered the possibility of a new charms partner. She knew who Hermione was. Millicent knew who all her direct peers were. And she was very aware of which students excelled in charms. Here was a possible, excellent charms-partner. Here was a brilliant student with clear power in her core. Here was a possible friend for Hadrian to provide him—and her, she could acknowledge—additional support. A base of two is not a solid base. Three was, as Millicent well knew, much more stable. Yet, this brilliant child also lacked political connections. Hermione would likely draw negative notice from the other Slytherin, which would reflect badly on her. But, here, the possible benefits outweighed the negatives. There was a charms partner at stake. Millicent moved her books, silently providing Hermione with space at the table.

Hadrian, ever observant in reference to the people and things he cared about, saw Millicent’s flicker of interest. At that moment, he had nothing against or for Hermione. But he did trust Millicent and Millicent had moved her books. He smiled at Hermione.

Hadrian would always be glad that he had trusted Millicent during his first year. He would later be
particularly glad he trusted her in this. Because Hermione brought a new perspective on their work. At first, their collaboration focused on charms. They did homework. They limited their conversation to schoolwork. But Hermione’s work had rushes of brilliance to Hadrian’s intuition and Millicent’s steady knowledge. She was fire that flickered and sometimes blew hot and dangerous. She reminded Hadrian of Ignatius, who sat quiet in his pocket.

Yet, Hadrian and Millicent conducted their more questionable experiments away from Hermione’s eyes. They didn’t tell her about the diary in the wall that second-Hogwarts year. They didn’t mention their plans. They didn’t tell Hermione about Hadrian’s parcel tongue or acknowledge his home life. Each child waited, eyeing each other speculatively. Slowly, they began to trust.

Millicent, for her part, did have trouble with her classmates, but not as much as readers might expect. Here, in this world, there were no quiet rumors circulating of a certain Dark Lord’s return. There were no fainting chosen ones. There had been an ill professor and a strange corridor, hardly enough to raise a furor of comment. There were still power plays and contests of will.

Here, handful of children tried to belittle Millicent about her willingness to include Hermione in her circle. She, in that mountainous way of hers, turned her eyes on them. Readers have perhaps felt the weight of a mountain’s gaze. It hits heavy on the spirit, inspires a subtle terror in the chest as something immeasurably larger than you sees you. And, as the other children would begin shaking in their robes, Millicent would smile that not-smile of hers. The other three children, one with hair as pale of moonlight, would unconsciously take a step back. The air would grow strangely heavy. The other three would feel a sudden terror in their throats. They couldn’t say why. Millicent didn’t have her wand in her hand.

And Millicent asked those children, in smooth, marbled words, if they were formally declaring themselves against the Bulstrode family. With their feet itching to take them away from there, the other three would negate the idea.

And then Millicent nodded and looked away. The extreme pressure would disappear. The other children left and did not talk about what had happened. They didn’t have the words to discuss the issue. They were too afraid of looking weak to try and find their right words.

Millicent, for her part, started taking greater precautions. She did not care for the other children’s implied threat. She preferred to feel secure. Preversely, the other children’s comments forced Millicent to commit to Hermione more completely. Hermione became someone she had to protect or abandon. Millicent chose to identify Hermione as someone to include.

But the threat was there. Millicent began to work with Hadrian to perfect those tuned-stones and she thought about charmed bracelets and beaded necklaces. She rolled Hadrian’s turquoise bead between her fingers and considered. She did not tell Hermione about the possible threats. She did not know the other child well enough for that and wasn’t given to speaking even if she had. But this, unlike the other, greater project was something that the three of them could work together on. They could cut and transfigure stone, they could charm and carve.

And Hermione could delight in the work. She could express her joy in learning. She could—and did—tell Millicent how very impressed she was with Millicent’s charm work. She could complement Hadrian’s stone figures and the shape of his runes. She could throw herself into the project and earn her first friends in the magical world. And, in so doing, she wrapped Millicent and Hadrian both around her.

When Flitwick caught them out in charms class, with charmed bracelets of small, stone animals wrapped around their wrists, he was thrilled.
Years later, Hermione extended trust along highly specific, clearly delineated lines. She trusted Luna as Minister because Luna believed everyone had a right to life, security, and a chance at happiness as long as they didn’t hurt others. She trusted Pansy to run a media empire because Pansy had shown an able pen and impressive business acumen. She trusted Riddle to act with Hadrian in mind because she believed that, if Riddle didn’t, Hadrian would put him down. But Hermione’s trust in those people was associated with clear capacity and pattern recognition.

For Hermione, a clear line was necessary for her to feel safe.

For the same reasons, Hermione trusted Millicent and Hadrian without reservation. The friendship, started that second year in Hogwarts, built slowly and grew surely. The three had worked so long, so intensely on concepts of self and group, on developing their ideas with and against one another that their perceptions and identities had become intertwined.

For Hermione, the breadth of that trust started with Millicent’s words about Hadrian’s thefts. If Millicent could trust her, she could trust Millicent. If Millicent could trust Hadrian, then Hermione could too. That, however, did not mean theft was acceptable.
Chapter Summary

There are always more minds involved than one necessarily knows. -or- That in which Hogwarts has some opinions on the humans walking through their bones.

Chapter Notes

I'm sure people who are more observant than I already knew that there is actually a Bulstrode Park. Oh, how I laughed. It was not what I had had in mind.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hogwarts was aware of the children that ran in their halls. And they loved those children, in their way. Their very-far-from-human way.

Humans, viewing themselves at the top of a sentient hierarchy, often missed the fact that other Beings frequently had difficulty differentiating them one from the other. But, just as ornithologists learn to recognize individual birds, so buildings and goblins could learn to differentiate between human specimens. Other Beings, like kneazles, couldn't be bothered. Humans, in kneazles’ opinion, were almost interchangeable. Instead of worrying about it, however, they chose to learn to recognize one human as their representative to the wider, human glaring[1].

It was perhaps fortunate for humans that kneazles did have their human representatives as, particularly when grouped in pet stores, they often debated whether they should permit humans to continue running wild. But then, ancestral memory dating back millennia indicated that ruling was difficult work. Those memories suggested that humans were less difficult to herd than their fellow felines but more so than crups. So, while the kneazles plotted, their plans tended to crumble as soon as they moved past the Great Hunt and on to the New Clowder[2]. Perhaps, the most recent plotters suggested, they should hold the Hunt but recruit the goblins to manage it all.

But kneazles, as wary as humans should really have been, are not the central figures in this tale.

Hogwarts could differentiate between each of the humans when they chose, but rarely did. The human children came and went again so quickly. Like any good leader of hundreds, they took the tone of the group and tried to ensure group well-being. The House Heads were supposed to care for the individual child’s wellbeing. And the Headmaster was supposed to care for their wellbeing, translating directly for Hogwarts. In short, the Headmaster was supposed to figure as the castle’s human avatar. Once, most of the great houses had one … which was, admittedly, rather similar to the kneazle’s approach to humans.

Despite this arrangement limiting how much individual attention Hogwarts would put towards the students, there were almost always a few children who drew Hogwarts’ particular attention. Those children usually attracted notice due to very specific actions and behavioural patterns. Speaking with one of the castle’s many faces was a sure way to draw Hogwarts’ interest, if only briefly. Most of the castles’ faces had been hidden or blasted away a century prior. Very, very few children
found those faces.

There were children who, unknowing, tried to speak to Hogwarts directly. Hadrian and Millicent were two of those. But they were hardly aware of what they were doing and Hogwarts paid little attention as Hadrian stroked the walls and told them that they were beautiful. The tiny, blue-dressed child talked to the castle walls as he walked about, telling them what he saw, all the while studying the bones of the castle under his fingertips.

Hogwarts started paying attention, however, when Hadrian started pulling out bits of its body and reinserting them.

Attention drawn, Hogwarts began to observe first Hadrian and then Millicent. The castle’s interest grew slowly as the children continued experimenting with their body. Hogwarts wondered, for a short moment of months, if the bits and pieces the children placed in their walls were supposed to be offerings. They weren’t the usual offerings of milk and blood. But then, the children were so untrained. If Hogwarts had been given to using human metaphors, they might have compared the two children’s actions to a toddler offering an adult a half-eaten lollipop. Such offerings were sticky, disgusting, and unwanted, but sweet nonetheless.

But, Hogwarts decided, the two were not making offerings at all, sweet and useless or not. Rather, the two did not seem to be aware—as most humans were not—that Hogwarts was a sentient being. The castle thought Millicent perhaps suspected. That Charmer, Hogwarts noted, had been raised in an-almost sentient home.

Hogwarts was waiting for the Bulstrode estate to finally consciously reach back instead of emitting long, blinking pulses of confusion as the estate struggled to comprehend itself. The humans could have—should have if Hogwarts had been asked—assisted the process with proper offerings. But the humans were ignorant, young, and often small-minded, stuck in their limited frames as they were.

Hogwarts had once frequently communicated with the sentient beings in their walls. But paranoia and pro-human movements had led to a decline in conversation. There were fewer and fewer people who knew how to speak to the faces scattered through her towers and deep in her dungeons. Compounding the issue, in recent centuries Hogwarts had watched the students leave her gates younger and younger, limiting their opportunities for discovery.

Hogwarts had been disgusted when they realized how young the children who left their protection and guidance were.

Once, they would have spoken with the Ministry towers and discussed the changing school laws. They would have raised their voices in protest. But then, Hogwarts had once had a more direct role in the school’s development.

But it had been a long time since the pro-human movements had swept the Isles’ magical world. It had been almost an age since those humans had first turned up their noses at the other magical beings, deciding that they were somehow better—more than—the other entities around them.

It had been then that the Minister of Magic and Hogwarts’ newest Headmaster had turned on their Buildings. The pro-human movement had downplayed the importance of Hogwarts’ sentience and suggested the children should not learn to respect their walls but rather control them. That headmaster had demanded humans act as leaders instead of as intermediaries. The walls on the seventh floor heated a moment in memory and Dumbledore raised his head in confusion.

Worse, the humans had destroyed the once noble Ministry, choosing to dismantle the once-being’s
towering edifices. The humans had pulled those old castles down, some generations back. They had killed Hogwarts’ kin, claiming that the structures were not sentient at all, just enchanted. They seemed not to realize that those two points were hardly disconnected. How long, after all, can any object have bits and pieces of spirit poured into it before they accumulate enough to be their own whole?

The humans replaced that majestic Ministry with a hole in the ground. Hogwarts might have approved of the new structure if it hadn’t been at the expense of an old comrade. Hogwarts might have rejoiced at the new being if the humans had not tried their best to prevent the hole from becoming kin. The humans downplayed their own magic within the Ministry, checking wands at entry points and relying instead on curiously limited spells. The walls were not designed to absorb destructive spells. The shelves were not spelled to guard against spills. Instead, limited magics were cast to prevent very specific things. There was no saturation. This new structure would likely someday be sentient, but its wakening would take longer that these current humans would be alive.

In their hubris, they had lost the old Ministry of Magic along with its magical protections.

And, in the now of Hadrian’s second year, with so many of their kind gone, Hogwarts missed the Towered Ministry with a particularly sharp reminiscence. They could still picture the old, grand building that had once stood tall along the Scottish border, a grand castle against the sky.

Hogwarts had closed its mouths and turned its faces from the humans as they mourned. In the intervening years, the humans forgot altogether that Hogwarts had ever spoken to them, had ever been able to speak to them. The newest headmasters were unknowingly pro-human and did not turn their ears to the castle they inhabited.

But in the now of Hadrian and Millicent’s second year, the two children were interested in stone. Hogwarts had watched that day when the two decided to seal their feeling of camaraderie and shared joy with a pledge to create a new gargoyle (or three or four).

Hogwarts became particularly interested as the two children intentionally fed three stones with themselves. The children’s decision to play with semi-sentient stones who were just on the cusp of full sentience only concentrated Hogwarts’ interest.

Curious, the castle hummed around them, the nuance of her magic seemingly more watchful, becoming more apparent. There was time to make choices about whether to interfere with the two children. But not too much time. Hogwarts knew they needed to reach a decision before the children were gone.

Pondering, the weight of Hogwarts’ attention sat heavily on the two. They seemed to feel it as a security.

The castle was still pondering when the children returned from a summer break, taller and sturdier than they had been. They moved in sync with one another, as if their gravity constantly pulled them toward one another.

So it was that Hogwarts watched avidly as they pulled out one of the castle’s stones. They felt surprise for the first time in an age as the two children slipped a book into their bones and placed the bones back in the wall. Hadrian leaned against that wall, his fingers stroking the edge of the stone and thanked the castle before the two slunk off to reacquaint themselves with the library.

Hogwarts considered the diary. They poked at it and felt the sleeping conscious of it. It had enough to it that it was almost a complete being. It had curious knots in it, a mess of complications and traps. Parts of those spells were designed to try and complete the consciousness, but in a fashion
designed to cause harm. If Hogwarts were to filter the mess, the castle could break the
enchantment. Paper did not hold against stone, not when it was already inside the stone.

Hogwarts hummed to themself and the castle air buzzed. The headmaster looked around himself,
wondering. There were moments when he thought about those old texts he had once read, which
claimed the existence of a castle guardian. There were moments when he wished the old libraries
hadn’t disappeared and their contents with them. But the buzzing stopped and the headmaster went
back to his work. He was a very, very busy man. He did not have time to work out all the castle’s
mysteries, not when there were so many lives at stake. He would have liked to, he thought with a
sigh.

Hogwarts tugged the tangle of the spells around the child’s book into the stone, away from the
consciousness. They didn’t care for the intent of some of the spells. They filtered the magic
through their own, solid stone, examining a weak connection to something far away. They
followed another, even weaker tie to Hadrian. Curious, curious. Hogwarts hadn’t thought the child
had a particular affinity for paper.

Hogwarts considered the book, thought about the almost-completeness of the being. And thought
that this being didn’t take a book’s shape properly. Rather, their shape suggested legs and fingers.
The book was not, Hogwarts thought, the being’s original vessel.

But then Hogwarts well knew that not all Beings were human. They were a castle with rooms and
walls. They were a being with foundations sunk deep into the earth and a voice that reached across
miles through stone. They were a large, encompassing being that missed their comrades and
missed speaking with the humans that swarmed through its halls.

There is no appropriate way to describe in words what Hogwarts did to that book. If humans could
visualise it at all, they might imagine careful hands untangling knots and gently rebinding the
book’s spine in order to more carefully support the conscious within. They unravelled bits of
hostile spells and swallowed the bits and pieces of released magic as offerings.

Hogwarts had the thought that the children would return to collect the cleaned book with its
slumbering conscious, but the two children chose not to. They passed through the hall and Hadrian
would run his hands across Hogwarts’ stones but he did not remove the book. He did call the castle
beautiful.

Hogwarts watched and moved toward the possibility of answering.

The expansion of the tiny group pushed Hogwarts towards a decision. Hermione changed the
group’s balance. Hogwarts had watched that child with the messy, medium-brown curls massing
around her face and brushing red-robed shoulders as she killed a troll. She had, after all,
inadvertently offered Hogwarts the being’s life and her own magical outburst. Hogwarts had
consumed both offerings, however unintentional they might have been, before they could damage
their halls any further. But then Hermione had withdrawn into herself and her books. She had
provided no more offerings. She had not stroked Hogwarts’ walls.

But then the red-garbed Hermione joined the blue and green garbed pair. At first, it was only for
their studies. Hadrian and Millicent kept their stonework to themselves. Their relationships might
have stagnated there. They might have. Who knows? Counterfactuals are difficult to address.

But Hermione joined the two friends while Hogwarts was watching and considering them. And the
castle’s notice had effects. Hogwarts’ focus added weight to the atmosphere. For Millicent and
Hadrian, the attention had descended slowly and was constant. The two didn’t consciously notice it
falling across their shoulders. But, without any awareness of it for their own part, most rooms the
children inhabited became heavy, the air tense, the magic denser. Other children felt it, but pay little if any conscious attention as they focused on their games of snap. Other children thought that perhaps, maybe, it had something to do with Millicent and Hadrian. But most didn’t pay enough attention to the two to really feel it.

But Hermione looked and saw. And then she looked again with more attention.

For Hermione, Hogwarts’ warm regard was newer. She noticed the difference between sitting at a table with the two and sitting alone. Conscious and wary of her surroundings, she paid attention to how the heavy air sitting next to Millicent and Hadrian felt and how it felt away from them. She noticed when doors seemed to open for the two that didn’t seem to for other people. They didn’t get lost like other second-year students.

And Hermione certainly paid attention when that feeling started following her toward the end of her second year. She felt the difference and might have been terrified if it hadn’t been so comforting.

Hermione pondered while Hogwarts watched.

And then, Hermione had a flash of her fiery brilliance.

Sitting down with the two, she announced that she thought Hogwarts was sentient and watching them. Millicent’s quill paused in forming her carefully beautiful copperplate script and she looked at Hermione. Hadrian put down his book.

Hermione took a breath, wrapped her courage around her stomach, and laid out her thoughts. She pulled out her chart explaining her observations and her thoughts on the matter. She said the words ‘sentience’ and ‘stone’ in a single sentence and entranced Hadrian. She’d already enchanted Millicent.

And so it was that when, about a month later, Hadrian hesitantly placed three rocks on the table and introduced them to Hermione just as you would a human, Hermione was allowed to touch them gently and vaguely feel the fact of their consciousness, their sentience. Having already had her fiery-brilliant idea about Hogwarts’ sentience, it was easy enough for her to connect some dots. Simple for her to grasp certain implications. Only a small step for her to look at Millicent and Hadrian, and ask about gargoyles. Hadrian gave her the first open smile he’d turned her way.

A week later, she would throw her arms around both her friends in delight and Hadrian would learn first-hand what a hug was.

So it came to be that Hermione became fascinated with Hogwarts, and more generally with understanding the possibilities and limits of sentience. After all, raised with books about starship travel and gates that opened between galaxies, the idea of non-human sentience was familiar to her. With one childish foot in the mundane world, she could question the structure of the world around her from a much different point of view than magically-raised Millicent or Hadrian, who in many ways we might argue was never raised at all.

[1] A “glaring” is a word for a group of cats.

[2] A “clowder” is another word for a group of cats.
Chapter End Notes

My ongoing and deepest appreciation for Tazzm's beta-work.
In Which The Third Time Is Not A Charm

Chapter Summary

That in which Hadrian just cannot seem to care about a very specific class. There is too much else going on.

Chapter Notes

My extreme appreciation to the amazing Tazzm for beta-ing this chapter. Twice in fact. Let's hope I didn't manage to somehow mess something up. I do have a talent for that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Readers will be aware that preparations for important events (such an ambiguous way to refer to something is that not? So very imprecise and lacking in emphasis) often involves a series of decisions and then a long period of waiting (and working) as the materials and steps necessary to accomplish the desired outcomes of those decisions are realised. As a consequence, life often includes long interludes during which it feels like nothing is happening. In point of fact, those periods of nothing often include a whole lot of somethings. Decisions are made to do, or to not do, things. Opportunities are passed up or disregarded. Or, in Hadrian’s case during his second (and perhaps even more importantly, during his third year; in which there was at last a reasonably competent defense teacher) he failed to become enamored with defense, instead drifting to other subjects. If Hadrian were to have left an account of his own life, he likely wouldn’t even mentioned the class other than to include the subject in an overall list. He found the subject immensely boring and not even Remus Lupin’s bright-eyed enthusiasm for the subject changed this.

Perhaps, had Hadrian found the subject stimulating, he would have gone on to build fortifications instead of libraries. He and his friends might have gone on to work for the Ministry as aurors. Or they might have become Unspeakables. Although, with their skills, they could have become Unspeakables without difficulty. They could have, if they had not become so disgusted with the status quo. As the world stood, however, the three become revolutionaries; lobbying for reform and information access. Readers might take that access for granted, given their place in a world with the Witching Library in it. Readers might not – probably do not - remember the time before.

The reasons why Hadrian never took defense, despite stone’s many uses in that direction, was in part because of the dismal defense professors and their rather personal interests in Hadrian’s life—seeing him as a symbol, as ‘Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived’—while utterly failing to see Hadrian Potter, a boy who really quite liked rocks and preferred solitude to boisterousness. Quirrel had been bad enough. But as time does continue to pass no matter how any of us feel about it, Quirrel vanished and Hadrian entered his second year and found himself with a new, not-really-improved, second year defense teacher.
The second-year defense teacher tried to sparkle at Hadrian, tried to convince him that he should take advantage of his fame. Said teacher's sparkling and loudly spoken words fetched up against Hadrian’s stone wall of bland disinterest. It is rather difficult to fight a stone wall without cannons or similar sorts of things. This man of sparkles had no desire to bring the wrong kind of attention to himself. (Perhaps if the man’s sparkling smiles had been accompanied by sparkling gems he might have made some progress, but we shall never know.)

Lacking cannons, whether literal or metaphorical, the man tried to press verbally in hopes of making it through the child’s stone walls. In response, the sparkling man found himself gifted a pebble by the child, as well as an explanation of rather great length about the import of pet rocks. The child told him that this piece was red sandstone, as if that was supposed to mean something to him. The golden-haired teacher gingerly handed the rock back to the child, deciding that the curse to his head as a babe must have addled his brains somehow, and moved on to more interesting subjects, forgoing his efforts to persuade the child to use his fame.

Besides, the golden-haired, sparkling man did indeed find more interesting subjects to occupy his attention. Why, at the end of that very year, he found the charges of fraud, endangerment, and identity-murder brought against him to hold his attention much more keenly than a child who droned on about carbon and the pressure needed to make coal.

Perhaps it is unfair to throw too much shade on the professor for finding Hadrian as dull as gravel. Most people did. There was a young, red-haired child, for example, who started school with hearts in her eyes but soon grew bored of the boy who had once been her hero. She was a child of fire, active and vibrant, who wanted to touch the sky and race the wind. She had little patience for stone. She wished Hadrian well and admired him, but he was boring. So very boring. Her attention soon drifted away. There was the quidditch team to consider, and how she might gain a place upon it.

The difference between the defense professor’s boredom and the fire-child’s was in the impact on Hadrian. The fire-child had little impact on Hadrian’s life, no more than any of the other children who theoretically could have become his friends. Being in the year below him, he did not have regular contact with her in the form of shared classes and thus neither had a great deal of opportunity to perhaps change their minds about the other. But the professor? Well, he taught a class, after all, one Hadrian had no choice but to attend. The professor’s inability to see Hadrian as anything but a symbolic Harry the Boy-Who-Lived (or else as a dead bore) meant that by the time his attention drifted away from the child, Hadrian’s feathers were very thoroughly ruffled. Hadrian despised the man.

As the professor’s lessons continued to tend towards reenactments of scenes from his books and commentary on haircare products, Hadrian’s sense of disgust began to encompass not just the professor but the class itself. In short, that particular teacher’s instruction strangled what little interest Hadrian might have taken in the subject. And, without interest, he did not perform well. His primary school education, with its wide variety of subjects that did not relate to stones, did not serve him well in this matter - Hadrian was already far too used to receiving abysmal marks in classes or topics unrelated to his specific interests to care about yet more red in his academic ledger.

Readers should be assured, however, that not all of Hogwarts’ classes were as laughable or the teachers as deplorable. Indeed, Hogwarts was rather proud to host professors such as Filius Flitwick, with his keen—if limited—stone sense.

Fortunately for the Witching World, Flitwick was able to ameliorate some of the damage Hadrian’s obsession had resulted in, insofar as his academics were concerned. Flitwick, more so
than the other three heads of house, was invested in his convocation’s marks. He may have squeaked in excitement when *Harry Potter* was placed in his house, but he took his charges seriously. It took him little time to look and see not Harry, but Hadrian. From there, Flitwick was able to get to know the child a little. He was lucky that his early misstep happened early, long before the child began to take offense at the usual assumptions made about his person.

With that in mind, Flitwick was able—unknowingly mirroring Millicent’s own arguments—to talk Hadrian into performing adequately in potions. He rather adeptly pointed out that one could enchant stones by soaking them in potions and provided conceptual examples. There was a permanence to a potions-related change that charms lacked. Hadrian left that advisory session with a contemplative tick to his mouth. Shortly after, Flitwick was unsurprised to see that Hadrian’s scores in potions saw an abrupt upturn from abysmal to mediocre.

Defense, in contrast, with its current second-year focus on teeth whitening charms and hair care, could not really be related to Hadrian’s interests. Thus Flitwick begrudgingly gave it up as a bad job. Hadrian’s marks in that class were impressive only in the nadirs they reached.

Millicent, for her part, excelled in potions and gritted her teeth through defense. She learned through books if not from the professor. Her mother had taught her to be proud of her work despite those who might try to prevent her from doing it, or the inadequacies of a situation. Helping her along, she found the class easier than Hadrian did, for charms of all sorts interested her. The charms the defense professor used on his teeth and hair were truly impressive. Millicent spent the bulk of class time trying to pick them apart, meaning she paid some attention. By the end of the year, Millicent suspected the teacher used a combination of charms and potions upon his teeth and hair. And she found herself disturbed in her confidence that she could answer questions about his favorite tea.

Yet, in the long run, Hadrian and Millicent's relationship with that professor was limited, dull, and short-lived. The year flew by as the two worked on their own projects and went even faster after Hermione joined them. Soon enough, the three were exchanging farewells on the London train platform, the smile stretched across Hermione’s face a significant change from the previous year’s almost-tears. Her sense of betrayal that all of the defense professor’s books were blatant lies was quite eclipsed by the new friendships she had formed with her fellow students. Even better, they were peers who appreciated the library and the knowledge found therein.

Hermione would really have been quite pleased if it hadn’t been for the growing crack in her shell. Ever since the troll encounter, her magic hadn’t stayed as tidily dormant. It seemed to reach out along her fingers and her hair. Her toes too, but those were usually encased in shoes. As she hugged her parents tightly, she found herself slightly concerned with the growing frequency with which her fingers sparked and her hair crackled.

Of course, at this particular moment, Hermione did not know that the cause of this problem was that she was happy. If she had stayed encased in a bubble of misery, caused by her social isolation and the loneliness that sprang from it, this would never have been a problem. The usual layer of reluctance that children have to learn to work through so they can channel more magic had shattered with her troll-slaying outburst in first year. It happened, occasionally. Someone familiar with the issue who noticed it in Hermione would have been able to tell her that it meant that she would have easier access to more magic, but that she would have greater difficulties in controlling the amount of magic she poured into her spells, and that simply flowed through her on a basic, instinctual level.

That problem would get worse and better in the following years. That summer, Hermione had yet to learn about the projects that Millicent and Hadrian were working on. She didn’t know that they
had, over the course of their second year, outlined an entire plan for how to approach the study of gargoyles. She was unaware that they had reams of parchment full of questions they needed to address, lists of books to find and consult that might have the information they needed, and experiments to conduct. She would like the two of them all the better and be the happier when she did find out. Hermione was a creature given to delight and her brown hair only served as a striking contrast to the golden electricity that danced along it. In the future that sparking fire would make visits to the non-magical world a problem.

Hermione was an observant child. She would, that summer, begin to note the problem when her grandmother visited and Hermione’s hair sparkled brilliantly with her happiness at seeing her grandmother. Her grandmother would smile and stroke her cheek before helping Hermione figure out how to test herself and her sparks.

Millicent and Hadrian were also observant, although in quite different directions. Their project, despite still being almost entirely theoretical, had quite consumed Millicent and Hadrian’s time and attention. Thus, where Hermione still noted most of the inter-school rivalries taking place, the other two missed the ones that did not directly influence them. Millicent did know about points that figured in her own or Hadrian’s interest, such as the political machinations of the Slytherin common room. She did not, however, have the time to follow everything. Thus, she her awareness of house standings was confined to the end-of-year-cup. Her interest in the Quidditch pitch only reared its head when the Slytherin common room expressed itself over wins and losses.

Hadrian barely knew what Quidditch was beyond some sport that did not involve stones. Pockets full of stones were not conducive to flight. He’d rather have his head in a book and rocks in his hands.

That obvious lack of interest in “normal” childhood things concerned the headmaster. That second year, he had again tried to speak with Hadrian. The conversation was not what the headmaster could have called a success. But he was not sure what the issue was. To the headmaster, Hadrian’s face was completely closed.

Hadrian, if Millicent had asked, would have expressed his disquiet around the man. She did not ask, as she could read it clearly on his face when she next saw him.

Hadrian had not forgotten the feeling of having his mind poked at, even if he hadn’t quite known the cause. His sense of unease only increased as the headmaster’s attempted probing continued. That year, Hadrian resolved not to let his guard down around the man.

From the headmaster’s side of things, he wondered if Harry was one of the few children who had a natural skill for occlumency or if the boy was simply extremely obsessed with castle walls. Given the likely probabilities (a twelve year occlumens – unheard of!), the headmaster was confident it was the latter. The child’s surface thoughts rarely dealt with anything else. Even verbally, the boy would speak of nothing but rocks. Snape claimed that, at the least, the boy was not nearly as arrogant as his father. The boy had, in Snape’s estimation, grown into a “quiet little shit.” Snape even begrudgingly approved of the child’s improving potions marks. The headmaster, of course, reprimanded Snape for his words.

But Snape was right about the child’s quietness, to the headmaster’s disappointment. The boy was reticent on all but one topic. Case in point: the headmaster tried to ask about the Dursleys. In response to each query, there was a related rock-fact. The Durley’s was where Hadrian had found a particular pebble with a lovely pink streak in it. When asked if he missed his cousin, the headmaster learned that said cousin was uninterested in rocks. The headmaster had never had a particular interest in rocks and had little to say on the subject. The conversation, if it could be
called such, petered out. The headmaster wished the boy a good summer with his family. Hadrian nodded and left. Both were discontented.

The headmaster was, in a way, a kind man. At his core, the headmaster wanted the world to be at peace and children to grow up in environments filled with wild laughter and an absence of pain or loss. He believed in a greater good and a higher purpose, but he did not want people to hurt. He disliked suffering to such an extent that he preferred to ameliorate present hurts in favor of later pain. After all, later pain could, potentially, also be avoided with careful planning. It was why he did not tell the child about the prophecy or any potential danger. There was time enough for that later. The boy needed some time to just be. Children needed time to roughhouse and just be children.

The headmaster had faith that the power of familial love overcame all problems. If people could just remember the importance of family, so many problems could be overcome. Nothing was more important than family.

To an extent, it was a tragedy that the headmaster believed in storge[2] quite so strongly. That belief tended to blind him to some of the darker realities in the world around him, something a strategist should not permit. As it was, the headmaster could recall Lily's fond reminiscences of her beloved sister. He did not remember that those tales had tapered off over the years or how, in her seventh year, Lily’s face would grow pinched at the mention of her sister’s name. The headmaster, for all his wisdom and his tendency to poke into other people’s thoughts, could not actually be everywhere at once. In the later years, Lily’s thoughts around the headmaster focused on her work and then her baby. She was not one to dwell and did not care to think about a sister whose last words to her had been of rejection. Instead, Lily chose to think about the here and now, the things she could do something about and the person she adored.

Recalling Lily’s fond thoughts about her natal family, the headmaster did not look to the sister either ten years prior or in Hadrian’s second-year present. Petunia was simply Lily’s adored family, ergo she must necessarily be worthy of the adoration Lily had once felt for her.

Perhaps Petunia was worthy, in her own way. She was, after all, a sentient being. This tale has difficulty, however, in accepting someone who would intentionally hurt any Being—much less a child—as worthy of the adoration the headmaster thought Lily had retained for her sister.

The headmaster felt that the boy was truly lucky to have family. The headmaster only wished he had, himself, been as lucky those years ago.

The reader will know that Hadrian felt very differently about his family than the headmaster supposed. The reader will know that there were many reasons Hadrian reached his aunt’s house the summer after his second year and remained only three weeks. And then, on the appointed day, he made sure his shrunken trunk was in his pocket, his bag of stones was around his neck, and a certain small piece of aragonite clutched in his hand. Millicent's father had given it to him, mentioning carelessly that he had picked the piece up on a trip to Spain and he had thought Hadrian might appreciate it. Hadrian did. The small stone was really quite lovely with its reddish hues. For once, however, something superseded the weight of the rock in his hand. His loyalty to Millicent reach monumental proportions.

Regardless of his assumptions about the boy’s family life, the headmaster could see that Harry was not a particularly gregarious or friendly child. The headmaster, seeing Harry's relative isolation throughout his first and second years and noting Harry's unwillingness to engage with him when called to his office for a friendly chat, thought to try another, perhaps more accessible face. There might be no news of Voldemort yet, but Harry was a child of prophecy. Voldemort would return
and Harry needed people in his corner when that happened. Preferably reliable people.

The headmaster knew about Harry’s two friends: a quiet Slytherin girl from a neutral family and a muggleborn Gryffindor girl who probably would have been much better off in Ravenclaw. But neither were the sort who had families the headmaster could call on when necessity arose. While pondering, the headmaster thought of Lupin, the last of Harry’s father’s friends. He thought again of Lupin when news of Sirius Black’s escape from prison was released. Thus Lupin was on the headmaster’s mind when he began the yearly task of inviting someone to fill the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

Lupin would indeed fill the position during Hadrian’s third year, but as the reader may have already suspected, the headmaster’s plot failed on two fronts: the boy neither learned to see Lupin as a guardian (or even to regard him with any sort positive feelings) nor did he come to care about Defense. Perhaps if the educationally-encouraging tone of the class had come earlier in his academic career matters might have been different.

As it was, Hadrian failed to understand why they were learning about dangerous Beings, such as vampires and grindylows. Granted, the class was infinitely more interesting that the previous two years. The class taught them how to protect themselves from, or reverse, hexes and jinxes. It taught them about shielding. But it was mostly about non-human Beings.

Hadrian felt the focus was entirely impractical. For him, people were as dangerous as any of the nightmarish creatures Lupin’s lessons covered. Those humans were treacherous with and without wands and yet neither Lupin nor the other defense professors taught the children topics such as practical warding so they could sleep safely. Why, Hadrian wondered, didn’t they learn about how to protect themselves against human transfiguration? Thanks to Hagrid, he’d learned to be wary of that possibility before he’d even stepped foot into Hogwarts; a lesson that had only been confirmed due to those red-haired twins and certain custards. Without adult guidance, he had to deal with these concerns himself.

Or, Hadrian tentatively thought in second year and knew for a certainty in third, not by himself. He had two reliable, solid friends. He liked to think of the three of them as strata of earth settling against each other. Perhaps granite for Millicent, magma for Hermione, and sandstone for himself. He hesitated over the last, wondering if that was quite right. He pondered as he handled the piece of old, red sandstone that he had handed the unremarkable defense professor from second year but promptly been given back. It was a truly a fascinating piece of British history. It was at least sixty million years old and had the loveliest lines of limestone in it. He wasn’t sure he would be suitably stable if he was sandstone. But perhaps.

Or maybe he wasn’t stable by himself but in combination. Working with Millicent and Hermione, they were becoming rather proficient in creating runic arrays of various sorts; making them from specific stones, rocks, and pebbles. Hadrian had never truly picked his stones at random when he made his first crude runestones, but increasingly he and Millicent began to put proper thought into the specific nature of the arrays they were trying to create. They considered things like the history of the stone and its properties. The aforementioned piece of old, red sandstone for example – sandstone is traditionally considered an easily worn rock, but this piece had endured tens of millions of years. Hadrian used the piece in a runic array for stability.

Put together, the three of them were protecting themselves from the world around them and not only imagined, possible future problems. For that, Ancient Runes and Arithmancy were much more useful additions to his schedule. Charms continued to enchant and transfiguration to enthrall (and occasionally terrify). Even potions had its appeal, particularly once Hermione discovered a potion for petrification. One could turn things to stone permanently with it!
In these, Hadrian saw uses for his own defense and the defense of those he loved. Defense with Lupin was fine. But Hadrian, for his part, intended to maintain a cold status quo. The defense professors had all thus far proven to be useless, untrustworthy, dangerous or some combination thereof.

And, despite what would prove to be an emotionally draining year for Lupin, as far as Hadrian was ever concerned, their encounter was only a brief footnote in the story of his life and the class notable only for being better than the two that had come before it.

After all, there were other classes that were more important to Hadrian. Hadrian would keep his friends safe. But, between those runic pieces of safety and that focus on his flesh and stone friends, Hadrian did not see how defense class – especially one so focused on various creatures Hadrian could not quite imagine himself or his friends encountering unless they actually went looking for them - could be particularly useful.

[1] A group of eagles

[2] Familial love, one of the eight kinds of love as defined by the ancient Greeks.

Chapter End Notes

I have long found teachers to be so important in convincing students to care about their subjects.
The Motivations of Panic and a Few Missed Connections

Chapter Summary

That in which Hadrian panics and chooses to hide behind a handful of beads.

Chapter Notes

My ongoing thanks for tazzm for the beta and appreciation for the accidental image of Hadrian and company in Final Fantasy XIV world.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If one were to have asked Hadrian what mattered during his third year, he would have first had to try and remember what that year entailed. The events of secondary school (Hogwarts) became something of a blur over a hundred years after they happened, no matter how good one’s memory might be.

If he ever got those years sorted out inside his head, Hadrian would have told the asker that the thing about third year that mattered the most was his realisation that friendship could be painful. It was glorious to have friends. But having people one cared about meant having people to lose.

On his way back to Hogwarts, his encounter with a dementor caused that thought to bite into him with sharp teeth and never let go.

There had been dementors on the train to Hogwarts. (“Yes, such a brilliant idea to have such foul creatures on a train with children, when the only spell that could drive them off is one very few adults are even capable of!” Hermione would soon enough exclaim with scathing fury, after her initial shock at the encounter with the thing had worn off and Millicent’s parents had imparted some pertinent information about the creatures to the shaken trio.)

From what Hadrian did recall of the matter, they had been something like specters in appearance, and their very presence had permeated the air itself with coldness and darkness; a coldness that stole into the marrow of one’s bones like venom most insidious, a darkness that lurked unseen but was omnipresently, maliciously there. Hadrian was well-familiar with darkness from his cupboard. But this was… something else. Past seeing the creatures themselves, he remembered seeing green lights and hearing a woman scream. He was vaguely aware that Millicent had clutched his shoulder with a heavy hand and activated the portkey that hung around her neck while Hermione caught his falling body.

The three ended up right back where they began their day in Bulstrode Park. Hadrian came to awareness to find Hermione clutching him in her lap, frantically checking his pulse while her hair blazed wildly. Fortunately for the Bulstrodes’ carpet, Hadrian’s pulse was fine and he opened his eyes mere seconds later. (Magic burns would have had to have been fixed by hand, you see.)

The adult Bulstrodes would press the three into the kitchen when Millicent calmly informed her parents about what had just happened. Her mother’s mouth would tighten and her father would
usher them into the kitchen with a flurry of pleasant words.

Hadrian would stare somewhat stupidly up at his friends, his mind looping on the screams and Millicent’s solid hand on his shoulder, grounding him. With a disconnected sense of befuddlement, Hadrian supposed the screams were likely from his mother’s death. They fit Flitwick’s description of the little known about the event. Hadrian’s mind drifted briefly over the photograph Flitwick had given him of a smiling Advanced Charms group, in which a red-haired woman turned to the camera with a bright smile amidst a group of happy friends.

When his mind finally returned to the present, Hadrian found himself sitting in the kitchen with hot cocoa to drink and listening to Hermione recount the event (short as it had been) in shaken but precise detail. She had been through brushes with certain death before and now had questions about these events. She was calm now that she knew Hadrian was fine.

But for Hadrian, this was his first fully-remembered brush with clear and present mortal danger. Now, grasping for a semblance of security, Hadrian found himself less concerned about the little-remembered past than with the very real present. Sitting there, on that kitchen stool, he felt the weight of his friendships. These were people he cared for. These were people he could have lost. He found the idea of that possibility unacceptable.

Readers will remember that Hadrian had long since taught himself that the appropriate response to perceived slights was a carefully prepared retaliatory theft.

Sitting there, all Hadrian could think was that there was likely little one could steal from a dementor.

Hadrian began considering every angle of the horror that he could think of. He was having a hard time concentrating.

Nonetheless, through his haze two points stood out. First, was the question of blame. Millicent’s mother had told them during the summer that a madman had escaped from Azkaban. That madman had been in prison because he had killed a wizard and thirteen other people after having betrayed Hadrian’s parents. No one knew why or how he had escaped, but Hadrian was a possible target. They needn’t worry as they’d be in Hogwarts, but the Bulstrodes had given them emergency portkeys regardless. After all, the Ministry had sent dementors to hunt the madman and one could not be too careful around dementors.

Meaning, the Ministry was behind the dementors. The Ministry was decidedly more approachable than dementors. Perhaps, Hadrian considered distractedly, he could take something from them.

The second point that stuck—and loomed large, almost consuming the first in its enormity, lending anger to the first—was that he could have lost his friends. These were friends who had protected him. He needed now to protect them in turn.

It concerned Hadrian to realise that his own survival was no long the central goal. It worried him to realize that his friends’ health and happiness were as important to him as his own.

To some extent, it had been simpler when he only had himself to focus on. He had a moment—only a moment—of missing the simplicity of his hated life at his aunt’s.
Despite the horror of dementors and the strange memories of green light, Hadrian preferred his life now. He realised that he liked his life now. Hadrian had, even if he would not have known to use the word, grown to love his friends. He had those lovely, small bursts of happiness when he saw them. He had moments of anticipation when he realised he could tell them about success with a runic array. He smiled with pleasure when Hermione greeted Petrus and let Aquila sit in her pocket. He appreciated her tendency to fidget with Marble when her emotions ran high and she began to spark.

But now, here, Hadrian learned the flipside of that love. Most readers will already know the feeling, the clutching horror at the idea of loss if they have yet to experience the gaping chasm of loss directly.

Hadrian decided he would rather be kissed that lose any of his friends.

That realisation hit Hadrian hard as he thought about how he had not been alone on that train. The dementor could have gone after Millicent or Hermione. He could have lost one of them. Fear crawled its way up his throat on account of someone other than himself. His knuckles turned white around his mug. Sitting there on that stool, he determined that he would not lose them.

That thought would shade his entire year and lend urgency to his interactions with most of Hogwarts’ faculty throughout the third year.

Readers already have a passing familiarity with Hadrian’s opinions of the Defense class. It is possible that Hadrian’s concern for Millicent and Hermione shaped his distaste for Defense even more than his limited ability to find use in the class itself.

Perhaps if the three had seen Lupin on the train. Safely at the Bulstrodes though, the three did not see Lupin chase the dementor from the train. He had carried the day, passing out chocolate and soothing tears. The children who saw him looked at the scruffy man with awe. But Hadrian was not among them. The three friends had not been there and did not hear about his heroics until much later. They had not seen the beautiful, silver Patronus that had other students gasping in delight, their fears chased away by the ephemeral apparition. Missing the welcoming feast altogether, the three would not even see the professor until their first defense lesson of the year.

The first lesson Lupin had devised was not a lesson that set a good tone for Hadrian’s impression of the professor.

Perhaps if Lupin had not chosen to try and capture his students’ interest with a boggart. (In a more general sense it hadn’t been a bad idea to try and capture his students’ interest and thereby establish himself as a good professor; Lupin himself had after all been subject to a different Defense teacher each year while at Hogwarts and recalled clearly how terribly uninteresting some of them had been.) It was a good lesson for most third years, when they were still too young to understand the world but were old enough not to simply dissolve into their fears when faced with them. And Lupin—for all his life challenges—thought better of humans than they perhaps deserved, and failed to consider the possible range of childhood experiences. (His own experience, the horror of being bitten at such a young age, was after all an extremely rare example of a less-than-good childhood, a part of him subconsciously reasoned.)

As it was, Hadrian was focused on his beloved friends and their associated fears, even as he thought about the fear of losing those friends he had so recently come to, in the class. His boggart reflected those thoughts. None of the other children understood why a small, shattered, dull stone lying on the ground had Hadrian turning white. His counter-spell turned the pieces into a butterfly.
as he could think of nothing more ridiculous than stone transfigured into gossamer wings. Later, he would explain to a bemused Millicent that the humor was in the absurdity of the idea that such a transfiguration would hold. Stone did not want to be gossamer. He chose not to dwell on how he’d also found security in making the not-Petrus whole again. He preferred the humor in that moment. That night, he clutched the three, and Marble, to his chest in relief.

It was Hermione’s boggart, however, that actually shaped Hadrian’s distaste for Lupin. Hadrian could excuse things done to himself, in part because he was secure in his ability to achieve his own retribution. A day after his brush with dementors, not even a full 24 hours after he determined he needed to protect his friends, Hadrian could not stand the thought of them being frightened. The boggarts came in a moment when Hadrian had only begun to realise that having someone like Hermione close meant he could lose her as well. For him, her shaking form after her encounter with her boggart was not acceptable. It fed too much into his own fears. If he had encountered his own boggart after her tale, the boggart might have reflected her broken form instead of Petrus and Ignatius.

Readers might have already guessed that in this universe Hermione’s greatest fear was being beaten to death with a club. She had spent too many nights alone in her dorm room, dreaming about what would have happened if her magic hadn’t snapped during the troll-incident. She wasn’t afraid of the troll itself so much as the pain of the beating. The vividness of her broken, battered form, of her own mangled body, that her boggart assumed had Neville throwing up in the corner. Lupin looked surprised and disturbed. For Hermione, it wasn’t the first time she had faced that image and she responded as she usually did. She used the appropriate, learned spell to turn her boggart into a tiny kneazle. She had read that trolls were somewhat afraid of kneazles. That did not mean that seeing the fear in the flesh, so to speak, did not make her shake. A dream, even a nightmare, is different than something physically before you.

Walking out of the classroom, Hermione was still shaking. She was still shaking when she reached their quiet classroom, where Millicent hugged her and Hadrian stood in temporarily-impotent furry.

Hadrian despised Lupin for putting Hermione in that situation. For Hadrian, that moment turned Lupin into one of the most dangerous humans in the castle. The three did not know that Lupin asked McGonagall about the incident and had been reassured that the fear reflected Hermione’s first year incident with the troll. What the children believed was that Lupin saw Hermione’s fear (a rather gruesome and detailed one for such a young child) and said nothing.

The events marred Hadrian’s early interactions with Lupin, created unease and mistrust. Hadrian did not trust the professor to protect the students. He did not believe Lupin would ensure Millicent and Hermione’s safety; something that had become extremely important to him.

Lupin became a walking reminder of Hadrian’s need to protect his friends from human Beings.

Lupin did not know about Hadrian’s impressions of the class or himself. Hadrian hardly confided in Lupin and the child had spent so long with a specific mask that he rarely slipped. All Lupin knew was that his beloved friend’s child sat with his blue-robed fellow eagles taking studious notes although Harry’s homework suggested that whatever he was writing was not focused on lessons. Further frustrating Lupin, when questioned, Harry inevitably responded with commentary on how stones fit into the lesson. How would one protect against a vampire? According to Harry, an enchanted sunstone would be a wise choice.

None of the other teachers at Hogwarts expressed any surprise when Lupin raised his concerns over Harry’s obsession. Flitwick did, however, look at Lupin with disappointment.
This, Lupin didn’t know what to do with. He’d built dreams of being able to connect with Harry over the course of the year. He hadn’t known how but simply hoped to find a point of contact. Somehow, before meeting the child, he’d assumed that Harry would be like his father. Boys were supposed to take after their fathers, weren’t they? Clearly, this was not the case. Harry, somewhere in the back of Lupin’s mind, actually bore greater similarities to his mother. But Lupin had been James’ friend first. It was James he mourned. It was for James’ son’s sake he had stayed away so long. For Lupin, the mother did not figure into the story as a central character.

Perhaps if Lupin had spent more time thinking about Lily-as-Harry’s-mother, instead of more associating her with James as Lily-as-James’-wife, he might have played a better hand when he did try and speak with Harry.

For despite the child’s almost complete lack of engagement with the class, Lupin still had hope. He did not know Harry’s opinion of him. He had not been aware that Hermione was the boy’s dear friend back when the boggarts were the lesson of the day. He never heard about how Hadrian had responded. Had he known, Lupin might have refrained from singling Harry out. Or, at the least, he might have approached the issue differently. He might, for example, have mentioned Hadrian’s mother’s skill with charms as opposed to what he did do and say.

Not finding a natural opening in the flow of the year, Lupin decided to speak to him directly. He asked Harry to stay after class. He kept him and said the damning (not that he knew it) phrase; “You know, Harry, you’re not much like your father.” When Harry did not immediately reply, Lupin tumbled on, nervous, “We were friends. We got into all sorts of mischief together.” Lupin smiled slightly. It was nothing like Millicent’s delightful, slight twitch of deep pleasure. It was a nervous, atrophied thing. It seemed somewhat fake.

Consequently, Hadrian didn’t believe in it, even as Lupin, apparently realising his smile was not doing its job, tried to lighten the mood. “You might even say we got up to no good.”

Hadrian did not comprehend Lupin’s joke as the frames of reference he would need to understand it were completely missing. His childhood, after all, had instilled in him a very great desire and need to blend in, to be unremarkable and beneath notice. Being “up to no good” did not lend itself to that, for it drew attention to one. What Hadrian did know was that “he was not like his father” and by this point he was greatly annoyed with this knowing. Several people had already shared that information with him thank-you-very-much, most doing so with a note of regret. And he’d found that people who started conversations with comments on “Harry’s father” tended not to see Hadrian.

Hadrian felt that those individuals tended not to act in his best interests. They wanted a symbol or they wanted a memory. Or they were the headmaster, who for better or worse had a category unto himself.

Hadrian assumed Lupin was the same and was not entirely wrong in his belief even if he was not entirely right. Lupin cared about the long-dead man, one whom Hadrian could not remember. But that focus did not mean Lupin did not have an interest in Hadrian for his own self even if the memories colored their interactions.

It was, likely, a tragedy that Lupin failed to reach Hadrian that year. Lupin was a kind man. He could have been—possibly should have been—a sweet, gentle friend to a Harry who could have existed in another universe.

As the world stood, Hadrian turned his bright, green eyes—nothing like James’—toward Lupin and
said that he’d heard his father was not interested in rocks. It was neither an encouraging tone of voice nor an inviting statement to continue from.

Lupin did not know what to say. The man was used to hiding inside himself when nervous. He did so now. Something about the room seemed oppressive. He felt like he was being judged and found wanting. He backed off and never could decide if, or how, to try again. The boy looked so much like his father when his head was bent over his work. But then he would look up. He would look up and his eyes would remind Lupin that this child was not James.

For Lupin, the event was crushing. All of those “what ifs” came to a head. Lupin wondered what would have happened if he had gotten to know Harry earlier. He wondered if he hadn’t let his own self-loathing consume him. He considered whether their relationship might have unfolded with care. It would have, most likely. Readers might realise it was monumental in the sense of how very differently things might have turned out had Lupin managed to connect with Hadrian.

Hadrian did not know what their brief encounter had done to Lupin. As far as he was aware, the man didn’t really care about him. The man had, after all, stayed far away for years. From Hadrian’s perspective, Lupin would simply do so again. And for Hadrian, abandonment was not a sign of someone who cared.

Lupin was, of course, hardly the only professor Hadrian viewed with suspicion. Hadrian’s view of McGonagall was nowhere near so terrible as his view of some of the other professors, but between his frayed nerves and heightened suspicions, a few of McGonagall’s words to Hermione were not well taken and she thus fell in Hadrian’s eyes.

Each of the children had received the options during their second year for their third year electives. Hadrian was pleased to enroll in classes like Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. He was tentatively enthusiastic about what Care of Magical Creatures might entail, but he wanted quite particular information on bodies to support his plans for his beloved rock-friends, and the course was clearly a more general one. And focused mostly on fleshly creatures besides. He had pondered the possibility of Divination because he had heard the class used crystals. But time was short and classes overlapped, so he had to choose. Between Arithmancy and Divination, there was no contest.

Hermione too had had to choose, unable to take all of the classes as might have been her first inclination. Little did she know that her head of house had, for the briefest moment, considered providing her with the time to do so. She had watched the child struggle that first year and flounder her second until she’d hit her stride alongside Hadrian and Millicent. McGonagall did not know how to feel about those three children’s friendship. It was too narrow, too focused, too exclusive for her tastes. Be that as it may, the three together were brilliant. They relied on one another, supporting one another.

McGonagall did not find that close, exclusive friendship entirely reassuring. She looked and took note of the infrequency with which Hermione sat in the common room. She saw how, when the child did, it was almost always alone and rarely without a book in her hands. Her bushy, brown hair would puff out and faintly crackle around her face when she read something particularly enthralling but she no longer tried to share her joy.

McGonagall’s discontent would have hardly mattered to Hadrian, except that McGonagall had once suggested to Hermione to try opening up to some of her fellow lions. Not all of them disdained study as her immediate year-mates did, after all, the woman had pointed out. The child’s hair had crackled angrily, even as Hermione’s face clearly tried to hide her surge of temper. Make friends with the children who had mocked, ignored or tried to use her for homework? Make friends with the older students, who would likely resent her for possessing the intelligence to do work on
the same level as they despite her younger years? No, she had gone through that in the non-magical world multiple times already. She would not do so again in the magical one.

The child said nothing of those thoughts though. She simply informed her head of house that she did not have the time to do so. There was too much to do and too little time to do it in. It was at that moment that McGonagall’s mind touched briefly on time-turners. But she shook off the nonsensical idea immediately. Who would give a child a time-turner? In another world, she might have. In particular, she might have if the child had spent weeks petrified, falling behind in her studies. Such an intelligence should not be wasted. But here, there were no momentous, calamitous events like petrifications, as much as such a thing would have fascinated Hadrian.

Instead, there was a child who looked doubtfully at adults and stuck close to her two friends. This child did not feel the need to attend every possible elective. She could simply choose, like everyone else.

Hermione was a child who loved and wanted to be loved. She was spitfire and consideration. She followed her friends into Ancient Runes over Care of Magical Creatures. Even if she had not been the things she was, she likely would have chosen the class anyhow. But then who knows? Counterfactuals can’t be proven.

For his part, Hadrian did not care for McGonagall suggesting that he and Millicent were insufficient, just as he had not cared for her comparisons between him and his father in the brief moments they had interacted outside of class.

For Hadrian, however, McGonagall’s greatest failure was in her lack of interest in providing her pride with boundaries. Hadrian found the idea that Hermione was staying in a tower with those twins distressing. The Weasley twins might have looked at a canary custard as good fun but Hadrian did not look kindly on non-consensual body transfiguration. By way of reparation for those custards, Hadrian had pilfered a certain bland-looking piece of parchment from the twins, though he remained uncertain why they seemed to value it so.

The ability of a madman to creep into the castle and the attack on Gryffindor tower only underlined Hadrian’s feelings that Hermione was in danger in Gryffindor tower. The slashed bedcurtains might not have been in Hermione’s own dorm, but the event was too close for Hadrian’s comfort. He did not like to think of either Millicent or Hermione so alone. They did not carry rocks in their pockets to care for them.

When Hadrian heard that the dementors who were “guarding” Hogwarts had invaded the Quidditch pitch during a match, he lost his already limited belief that the adults could be relied upon to protect or care for the children in their keeping.

The sense of needing something to constantly carry that could provide some protection—here Hadrian thought of the portkey that still hung around his neck—became even more pressing. Clearly, Hadrian felt, the castle was not as safe as the teachers often claimed. It had not passed Hadrian by that Flitwick only made the claim of safety with a scrunched face. Hadrian did not think the man entirely believed his own words of late.

Or, as Millicent pointed out, the castle itself was secure. It was the people who walked their bones that were not necessarily safe. Hadrian worried about what might happen to he and his friends when they were separated. He thought they might have a chance together. Separately, however, they only had eyes pointing in one direction. Even worse, there were often times when they had to walk in areas that had not had any protections placed. Hadrian had already seeded some hallways –
the ones on the way to their classroom - with carefully selected runes to encourage people to look away. The three friends’ pilfered classroom was taking on fortress-like levels of protections. Three determined, intelligent children can accomplish quite a bit when they have books and magic at their disposal.

When the headmaster next tried to talk to Hadrian, it was not a good moment to do so, not that the man knew that. For his part, the headmaster was immensely disappointed that Lupin and Harry hadn’t connected. It was particularly unsettling as the headmaster failed yet again to make an impact when he tried to speak to little Harry after the attack on Gryffindor tower. But then the Weasley child was attacked in Gryffindor tower. It was possible that the madman didn’t know that Harry was a Ravenclaw, but that supposition was a stretch. The attack was too targeted. Harry, apparently, had nothing to do with this just like he had had nothing to do with the philosopher’s stone or Lockhart’s crimes. Either way, the boy did not confide in the headmaster.

Hadrian did confide in Millicent. She nodded in response to the litany of concerns, considering as he spoke. Two weeks later, Millicent presented their group, hidden in a carefully warded, once-abandoned classroom, with a box of rounded, beaded stones from her parents. Blank beads, Millicent announced, that they could carve appropriately. They could, she said in her calm, staid tone, protect themselves. Hermione’s fingers sparked with excitement.

Overwhelmed, Hadrian felt like crying. He had spent too long in a primary school filled with mockery to actually allow himself to, but his watery expression said enough. Millicent nodded and spoke with Hermione while he collected himself, toying with a bead of turquoise and one of silver.

One bead for protection, another for activation. Over the remaining months of the year, the three grew loops of beads up their arms. A twist here, a clasp there, and you had sleeping powder for trolls. Another twist and pull, and a silver bead was enchanted to transform into a silver protection again potential werewolves in the halls after a certain lesson from the Potions professor in Defense.

Millicent’s straight-faced insistence on the inclusion of sunstone actually brought Hadrian down in stitches of laughter. She recalled his response to Quirrel from first year about vampires.

Most of the beads, however, served to protect the three from their fellow man. Certain loops, arranged just so, suggested people look elsewhere, consider going elsewhere. Another loop encouraged people to overlook the three friends. They weren’t, the runes suggested, important enough to notice.

Hadrian felt better knowing that Hermione walked the halls with a loop that made her difficult for a human mind to concentrate on, while beads for their own group made individual members easy to find.

It was nice to have an arsenal on their wrists just in case. But it was better to avoid the problems to begin with.

Stones were wonderful in their ability to retain or even empower enchantments placed upon them.

Increasingly, people approaching the three friends found themselves remembering homework that needed to be done and tasks put aside that must be completed even before they hit the inner wardlines underlining the strong suggestion that the children at this particular library table were really quite boring and not worth any further consideration. As the three began to experiment with
warding entire abandoned classrooms, instead of just a library table, they also began to experiment with potency. For those people who wandered across the trio’s ward-lines often, it became hard to even think about the three friends without remembering something significantly more interesting.

It must be noted that some of the consequences of their actions were entirely unintended by the three experimenting youths. Of the three, only Millicent had been raised in the magical world and was partly aware that it was possible to permanently alter someone’s mind via magic; though what Millicent might have known of such a topic was that powerful curses did such things, not simple runic wards asking for something so innocent as peace and quiet.

They did not think about how, eventually, some of their classmates might simply find it hard to even remember that they had three introverted classmates whose friendship crossed house boundaries.

Again, Hadrian and Millicent—and now Hermione—failed to keep track of the minutiae of school gossip. Hermione distantly knew about a pet rat gone missing because one of her housemates bemoaned and bewailed his pet’s possible fate just like Millicent was aware that Daphne had long since gotten a kneazle (its fur got all over her robes). Hadrian knew that there were other people who slept in his room but likely would not be able to remember their names. He had long since warded his bed so heavily that the other students in the room had a hard time remembering that he even slept there.

That said, even if they had listened, they would hardly have heard about a certain dog killing a certain rat. Dogs preyed upon rats, after all. It was hardly a remarkable thing. No one but the dog in question knew anything about that matter until much, much later.

Who knows what Hadrian would have thought had the issue come to his attention. Summer came soon enough without his rock-friends gaining forms, but the three had made promising strides. Hadrian felt somewhat secure knowing that they were doing their best to protect themselves and could turn to creation. He couldn’t have known at that moment how much Hogwarts would play a role in the shape that turn took.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to those of you leaving comments. I promise, I respond eventually. Usually when I manage to move past my confusion that _real_ people actually read what I write. Sometimes.

Thanks for being awesome.

(The guy behind the counter in this cafe just wished someone a "lovely day." The way the person drew on the word "lovely" sounded like they wanted to keep the sound in their mouth and savor it.)
Of Sapience and Libraries

Chapter Summary

That in which Being is given form and diaries start to smoke. There might also be references to libraries.

Chapter Notes

As usual, my continued thanks to Tazzm. Particularly as they shaped parts of this chapter with off-hand comments and fixed some rather important details.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In later years, if one was able to figure out just how to catch Hermione’s attention without getting trapped in Millicent’s glares - which of course could only happen after having gotten around Hadrian’s suspicions - then Hermione might have been willing to explain that she believed part of the challenge of supporting a society that emphasized equity amongst its members was that different Beings are just that – different. What one Being needs or desires can be completely different to what another does, even within the same species. Magical society being as prejudiced as it was in their time, it isn’t likely that anyone would have had the chance, or inclination, to ask other Beings about such things. But, if one had asked Hermione, she would have pointed out that a castle does not think like homo sapiens, and a gargoyle does not ponder in the same way a sphinx tends to. Nonetheless, even as expressions of sapience differ, those differences do not mean that the Beings involved do not deserve rights and respect.

Such thinking also raises questions about bodily transformations. If different Beings think, ponder, and consider differently, then what does transfiguration mean to other species? Witches and Wizards know that homo sapiens achieving their Animagi shapes frequently have difficulties reconciling the differences between the two forms; difficulties borne of having spent a life on two legs and all the other things that are uniquely human, before completing the transformation for the first time and abruptly having four legs or no legs; of having fur or scales or feathers. Many animals’ senses are much keener than a human’s. Despite the vast difference in shape, though, an Animagi retains its sentience; its Being status. Reconciling the loss of an eagle’s keen sight to human vision might well make one feel blind after changing back for the first time, but that reconciliation is part of the process. Once the alternate form is achieved, the new shape and its sense experienced, then the human will never really be entirely just-human again. Some of the animal-shape’s senses or traits carry over to the human form, just as the human form’s sentience carries over to the animal shape.

That knowledge, in turn, raises concerns about what forced transformations can do to the capacity of different forms of sentience and sapience. If, say, someone human then spends a few decades as a book, are they still human at all? A book cannot move about or really express itself. What of a rock that becomes a manticore? Ordinary stones do not ordinarily possess sentience; has the change
into a manticore granted it a degree of said? If so, is that taken away if the transformation is reversed?

Each and all of those questions were part of the reason Hermione would be very forceful on the idea of all Beings being equally worthy of respect regardless of form. For Hermione, that point became among the most important, life-defining truths of her existence. And, as that point became part of her core tenets, it mattered greatly to Hadrian and Millicent as well.

While we are not our friends, our friends are part of our identities. One could argue that friendships transfigure us. Hadrian, had he not met Millicent, would likely have failed to consider homo sapiens as potentially valuable. He might have become the equivalent of a mole-person or ended up joining the Goblin Unions as more than an honorary member. Had Hadrian not met Hermione, he might never have tried to change the world around him. He probably would have unintentionally, managing to find a portal at the center of the world or some such. Readers might know Hadrian’s luck to be like that.

On Hermione’s side, she would have changed her society in some way regardless. There is hardly a permutation of her existence in which she could have let the world be. The world, in Hermione’s opinion, was not nearly as good as it could be. There was much room for improvement. She would have changed the world differently; perhaps been more focused on non-Magical human’s rights. As it was, her friends shaped her perception of social concerns.

And Hadrian, after third year, viewed Hermione’s problems as his own. Millicent felt similarly, although here again, there were some vital differences. Millicent, although she wouldn't say anything for years yet, was developing quite the crush.

Hogwarts, for its own part, greatly appreciated Hermione’s growing insistence on showing all possible Beings respect.

Look at her response to house elves. The child initially failed to understand that their problems did not directly reflect her own family history, even as she was willing to understand their sapience and respect their Beinghood. Hogwarts had watched as Millicent, ever the rock, had stopped her from skittering ahead without consideration. A hand on the wrist, a shake of the head, a demand that Hermione consider and speak with the Beings before charging ahead with what she believed she knew. Hermione had not earned the right to speak for the group she was not part of and had barely met.

That was Millicent – she who watched and stared and only moved when she was confident. Solid, sturdy, immovable in her beliefs; she was a veritable feast of fascination for a castle who spent its time watching. Millicent, who took a map from their walls and stared at it until finally drawing a very precise circle of runes around it and staring longer. Millicent would have used the word “studying”. Millicent did use that word when Hermione and Hadrian asked.

Millicent used it again to announce, as she handed Hermione a certain map, to announce that she’d “studied this” and then announced “I solemnly swear I am up to no good.” Hermione shone with delight as a partial map of Hogwarts’ own bones spread out in front of her. (Not that Hermione thought of them as ‘bones’ at that time.) At that moment, Hermione had believed that the map might be a key to finding a way to communicate with the castle. It wasn’t.

The moment still wasn’t then. Although the map did figure into later conversations.

The castle thought that Millicent might be the most castle-like of the children.

But it was Hadrian that raised some slight concerns, as he seemed to want to figure out how to walk
through stone walls and began to consider more than the elemental composition of the walls. It was Hadrian who began to wonder what it meant to add to the castle; the way he and Millicent has added to it by secreting the strange book in the wall.

The castle had decided to pull the children in, yes. But Hogwarts was a castle, a very different Being to a human. They did, in all of their decisions, move at the pace of a castle and had not quite determined what they wanted to do with the children once it had them. Readers might do well to consider the castle a grander form of Millicent, who pondered, thought, considered and reflected before acting, where most people might only think before doing so.

The children ended up providing their own answer to Hogwarts’ considerations and were pulled in the faster for it.

The answer, Readers will be unsurprised to learn, was in the idea of a Library. Not a real library, bear in mind, but the rather vague conceptualisation of one.

This was the children’s fourth year in the hallowed halls of Hogwarts. This was a year in which the children spent more time working with Hadrian’s four stones. They began careful transfigurations of little Ignatius, the most impatient of Hadrian’s brood to take on a form they could manipulate for themselves. The fiery stone wanted its form.

An understanding of stone, an ability to transfigure, a penchant for charms, an ability to comprehend the ties between object and sentience. It would never have worked without each child’s individual but still overlapping and complementary skills. To properly permanently and transfigure Ignatius, the Being needed a shape that reflected itself down to its components.

There are reasons why most magical peoples never succeed in creating fully sentient and independent gargoyles.

Across the beginning of the year, Hadrian could transfigure little Ignatius into form after form, even get the form to stabilize. Ignatius experienced moments as a dragon, a centaur, a naga, a manticore and many other creatures.

Millicent could charm them for movement. In their trials and experiments, Ignatius found they liked being a manticore. They liked having claws and a face that crossed the line between lion and human while its bat wings stretched and flexed with almost-the-ability to fly. Ignatius stalked and pounced and gambolled about. (Ignatius was rather cute, Hermione thought, scurrying about like a kitten getting used to its body. In many ways that was exactly what was happening.) They liked having a throat that could swallow. And they despised the feeling of the magic wearing off and its clawed paws going still.

To make those changes - particularly those abilities - permanent required an understanding of body and brain working in concert with substance and form. The three friends worked together on a careful, large array that spoke to the combination and consideration between the various levels of existence.

The three spent ages between Hogwarts’ library and their fortress of a once-abandoned classroom. They read and researched and experimented, as cautious Aquila stretched their wings for the first time as an eagle.

Blinking in the bright sunlight between sessions, trying to make their way to the library one day, the three found themselves caught off-guard by the arrival of dozens of extra students. Students who, Millicent informed the other two with bemusement, appeared to be from other schools. They had, Millicent learnt, missed the arrival of the carriage and ship bearing these newcomers, though
no-one from Hogwarts had missed them in turn, bar Flitwick who had hardly expected their presence in the first place, and thus had been unsurprised at their absences. Something, he felt, needed to be done to draw those children back into the fold.

The extra students flooded the halls and crowded the library. And, to make matters stranger, there was a new defense professor with a roving eye who seemed constantly on the brink of seeing them.

Millicent wondered if he did truly see them, or if he saw the waves of magic that surrounded them and redirected attention. She rather felt the latter, but refused to write off the possibility of the former. In class he claimed the students needed and should practice “Constant Vigilance!” She didn’t disagree, precisely, though she thought perhaps he took it slightly too far. Millicent took to unravelling this professor's use of magic, just as she had since the golden professor. That one had unknowingly provided her an excellent template for picking charms apart in her head. A spell on her eyes, her bracelet of charms arranged just so and preferably Aquila in her pocket, and Millicent found she could see quite a bit.

It was unbalancing but wonderful.

The extra students in the library were not wonderful. They were exasperating and rather in the way.

Hermione wondered if there wasn’t a different library they could eventually visit. A place beyond Hogwarts for over the winter break. She asked Millicent, who of their group naturally knew the most about the magical world beyond Hogwarts.

The answer she got did not please her. Perhaps it was good that at that moment her hand happened to be on top of a certain book. A certain diary. It smoked.

“There isn't one.” Millicent had told an irate Hermione. Millicent had seen references to great libraries of the past in books she had read, but as far as she knew they were gone, with no chance of recovery.

This answer devastated Hermione and rather appalled Hadrian. The implications were horrifying. Libraries full of knowledge just lost. She felt a burn behind her eyes and her throat felt as though it were afire. For the first time, Hermione wondered what else might have vanished during the wars. But at that time, for Hermione, the knowledge was a devastating surprise. Hermione had spent so much time trying to find her footing and protect herself and her friends that she hadn’t fully considered the shape of the world around her. She hadn’t thought about how few jobs there were. She hadn’t fully contemplated the limitations of a war-torn, devastated society that struggled with its own rebuilding. She was a child. She had yet to learn what she needed to look for.

Yet we must all grow up eventually. We must all learn to look and see what is truly there, instead of childhood illusions. Hermione was starting to look.

And she did not like what she saw.

For Hadrian, Millicent’s unintentional revelations seemed to fit. He’d already considered the entire world around them as a violent, dangerous place. He loved it, but there were very few people he considered in any way safe. Of course the humans in it would have torn at the foundations of their own society. Of course they would try and hoard knowledge in private libraries.

Hermione, a mess of teenage emotions and hormones and righteous indignation, caught fire. Drops of sparkling electricity started dripping down her face like tears, singing holes in her robes where
they landed on the fabric. The book’s pages began to curl and scream underneath her hand. Millicent took Hermione’s hands in her own, and the crackling magic seemed to wrap around her wrists rather than burn. The book stopped smouldering. Hadrian’s eyebrows rose in startled surprise.

At least the book hadn’t burned. But it had screamed. They had known that the book was something like Petrus or Aquila. Sentience in an inanimate object. They knew that. But this, this was not calming. Petrus had never screamed. But then Petrus had never burned in Hadrian’s palm. The small, jerking form – primitive, somewhat unstable, but still more mobile than it had originally had - that Ignatius inhabited nosed the book.

Millicent eyed the book askance. The book, which Millicent couldn’t seem to look at in any way except but askance (even if it felt less … absorbing … than it did those years ago when first Hadrian snatched it). But Hermione was using it to examine the differences in sentience between seemingly inanimate objects. She’d wanted to study it to better understand Beings. She’d found records of a Tom Riddle in the school. He’d been a student, they knew that. And they knew that he must have used this blank book constantly for it to be so very much on the verge of Being. Yet it was blank. There was nothing written in its pages.

Millicent continued eyeing it, distressed. At some point during its time inside the wall, it had stopped sucking at the magic and being-ness of those around it quite so actively, but it did still pull and it so very much wanted to be, but was not enough of something to be so.

The children stared, distracted from the lack of libraries to look at the book in contemplation. Hermione wanted to continue poking and examining. Millicent felt hesitant to let her do so, as surely a book that could scream – could feel pain in some way – could be a danger. Hadrian felt everything would be better if they petrified it. (Many dangerous things, Hadrian would come to feel, would be better if petrified. Stone improved nearly all things, after all.)

In this particular case, Hadrian and Millicent though, why not? There would be no further danger of immolation - or at least much less, as Hermione had yet to burn that brightly - and little concern that Hermione would be drawn to write in the thing. Hermione claimed there wasn’t really a concern about that to begin with. She hadn’t written in it so far, had she? Either way, Hadrian and Millicent preferred her safe. They remembered what the book had been like when they first encountered it, even if they didn’t know why it wasn’t like that anymore. Hermione had not been a part of their group then. She had never been around the thing before they had stowed it in Hogwarts’ walls.

But anyway, what was the point of letting the book remain as delicate paper when they could have sure stone instead? Stone was just so much more wonderful.

Hadrian would be proud of the results. He had managed to tweak the petrification potion he used to change the book - with its shabby black cover and slightly-weathered paper - into a rather lovely form made of serpentinite. This made the diary varying shades of green, and of course rendered it into stone. Riddle had been a Slytherin and Hadrian felt the choice of stone would be appreciated. Millicent was bemused and Hermione pleased that she could continue her study, slowly feeding the stone book, charting any changes and differences.

Hermione’s delight with the progress they were making with their gargoyles and their private studies did not, however, address the social issues at hand. Now, the question of the future loomed large. Now, with the O.W.Ls next year, and if she had heard correctly, a career meeting with her head of house some time then too, combined with the current presence of students from different ethno-cultural groups made her think about both the present and the future outside of her current
classes and projects. This would not last, she concluded. The bubble that they lived in could not last.

For Hermione, this was significantly more terrifying than anything that had distressed Hadrian the previous year. They might have shared concerns, but they felt differently. Those problems were ones she could research and do something relatively concrete about. These issues were necessarily unending. They were her life. All of those problems about inequality and social violence that Hadrian already viewed as concerns suddenly became very, very present and real for Hermione.

In other worlds, where Hermione didn’t have first a bubble of indifference and then the security of friendship before a chain of all-but-invisibility, Hermione would have learned about some of those problems much, much earlier. Those problems were hardly hidden in the folds of social discourse but rather sat directly on the surface. A certain silver-haired peer of Millicent’s made those issues difficult to ignore, with his continued nepotistic, classist, and species-ist statements. His voice was hardly quiet nor his opinions subtle. The fact that he could state his opinions so very openly with so little fear of repercussions was in and of itself a rather blatant sign.

Hadrian stole the child’s quills, transfigured them enough to remove the clear peacock insignia, and left them in the common quill jar. He was rather proud of the permanence he could now achieve with his transfigurations, even if his non-stone based work was hardly as elegant. Petrus was trying out a rather stunning sphinx form in his pocket that day and Hadrian felt rather pleased with the lines he’d managed. Petrus, in turn, was feeling rather content.

Here is a moment where it mattered that there were three good friends involved, each of whom talked with the others and each of whom brought their own views to the table. Because here, as Hermione expressed her concerns and wailed her fears, while Hadrian expressed his intent to do something with stone - he wanted to explore the bedrock of the British Isles - Millicent listened. She heard and she thought.

And here, under Hogwarts’ observation, Millicent suggested that, perhaps, they could build a Library of their own. It they did it right, Millicent pointed out, the existence of a substantial, public Witching Library could change the entire fabric of the Magical community across the Isles. Theoretically, Millicent pointed out, magical power was supposed to be the determining factor of respect and control in the magical world. Yet, with the structure of the government and efforts of the old families to maintain control, the system effectively repressed most magical children.

The school system taught just enough to channel children’s magic away from self-destruction or an outburst that might reveal the magical world to muggles, and it trained them in accepting the status quo.

After Hogwarts, however, without much access to magical texts or safe spaces for experimentation, most children would find themselves in boring jobs just to make ends meet, without any thought for the sheer inventiveness of magic.

If the three of them built a public library then they could effectively challenge the entire system.

Millicent was fourteen.

She was a child. Brilliant, but a child. Her points were solid enough, but the simple plan of “build a library” almost entirely impossible. She would learn that later and have to rewrite her plan to span decades. It is not a simple thing to build, stock, and fund an entire public library. But, as Readers know, the three would manage.

But - at that moment - more important than the basic idea was that Millicent’s plan inspired
Hermione and pointed Hadrian in a direction more precise than a vague notion of “down into the earth.”

And, more importantly, Millicent’s speech combined with Hadrian’s agreement and Hermione’s enthusiasm led Hogwarts to at last choose a definitive course.

Hogwarts, as the Reader knows, observed all those bubbling feelings and flailings for years. They watched and considered, looking at those three children and how they moved. Hogwarts thought slowly, considered ponderously, and moved deliberately. But, even for a slow, solid Being, there were tipping points. For Hogwarts, the dementors featured among those points. These interesting children, the castle considered, were likely to be short lived. They were but mortals and mortals did have a tendency to perish after limited, often repetitive, lives.

Yet, short-lived Beings could also be fascinating. Short-lived Beings could be family. And Hogwarts, considering the potential deaths of all the children as represented by the dementors that the castle despised having within the confines of themself, pondered the possibility of actually reaching these children, working with the three small Beings who were constantly dripping through their halls and spreading magic in their bones.

Here is where Hogwarts determined it would engage more directly with these children. But, in what capacity and to what extent?

Part of that consideration was absolutely self-serving, although a castle’s version of such does not reflect a homo sapiens’. For the castle, the more the children worked, the better they tasted. The more the children learned and scrawled runic arrays across the castle floors, the more the children channeled their magics into the castle.

Hermione was particularly prone to providing sustenance with the way she sparked and leaked. The castle could, it considered, provide oblique hints on their different projects, encouraging to reach even deeper into themselves, strengthen their connection with the Great Wellspring, and leak more.

But there was Hermione, insisting that the three should find a way to talk with Hogwarts. She was convinced it could be done, even if it wasn't quite possible to use common speech. It considered and found an answer.

That winter, just after Yule, the children managed to lay out a rather impressive array along the floor of a new room. Their usual space was too covered with cauldrons of petrification potions and experimental arrays to give them the space.

In this new room, Hadrian carved out privacy and exclusion into the doorframes and along the walls while Millicent and Hermione banished the furniture to a store room and sterilized the room completely. Clean stone all around with the exception of the door. Hadrian transfigured it perfectly flat. The three then laid out a rather beautiful, circled and knotted pattern in colored sand along the stone. Hadrian nervously set little Ignatius in the centre and stood back. The three, in a careful triangle, then re-sang the stone’s entire existence.

Music is rather phenomenal for channelling magic when a pointed stick won’t achieve the necessary complex delicacy. It requires an ability to pitch almost perfectly, meaning the spells have to match the specific voice and are very difficult to pass on.
Their success would leave Millicent asleep for a day, Hadrian with the first feelings of magical exhaustion he’d ever experience, and Hermione slumped at the side of the room, and Ignatius who, for the first time in their existence, could fully control articulated limbs.

The hesitancy and clumsiness of the toy-charms was gone. The tiny stone manticore, no larger than the rock had been, leaped and pounced in the sand, creating puffs of displaced silicate. And, for the first time, their wings actually enabled it to fly. Their body was at last their own, not merely a charmed bit of rock. They fluttered about with all the enthusiasm of the newborn they were.

After that day, however, there was a mobile Ignatius who had been and was still a sentient, sapient, rock. It might now have a mouth and a tiny roar. It might have a throat and be able to learn some human speech. But what it had had, and still had, due to its existence as a rock, was the ability to commune with other rocks. There had been long moments of checking in with Petrus and Aquila. There had been a fascination with the early development of Marble’s curiosity.

And then there was the large, watchful consideration of the castle. A castle that wanted Ignatius, now so full of mobile life, to lead the children on a merry chase through their bones and toward their mouth.

Once upon a time and long ago, someone had built and enchanted the walls in a glittering mosaic of millions of tiny stones. That someone, who Hogwarts remembered fondly, had spent a life on the monumental achievement. A single life of blood, sweat, and tears, all of which Hogwarts happily consumed as they watched and spoke. That person had taught Hogwarts to speak with other people, imparting comments on word and form in combination.

Once, the castle had a face with a mouth that did not speak well in the human tongue. For the human, the experience was like getting cryptic riddles in response to simple questions. Ask if the student body was healthy, receive a response about what health amount to in the grand scheme of life. For Hogwarts, the answers did not limit themselves to the confines of human language. What, after all, did health mean for the students? Did homesickness count, did the broken toe that was now fixed but held a residual ache? These children wanted comfort, but did not necessarily need it.

And then there was Headmaster Sylvine. That Headmaster sat and theorised with the castle’s small face and then grew frustrated. They determined that “something must be done” and set out to do it. Sylvine consulted with Beings following multiple walks about the nature and truth of communication. It was a goblin who snidely told an attentive Sylvine that “stone sees things. You need a way to see in order to speak” and Sylvine felt the light on their face and the inspiration in their knees.

They negotiated for years with the goblin communities until finally, the community designated a goblin for the task. The old, slow goblin arrived in Hogwarts through the Goblin’s tunnels and would spend the rest of their life speaking with the castle and setting out a room for the purpose. Built within the ward room, the goblin constructed the communications room. They cast tiny shards of glass and carved little pieces of stone. Headmaster Sylvine brought sacks and sacks of mineral stones and semi-precious metals. And they bled for the castle, telling the castle about themselves and giving the castle their magic that they might grow their own.

Sylvine cried long and joyfully when the first, small, fluttering flock of mosaic pieces formed a pattern the Goblin had not set into the wall.

This was the room, long disused, that the children chased Ignatius to. It was into this room that the children stumbled, afraid and overwhelmed, clutching one another’s hand as they watched as those millions of stones swirled like an impossible flock of birds.
The pieces settled in a series of images of what appeared to be a small group of three gathered—one in blue, one red, and one green—around the basin in the centre. In the image, the green one slit their thumb with a knife, the blue one let three, bloody drops fall into a carved basin, and the red one healed the slice in their thumb.

Millicent licked her lips to taste the rainbow in the air, a concentration of the attention that usually followed them. Hadrian was running his fingers along the edges or the images, all but crooning to wall. Telling them that someone had done some excellent work. Millicent was frowning at the basin, following the text around the lip.

An identical basin, carved—as Hadrian would later point out—from old basalt rock with the four founders' animals, in the centre of the room.

As Hermione was now wont to do when she wondered, she turned to Millicent. She turned and she asked all her questions and received hesitant responses. Millicent simply did not know for certain. She knew that her mother demanded she add a drop of blood to the family’s hearthstone. She knew that the house-elves sometimes muttered things about the humans forgetting, usually when working with changing a room. But she didn’t know the whys and the wherefores.

Hermione enjoyed the quiet perusal. She liked Millicent’s slow smiles when she exclaimed over things. She enjoyed Millicent’s considered responses, the pauses as she thought through her answers. She liked that Millicent seemed inclined to take care of the people she cared for.

That support, that concern, gave her space to think sit there and think about what it must be like to build a place like this. She could feel Hogwarts’ attention, waiting. Perhaps considering. Hermione wanted to ask what Hogwarts wanted, but she supposed the answer was already there on the wall.

“Are we going to?” Hadrian asked, looking at his friends in expectation.

Hermione smiled. The air in the room felt charged, like Hogwarts was waiting. Hermione felt the hairs raise on her arms and she desperately wanted to know what would happen. Surely, as Millicent had pointed out, Hogwarts would only want the best for them. Surely, donating three drops of blood to the school wouldn’t be a problem. Surely, they would be safe. They’d examined the basin and looked again.

Millicent just looked at the two steadily and suggested Hadrian check it himself. Better to be in accord before anything went wrong.

The hubris of the situation was incredible. Three, brilliant students were trying to play with ancient spells no one had touched in more than 200 years. They had no guides and were asking no advice except that of an old Being who ate magic and magical blood, who loved them in part because they liked the children’s taste.

They were checking, certainly, but they were still children who didn't know the range of possible magical traps to look for.

They were lucky between the three of them that Millicent was right. Hogwarts was, in and of themself, safe for the children. It was the other Beings, as Hadrian had long suspected, who weren't. The parts of Hogwarts, however, the pieces of its body, it would have rendered safe or shut off before the children could have touched them.

The children did not hesitate long. They would later understand that their checks barely scratched the surface of possible explorations. They were too used to their own success, still high off Ignatius’ new Being and form.
They dropped their blood freely into the prepared basin.

There was a series of noises, like words but a bit too deep. There was a grind that seemed like a sigh, gusting through the castle from a long-unused oesophagus that none alive (and fleshly) had even known existed.

It was from here that Hogwarts would take the three children in hand, under their wing and protection, with the intention of turning them into architects who might one day, hopefully, create new kin for Hogwarts to speak with.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sitting in a cafe and I happened to look up. And by up, I mean at the ceiling. There is a green blob thing up there. It looks like a clump of silly-string. I'm so confused at the moment. Maybe three cups of coffee are having an effect?
Of Tales and Riddles

Chapter Summary

It is time, readers, to come to the Riddle within this tale.

Chapter Notes

My apologizes for the long hiatus. I moved.

My ongoing thanks to Tazzm for beta-ing this chapter. Note that any mistakes are mine as I went and changed a couple sentences after they sent it to me. Oi. Hopefully no one will notice a thing.

Note that Tazzm fixed my grammar in early October (2019) and I got distracted ... in that I dreamt I fixed things without doing so. My apologizes for the delay.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It is time, readers, to come to the Riddle within this tale.

And readers, please do believe me when I tell you I have been striving not to make that obvious joke for months; but alas, I am weak-willed at the end and cannot resist a bit of levity.

For, even if I have made a small joke of the man’s surname, the man’s actions and part of this tale are very serious indeed. Part of the fascinating challenge of history is that one knows what the end of the journey is – given that one tends to be living it presently - but may not know the path taken to get there, or the reasons for the paths taken. The progress between “A” and “B” is so often lost to the hungry, ever-restless sands of time as they continue to flow on, inexorable as the tides.

To understand Riddle’s role in this entire story, to see how the three friends eventually become four, to comprehend how disgust and distrust could morph into affection, one needs to unravel the background of just who those young people were when they truly encountered Riddle for the first time instead of sharing an orbit now and again. In short, you needed the previous chapters of this tale.

We needed to know that Hermione believed Beings should have a say in their own destinies. We needed a Hadrian who thought stone was more interesting than flesh but was willing to give non-stone Beings a chance in part because of Hermione. And we needed a Millicent who took ideals and dreams and asked why shouldn’t they be achieved. And we needed a group of three who had gargoyles on the brain as another set-of-three rather delighted young, stone Beings cavorted around them.

This all matters because if we hadn’t had those specific children, then it’s unlikely we would have had - years later - a Hermione and Millicent who habitually sat cosily around a table while Hadrian
spread out on floor cushions. The three would think and talk together, with Hermione considering aloud as the other two inserted considerations. Their conclusions were theirs as a group, rarely belonging to one or the other of them alone.

By then, if Riddle should be present, it would be habit for Hermione to glance at him bemusedly, a slight smile on her face even as she wondered what he had been up to. It would be common for Millicent to shake her head slightly at him and for Hadrian to eye him critically before turning back to his books of cartography.

A couple of decades later and Riddle’s appearance would prompt a few nods and smooth integration as Hermione demanded backup and Millicent presented counter proposals. By then, Millicent would argue with Hermione while her thumb swept across Hermione’s wrist. Riddle would look at Hadrian out of the corner of his eye as Hermione caught him up on the newest and latest, sweeping giant diagrams of chalk across their slate table with flicks of her wand.

But before that, before the slate and the cushions, there was a diary of paper. There was a diary of paper that spent months soaking in a cauldron of petrification potion brewed from carefully enchanted ingredients. The resulting stone book was a lovely piece of green serpentinite with streaks of gold. Hadrian had picked the stone with a grin. The choice of stone and the color it would be, as the reader knows, wasn’t a coincidence.

Those children knew, after all, who Riddle was. Hogwarts had told them. Hogwarts had painted pictures of his years in the school across their cavernous mouth in pieces of stone mosaic.

Riddle had, once upon a time, been a frightened little boy. That terror, first of hunger and then of fire and bombs, inspired him to cruelty. It was what he knew from infancy and he was far from self-reflective enough to become something he’d never seen an example of. So, he had become cruel and eventually conniving, precisely as he’d learned to be in order to not only survive, but thrive in his world.

Lacking other examples, that cruelty grew as he did. Riddle, like Hadrian and Hermione, entered a magical world that was violent and unforgiving. He had, for a brief moment, been a shy, hopeful, cruel child who had believed that the world would be better on this side. It was not. He met no smooth assistance, he received no help. He did not have another child demand to be his friend. It did not occur to him to try to be anyone else’s friend.

Instead, every part of the Riddle that once was had been was belittled and derided.

Perhaps if Riddle hadn't been such a sensitive child. Maybe if he hadn't cared about his peers’ taunts and behaviours so much, or if he'd cared differently, then his life and choices would have been different.

As the world stood, he wanted to be liked, to be special. Sadly, nothing in his circumstances suggested to him that such a thing was possible. He had thought he was special, at the orphanage, because he alone had the power he did; only to learn that there was an entire world full of others
like him – witches and wizards.

Alas, most children are simply children. Each one is special, but not more than the others. They are sometimes thoughtlessly cruel without realising they are being so, and they are sometimes beacons of kindness. Riddle, as readers may know, did not experience any of the latter during his formative years.

And so it was that Riddle had been raised with violence; against both his physical body and against his emotions. In some pit of his childish mind he reached for the only tool he knew – his magic - and determined that the world was too horrible to continue as it was. He decided he would destroy it from the inside out. Humans, whether magical or mundane, were disgusting, despicable, heartless, violent creatures.

Perhaps, in that, the child Riddle was more human than any of them. Even though he would have sought it through great violence, he wished for there not to be any more violence among humans. It is a twisted logic, perhaps, but the young Riddle was somewhat twisted.

But then, still in school, Riddle had found a friend in a snake too large to fit in his pocket. In the grip of his anger and hatred, he hatched a terrible plan, which he painted on the wall, threatening the school. And then he forgot about that plan, falling prey to kinder thoughts as he finally got to interact with another Being who was kind. He liked sitting on Sachashkia’s coils and talking with her about theory. She was the only one who ever entertained his ideas seriously. And she was trapped.

Instead of planning the world’s demise, Riddle plotted with his only friend, determined to help her out of her confinement. Briefly, the two planned. Briefly, they forgot the world around them. And she, being nothing less than what she was, looked at another human only to have that human die.

It was one thing to know his serpentine friend was a creature - a Basilisk - who could kill with her mere gaze; and quite another to witness that happen firsthand when he himself had come to no harm at her coils. Terrified, Riddle returned Sachashkia to hibernation. He thought haphazardly that he had to save both her and himself from discovery – from destructive retribution.

That night, he had cried for the girl who died and for his scaly friend who had only briefly become a bright part of his life. And he cried for the fact he had been foolish enough to allow himself to dream of sweet things.

All this, Hogwarts relayed in great, sweeping images across its walls.

But there was more to this story that Hogwarts was never fully aware of.

These parts, the children would still speculate about five decades later. It went as follows:

Once upon a time, Riddle had looked at that unintended death - so abrupt, so unavoidable, so final - and felt a heretofore unknown terror about his own eventual demise. He tried to tear that fear, along with concern, compassion, and friendship, out of his very self. He poured all of those emotions into the most precious possession he’d had at hand. Granted, it was also one of the only possessions he’d had.
With that outpouring, he'd rent himself in two in the hopes of living for even a day without fear shadowing his steps, haunting his dreams, suffusing his every breath, and informing his every action. The half of him that was composed of skin and bone, muscle and sinew, had never quite fully felt affection - or almost anything else - ever again. With his emotions thus blunted, he had eventually, unthinkingly, gone on a quest to feel anything at all. Even fear. He hadn’t met with success no matter how hard he strove.

Unable to fulfil the goal of fully feeling something – anything - since he had shorn himself of the ‘weak’ emotions – he turned back to his determination to cleanse the world of humanity instead.

The other half of Riddle - the half that remembered a friendship with a snake, who remembered happiness - slept and then slept some more inside the pages of an innocent-looking old journal. Sometime they dreamt, but mostly there was nothing at all.

The nothing was not, of course, actually nothing. Instead, for the first time in one-half-of-Riddle's life, they slept without fear.

The other half of the person who had once-been-Tom-Riddle carried on with Tom’s face but started building a life under a different name. That name would, of course, become known to almost the entire community, with a shudder of terror accompanying it.

Those who heard that new name knew him as a radical, unreasonable, homicidal, sadist of absurdly extremist proportions. Some approved of those extremes and others didn’t. Lily Evans certainly had not.

Not many still breathing remembered the sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle who smiled and managed to appeal to almost everyone even as he secretly despised them for being human.

For those who did remember Tom Riddle’s face or name, they thought maybe he had vanished years before after a short stint in an antique shop. Or possibly a junk shop? Most weren’t sure which. Most hadn’t felt that the employee at whatever store it was had been worth remembering. Shop clerks are rarely thought of as being worth remembering.

There were a couple of people who remembered Tom Riddle with fleeting fondness. Those people were remembering the school boy, who had seemed quite nice but never seemed to have any friends. Tom Riddle was simply not memorable enough for more.

That lack of recollection was likely for the best as most of Tom Riddle hadn’t really made it into that shop and even less made it out. The flesh Riddle, after all, kept cutting himself to pieces without giving himself time to repair.

His actions were childish, ill informed, and rather stupid when it came down to it. But they stemmed from mistakes that Tom Riddle was not alone in perpetrating: trusting a book.

Many people sorely misjudge the veracity of the printed word. People seem to think that the act of writing down information - particularly if presented in the form of a well-bound book – somehow compels truthfulness and honesty.
But, as readers hopefully realise, it does not. Humans are not so trustworthy.

People end up lying, in print and with words, in part because people frequently don’t know the whole truth. They often think they do and impart their knowledge as if they do. But they don’t.

Hogwarts was vaguely aware of the problem as they knew about the books within their bones. They were aware that the little humans often placed great value on those volumes, using them to convey ideas and information about all manner of things. Humans were short-lived, after all, and needed more reliable record keepers than their own memories.

But Hogwarts had never read a book. Hogwarts had never had to attempt to separate truth from lies in written form; had never even therefore considered the whys and wherefores of such matters or how they might impact and shape a young person who did not trust his fellow human at all, but placed great trust in the words he read.

Hogwarts’ inability to comprehend this owed in part to the fact that Hogwarts did not have any direct interaction with Riddle, and in part because, being a castle, Hogwarts could not fully understand the fleshly Riddle. Hogwarts knew that Riddle had torn themselves to pieces and even knew that the flesh part of them had worked in a shop. The humans in their bones had spoken frequently on the issue.

But Hogwarts did not know why Riddle had done it. The castle was just too different in so many fundamental ways to the small, short-lived, fleshy beings that inhabited it.

Hogwarts did not, could not, know about the things Riddle read. Hogwarts knew that Riddle had been a voracious reader. What Hogwarts did not know was that Riddle was a very great believer in the written word. And Hogwarts did not know that one author Riddle came across, and wholeheartedly believed, as he plumed the dusty corners of Hogwarts’ massive library was Waldo the Deathless’ book on immortality. It had been a very well-presented book.

It should be noted that Waldo the Deathless’ moniker was not one bestowed upon him for his deeds or misdeeds. Rather, Waldo had bestowed “the Deathless” on himself as a young boy. Waldo gave himself this name when he became obsessed with death, at the passing of his much-loved pet flamingo. Young Waldo, with all the wisdom of his eleven years, had determined that he would never do the same. He swore that he would be deathless. He just, at that time, didn’t know how.

But Waldo found himself lucky. The year following, when Waldo was proudly twelve, he had ‘overheard’ (eavesdropped upon!) his Uncle speak on the topic of horcruxes. He’d taken it upon himself to write down everything he’d heard through the wall in his beautiful penmanship. He created a quite lovely book, which he forgot and left behind in the school library the year he graduated. The book was shelved according to subject. Several people read it over the subsequent centuries.

Some believed what Waldo had written. It was, after all, a very well presented book which was appropriately shelved in the library of a school renowned for its size and accuracy.

The content, however, was just short of completely inaccurate, mostly because Waldo hadn’t actually understood anything about horcruxes. The sole bit that he did manage to get down accurately, alas for later generations, was how to make them.

One of the problems with children like Riddle believing they are capable of making reasonable decisions as little more than infants, by true Witching standards, was that Riddle had read precisely
one inaccurate text in a school library and spoken in passing to one self-obsessed teacher when he
decided to make the horcrux. If he had read more widely, sought more information or some
manner of outside confirmation of Waldo’s text, he likely would have found more accurate texts
which existed in multiple libraries across Europe. He might have altered his entire plan.

If he had read more widely, it is likely he would not have made a horcrux at all.

But, if he still had, he would have at least known that the best horcrux objects were items that were
mundane but easily kept track of. That tracking was important in part because horcrux creators
needed to have access to the thing in order to destroy the object when they were either too sick of
their emotionless lives to keep going, or stuck for too long in limbo that they wanted their existence
nullified.

As much as many humans think they want forever, most humans are simply not cut out for such a
long haul.

When the person reached the point of being done with it all, the more accurate accounts of
horcruxes recommended handing the soul pieces over to whatever essence-consuming being was
available. Dementors were decidedly an option, as one of the books Riddle sadly did not read
(though to be fair, there was only one copy in existence) made educated mention of. That book
described a rather experiment-happy Magician who had created a horcrux. Years later, bored with
life, the Magician had arranged to have a necromancer hold a séance with their spirit after giving
both horcrux and body over to a dementor. The necromancer had not been able to raise a single
suggestion of continued existence from either the defunct horcrux or the corpse, thereby
demonstrating that the spirit essence was indeed gone.

The author of the book had greatly applauded the dead Magician’s foresight in requisitioning such
a service. (And in pre-paying the necromancer for the service!)

But then, how could a Magician focused on knowledge and research not take advantage of
knowing a necromancer – a person with the appropriate skills to reliably contact the dead?

What Riddle also would have learned was that those texts recommended using objects that were
not overly familiar to the creator. To place a large piece of essence into an object that the creator
already knew had the potential to create an object that could take on a life of its own, which would
weaken the bond with the originator to the point of breaking.

The texts did not warn specifically against diaries, but the implication would have been there. A
diary, a beloved toy, or a favourite cooking pot were arguably the worst possible objects to enchant
as they were already on their way to potentially becoming Beings. A Being, even one initially
formed of slivers of a single person’s life experiences, still had experiences that were entirely their
own and thus decidedly did not form as mere duplicates of their progenitors.

But Riddle did not remove just a sliver of himself. He, having read the one terrible text with its
beautiful script, used the accidental death of a classmate to rip his existence in two. He had tried to
make the best out of a terrible situation and back then he did not think he would ever have access to another murder. He might have planned to burn the world, but like most children the world over, he hadn’t really thought through what that would truly mean, or require.

And here we must emphasise in the strongest possible terms that half of a person – half of the emotions and experiences that have shaped and defined them – is of course immeasurably more than a sliver, a fraction. Half a person is in many ways a person unto itself from the outset, carrying enough memories, emotions, and knowledge to be so.

Also consider what kind of object that half an essence was shoved into.

Having been a very emotional, frustrated young man meant that the diary Riddle picked as his receptacle was already rather steeped in his magic and had been accumulating slivers of his emotions/self throughout its span of use, even if it was nowhere near conscious. He’d been writing in the thing for a while.

The addition of an entire half of a Being, however, drastically accelerated the object’s transition towards true Beinghood. Indeed, one might have argued that the book’s only real separation from true Beinghood at that point was that it could not act on its own, requiring someone else’s input in order to gain mobility and true independence.

The flesh-Riddle’s ability to feel the almost-someone in the book was what inspired the subsequent enchantments and compulsions on the book to ensnare a possible diarist and thereafter compel them. Per flesh-Riddle’s plan, the book would awaken when someone with magic wrote in it, seeking to complete itself. It would then enact a reign of terror on the school. Failing to recognise the implications of the near Being, that it might have opinions and desires of its own, flesh-Riddle failed to ask book-Riddle about their opinion of these plans.

This rather presaged what was to come, because just as flesh-Riddle failed to comprehend what they had done at that point in time (creating a near-Being), so too did he not come to understand what he was doing as he continued to shred his very self, nor the implications of what he planned to do.

The pre-book Riddle would likely not have considered adding those components to compel a semi-sentient almost-Being to finish themselves and force the murder of Hogwarts’ students. Or maybe he would have.

The pre-book child was prone to acting on fear. He was prone to manipulative behaviour and obsessions. And there was nothing that terrified him so much as the thought of death. Constantly terrified, horrified, and terrorised (most often by their peers), the pre-book individual had frequently lashed out, to their own detriment and decidedly to the detriment of others. But they had also been inclined toward consideration when they weren’t terrified.

Alas, the part of Riddle who could plan and consider, the Riddle who remembered the concept of reason, was trapped in a book, where they spent most of their time asleep, barely aware that time was going by. Besides which, book-Riddle was not precisely who the pre-book Riddle had been. Books are, after all, not homo sapiens and have a decidedly different capacity for sapience. That said, book-Riddle carried more similarities to once-Riddle than the man who had walked into Godric’s Hollow some decades later.
In short, neither flesh-Riddle nor book-Riddle was quite Tom Riddle anymore, but that the book-Riddle was more Tom Riddle than the embodied Riddle who continued to actively interact with the world was undeniable.

Flesh-Riddle seemed determined to allow their essence to regrow, then tear it again, repeating until there simply was not enough left in it to keep regrowing. One supposes, then, that the spirit is more like the liver than the heart. It can grow and recover until it is so used up that the option is gone; too scarred to regenerate any further. There are, after all, points of no return. And the Riddle that was left over after he’d torn himself in half had - as the reader well knows - eventually become the Voldemort who was still trapped in Quirrel in St. Mungo’s.

The book-Riddle, in contrast, slept and sometimes dreamed until Hogwarts ate and cleansed the great (in terms of their complexity and strength for a mere infant) but terrible compulsions. It started being just a bit aware when Hermione began poking at it and then absolutely somewhat-aware when she accidentally set them ablaze, even as she managed to unintentionally shove enough magic-slivers of herself into the book to tip it into confused almost-sentience. The book’s new awareness, incomplete and fragmented as it was, was not entirely pleasant.

The partial knowledge of the above was part of the reason Hermione spent months pouring bits of herself into the stone book and setting it up in carefully scripted arrays before the three transfigured the book into a meticulously crafted body.

For the form, Millicent and Ignatius chose a mushussu.[1] They could recast later, if the Being wanted. But Millicent rather thought a Slytherin Being that Hermione had contributed to would do well as a facultative quadruped.[2] Already tipping into the absurd, the trio went ahead and added opposable thumbs and folding wings.

Granted, the thumbs and wings weren’t standard to the creature they’d based the design on. But, as Millicent’s mother liked to point out, they were magic. The shape of reality didn’t entirely need to constrain them. If Hadrian could figure out the possible musculature and bone structures that would inform the Being’s movements, then they could shape the Being as they saw fit. If the Being didn’t like it, they could design their own body later. It wasn’t as if the children could clearly ask the Being what shape it would like at that point in time.

Hermione had tried to do so. The Being ate greedily of what it was offered and exuded a powerful desire for expression, to be able to react and interact. But, unlike with Hadrian’s trio of stone friends, who had been in multiple forms as the group learnt and experimented, the children did not want to provide a temporary body to the diary. The three stones had been aware enough to consent to their temporary freedoms. Here, they hadn’t raised the Being from its completely pre-sentient stages. This Being had no reason to trust that they were working towards its freedom and independence.

The three friends didn’t want to wake it without some feeling of a naturally controllable self. Hogwarts had explained, in their own way, that the stone-book, as they currently existed, was stuck in a loop of existence. They were a book who was more than a book and had enough essence to be a complete Being, but the form of their creation and the spells that Hogwarts had removed from it meant that they were somewhat stuck, unable to complete that last step. Without continued experiences, their pieces couldn’t quite meld or grow. It needed to wake up to be, and become, itself.
Hermione’s fire had helped, but they needed their own chance to be. So, by the time the three friends placed the stone-book in their carefully laid sand-array, the book was a chunk of a person, a book with lots of slivers, and bits of Hermione. It was enough to enable them to begin to anxiously twitch between those stone covers, confused. They clearly wanted to be.

Yet, for the friends, there was also the issue of who Riddle was. In two-dimensional mosaics, they had learned about how badly he had been bullied, but also about Myrtle’s death. They knew about the child’s knotting and twisting until he had become something resentful and horrid. They also knew he cried alone behind warded bed-curtains when Myrtle had died. He had been so very broken.

There were long discussions and so many layers of “but” shaped by who, precisely, the three children were.

There was the “but” from Hermione who insisted that this was an almost-Being who had not had the chance to grow into themselves. The book-Being could not be the same Riddle they had been part of any more than Petrus was Hadrian. Petrus had developed from Hadrian but was now clearly their own Being. Hadrian did not like to roll in the sand with his tail lashing out. Hadrian did not skulk about in high places in order to spring down on Aquila without warning.

According to Hermione, they could not condemn an unknown Being to non-existence who exuded a desire to live. This was a possible Being who could, theoretically, be someone if they chose.

Hermione had experienced her formative years in a country that decried the death penalty, which insisted reform was possible. She did not think that view was wrong. She firmly believed that rehabilitation and reformation was possible. She could not hold with the idea that a child was irredeemable unless they were, well, fully Voldemort. This Being, if close to Riddle at all, was clearly pre-Voldemort and/or not Voldemort at all.

Hermione could not abide the idea that people were simply unsalvageable. Beings had a right to try and live, to find their way, and have choices.

Besides, she was very, very curious who this would be given the Being had spent more time as a book than as a human. Clearly they would not be the children Petrus and Ignatius had started as and in many ways still were. Which part of them, and how much of it, would shape their existence?

Riddle was not party to their deliberations. They were, at that moment, effectively high as a kite on a pleasantly blustery day. The potion was just so very pleasant. There was some excellent fizzing magic that tickled as it worked.

And then, as they settled down, they found themselves dried, and placed in a runic array. The children had developed a tendency to default toward those complex, sculpting arrays. Here, they almost reflexively designed one to guide shape and direction. Here Hermione drew with Millicent looking over her shoulder to make suggestions while Aquila nudged lines of magic to correspond, occasionally snapping up the extra magic Hermione left behind. Anger was to be channelled into
constructive passion. Fear was supposed to shift into a desire for understanding when it couldn’t be flushed.

Hermione found herself humming the scene from Tchaikovsky’s *Sleeping Beauty*’s prologue for the fairies’ gifts. She hoped she wasn’t the one with the curse on her tongue.

For the book, the entire experience was a bit of a soupy dream. There were soft sounds and a lovely, safe ambience. There were days and days of gentle handling that sparked memories of desired comfort. There were also moments of sparking excitement. The Riddle that had been loved learning. The Hermione that was adored it. The book-Riddle, in their waking dream, began to channel in support.

That moment was important. Unlike human babies, gargoyles come into Being with purposes beyond existence. Gargoyles are sapient sentients but they are not homo sapiens and should not be judged as such. Petrus firmly viewed part of their existence to be about existing. They also believed part of their point was to build a sense of calm solidity. They were also to assist Hadrian in pick pocketing.

Their specific magical talents lay precisely in those directions because that was the magic that Hadrian channelled into them. They were, thereafter, a separate being and developed as their own individual. Is a human capable of understanding the proud solidity of a stone Being? Petrus would ever more exude a sense of calm stability for the human they favoured. They hadn’t had a choice in the matter. But Hadrian could not have asked their preference until they already were, after they already exuded that rock-like calm.

What then, about a book with human memories who is then petrified? What then of a stone book who, to be completed and its existence enabled, became a gargoyle with a keen interest in research and a strong sense of the importance of Being?

The three friends debated with Hogwarts even as they carried out their experiments and Hermione fed the book bits of magic. She took to spinning concentration charms and consideration over the both of them.

But, for all that they worked and spun and fed, the three made sure to draw clear lines. They did not, for example, feed the book blood. They had, per Hogwarts’ suggestion, begun to do so for Marble. For Marble, all three bled one whole drop of blood daily and measured the level of conscious. For that almost-Being, they carefully did not set specific parameters and handed them around day after day. They were taking notes and Aquila was carefully monitoring. But that all is a story for a later chapter.

The stone-Riddle received absolutely no blood. Blood, Hogwarts conveyed, created a rather strong bond between the giver and the gifted. Such a bond did not give way without great effort. Or death. Hogwarts had such a bond with almost every child in its bones. It was part of why the children loved them.

But such a bond would be inappropriate for a being like Riddle. They might seek to change Riddle before they’d met them, but the children did not choose to bind them in any permanence.

The choosing of stone-Riddle’s form was almost entirely happenstance. When Millicent laid open a book depicting snake gods, partly as a joke, Ignatius had liked the mushussu. Without any
particular guidance or indicator on if the book had a preference for form, the children thought “why not?” and followed Ignatius’ preference.

The three friends did not know how book-Riddle viewed their corporal self. They knew what Riddle had looked like as rendered in two dimensional mosaic. But even if that had been how Riddle still viewed themself, they could not create a body to match. They considered forming Riddle as a golem and almost did. The golem would have been as close to human as they could come. But the cultural implications of service made the three hesitate. Besides, stone books are not human. Perhaps they would give the book a form, only for it to choose to be a book again. Many books loved being books. They knew that from experience.

But, Riddle - be they book or homo sapiens or other - needed a proper, activity-capable body to be more than they were.

Mushussu it was.

There was a flurry then of study, with Hadrian trying to understand the form as stone and Millicent working on the necessary charms. Hermione read everything she could on body dysmorphic disorders and medical cases of coma patients waking to unexpected surroundings and bodies. She worried about how book-Riddle might feel when it awoke with such extreme changes to its physical form.

And the three tried to figure out how best to awaken the Being. There could be no easy solution. Ignatius, Petrus and Aquila had been awake and aware throughout the process. They had chosen their own forms and - as Hogwarts had claimed - understood what was happening to them.

The book-Being that maybe-was-Riddle decidedly did not.

There was likely no way the process would have gone well should they have been able to get the book-Being’s input or opinion anyway.

[1] A chimerical creature from ancient Mesopotamian mythology; one could say a cat and a dragon interbred, with some eagle thrown in. It is a scaled quadruped with hind paws like an eagle’s talons, forelimbs like a lion’s, a long neck and tail, and a horned head that has a snake-like tongue and a crest of some sort on top of its head.

[2] A facultative quadruped is a creature that normally walks upright on two legs, but is capable of moving on four without difficulty; such as for greater running speed or a sturdier stance in a fight.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully this is a clear build. I sketched this months ago and then rewrote it.

Also, there should be another chapter next week.

Thanks for your lovely comments. Ya'll are awesome.
In Which a Being That Might Be Riddle Tries to See

Chapter Summary

Who are we when almost every part of us has shifted and the world around us is not the same?

Chapter Notes

My ongoing appreciation for Tazzm, whose phenomenal editing, comments, and additions keep this going.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Readers will have noted by now that Hadrian, Hermione, and Millicent’s experience - the nurturing they experienced (or did not experience, in Hadrian’s case) - influenced the shape of who they were. Yet, this text would be remiss in neglecting the issue of nature: the very real physical aspects that also shape their Being. We – Beings - are a nasty, confusing confluence of both the mental and the physical, as the reader will have long since realised.

That combination meant that, upon the point of their awakening from their long slumber, Riddle was something of a Frankensteinian monster in form. At the simplest measure, they were the memories of two very different physical forms and multiple different influences recombined into a single new Being.

As such, Riddle’s animation was not smooth. Their consciousness snapped into sudden awareness as if someone had cast *renervate*. Having spent most of their existence as a book, they tried to shut their covers. The attempt was an abysmal failure. Instead, not expecting clawed back feet and padded front paws, they fell over.

Adding injury to insult, the three friends had designed Riddle's new body with the capacity to feel. And part of the horror attendant in the ability to feel is, of course, the capacity to be in pain.

Falling hurt, if mostly from the shock of having the capacity to do so. The part of Riddle that did remember falling and experiencing the pain of a fall expected to be human, meaning bipedal and without wings. In trying to stand up from the fall, they overbalanced, flared their wings, and created a cloud of sand. They tried to reflexively close their eyes but only managed to slam their inner eyelid shut, resulting in a surprised inhale as an unfamiliar vision spread out before them. They began to cough reflexively as sand flooded their mouth and lungs.

When many Beings talk about form, they mean physical shape. Perhaps even now, some readers are flexing fingers or toes if they have them. Perhaps the reader is blinking and thinking about the eye as a physical object and a biological structure.

It is unlikely that the reader is considering how the shape and construction of their eye dictates the range and limits of their vision. But perhaps the reader is now considering those things. Perhaps they are considering the cones in their eyes. Maybe they are thinking about Beings like rainbow
shrimp with their extreme range of vision. Humans can’t even begin to fathom the colours a rainbow shrimp can see.

And now, perchance, the reader’s thoughts have turned to Riddle and Hadrian's gargoyles. The reader might be wondering what a gargoyle’s eyes are like. They are just maybe considering whether different forms of gargoyle have different kinds of vision. If the gargoyle shape is dependent on (one of) the caster’s understanding of form, then wouldn't Hadrian’s perception influence the gargoyle's range of vision?

Absolutely. An eagle gargoyle is often shaped with clearer mundane sight than a manticore, for example.

But consider: a gargoyle can “see” even without the progenitor understanding eyes. A gargoyle often exists before they take any form beyond lump-of-stone. After all, a gargoyle is, to their core, a Being of rock.

What then, do gargoyles “see” regardless of whether they have eyes?

The answer will not surprise the reader. Gargoyles “see” magic. It's why they can work so well with wards and are so very useful in defence. They can see magic and, if they have hands or claws, they can touch, move and otherwise interact with it.

If a progenitor is very careful, perhaps fascinated with gargoyles and has access to a few, they will know to put in layers of eyelids into a new gargoyle, in order to allow the Being to manipulate its levels of sight. Millicent and Hadrian were very careful in their physical shaping.

Most gargoyles, however, might turn down the option. They might view such a thing in a similar light as some *homo sapiens* might respond to the idea of limiting their sense of touch. Some.

But consider: Riddle was a book who was a series of slivers and almost a Being who was also a part of the essence of a human child and a series of Hermione’s essence slivers all combined to be a full gargoyle who remembered the child and the book but the final slivers were a shaky feeling of dreaming more than a memory. What, then, was Riddle but a compiled Being reminiscent of Frankenstein’s monster – sewn together from parts of other Beings?

Perhaps in some worlds Riddle would have behaved like that monster. Perhaps they would have sought out a certain basilisk and attempted to take out all those whom the three friends found dearest. Maybe Riddle would have gone the route of Frankenstein's monster and chased the three as far as the perilous polar ice in single minded obsession.

The three friends did not, however, abandon Riddle immediately upon awakening as Frankenstein did his nameless monster. Indeed, the three remained in the room with them and observed carefully with varying degrees of patience as Riddle flailed and fumbled.

Riddle, in their awakening, did not immediately notice the three. Riddle did note their altered sight. With their inner eyelid closed, all they could see was magic. It was noticeable. Particularly as they, unlike Petrus, did not remember seeing magic before that moment. They’d been asleep for most of their time as stone and most Beings do not believe in the reliability of their vision in dreams.

Seeing clearly and consciously for the first time as a stone felt a little bit like being shoved out of an airplane over Humantay Lake in Peru without knowing that one was possessed of a parachute. The view might be one of the most spectacular in existence, but one still believes they are about to die.
Maybe Riddle’s animation would have been easier outside of Hogwarts, in some location where the air wasn’t quite as thick with ambient, clean magic.

Here, the air almost shone with the lines and colours of magic and meaning that poor Riddle, in any form, had no reference for or understanding of. It was all light and colour and brilliance and new and unknown. It was a thing of magnificent and unparalleled beauty; overwhelming even to someone who had had sight all their lives, let alone this newborn who could scarcely remember what eye-vision was.

Riddle felt like they were drowning in sensory input. They drew in a breath to gasp. They breathed in magic and sand.

The movement shocked Riddle again. A tiny, tiny part of his mind suggested he could use the wings to move upwards and thereby be able to better see the patterns.

The catch here was, as with many things, that while Riddle might have had the ability to do so, he did not yet understand how to employ it. Most bodies have a great many potentials that are never fulfilled. Ignatius and company had learned to hear and speak before they learned mobility. Riddle, in their dreams, hadn't learned how to interpret the sights and sounds that their new body took in. (Riddle's ability to learn how to interpret his new senses was greatly hindered by how rare such dreaming was during his time as a book)

Compounding the issue, the unconscious physical expectation of being a book (having spent so long as one) combined with the conscious presumption of a human shape (having been born that way and therefore on some level creating the expectation that one would always be shaped that way) made the transition all the more baffling. As neither book nor homo sapiens, they did not know how to manipulate their new form, particularly not one charmed for transformation.

Their mind was spinning, trying to reach for answers and refusing to listen to those very answers that Hermione was in fact trying to provide, her voice resounding far from his conscious thought.

In reopening their eyes, Riddle was fortunate that normal vision returned to him, and they could therefore look at their own mushussu-body. They eyed one paw-hand and then the other, then lifted them to feel a scaled face. These were hardly the fine, long fingers they remembered once possessing.

A voice sounded, shaky, from a red-and-gold dressed person, “It’s a very pretty body.” It was the first sentence that penetrated. Perhaps it was good Riddle was vain.

But, at the time, Riddle had not had an opportunity to appreciate themself. But they would later agree. The magic woven into the animated form was rather lovely, altogether a piece of art. At that moment, however, Riddle felt mostly confused and overwhelmed by the shimmering runes inscribed across their own arms. Later, Riddle would actually look at their own body, twisting it around. They were entirely inscribed with tiny, meticulous marks set in and above a lovely green stone.

At that moment, they were simultaneously appalled and pleased. They wanted to vanish and have time to think. Their body promptly began to disappear.

Riddle heard a droll “We maybe shouldn’t have enchanted the stone with chameleon charms.” A silver-and-green dressed person appeared amused, her face rather like the stone of Riddle’s own body.

“But,” the red-and-gold one said “it fit so neatly into our schematics. It never would have worked.
as well if we hadn’t tied them all together. It made sense!” The need to comprehend grew. At least that feeling was familiar. Riddle desperately wanted to see the spell work that had made them like this.

Their brain, conscious for the first time in half a century, was still spinning. Riddle felt like they kept tripping. At that moment they didn’t want feet. The body spasmed and reformed as a snake.

Riddle hissed a shocked “What is this.” Their words didn’t feel as if it were working through their throat so much as was channelled through the stone body. The blue-dressed one’s eyes focused in apparent comprehension.

The red one scooped him up in their palms and Riddle found themselves horrified to note that their body began to reflexively relax. The red-one’s magic calmed them like a lullaby, which terrified them in turn. She was carrying them somewhere. They thrashed, trying to pull back, away from it all.

And Riddle found themself looking at the three students, their stone body still cupped gently in the red one’s hands. Riddle looked down at themself to find their present-self incorporeal, human shaped. They panicked harder, and found themself flickering in and out of the stone snake. One moment, they existed as an almost ghost and the next as a stone snake.

Riddle couldn’t hear through the white noise buzzing in their head. The red one might have been trying to tell Riddle something again. The green one was watching with a raised brow. And Riddle needed to be away.

The red one almost felt like home, which was disconcerting.

Riddle heard someone sigh and felt the body - their own body - lowered to a table. They had enough wherewithal to see the green one finish chalking a set of runes on the slate surface before their body was placed down. They heard the words “Well, this is rather exciting. We should write it up.” from the red one and their consciousness went out.

Later, over the following days, after waking up for brief periods and sleeping again, they would finally have enough wherewithal to actually learn themselves anew. It would take time, however, to feel stable in their own body.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter, a bit shorter, gets at an issue I’ve long wondered about regarding the idea of copying people into virtual worlds. If we do not have the same sensory experiences or hormonal influence, etc., would we be us?
When Hadrian was small he had walked into his vault and been more interested in the walls than in his gold. The goblins watching him had taken note and made sure to begin a clear file on the child. Human children with stone sense could, after all, be agents for great change among the goblin peoples. These children could become thieves and destroy. Or, they might build. There hadn’t been a human child to build in more than a century and the goblin matriarch who reviewed the file had no great hope for this one.

So the goblins took note of the child, recording their thoughts in crystal. They engraved further notes when the child visited as a second year.

That year, they opened dedicated a crystal to Millicent Bulstrode as well.

Her family had long patronized Gringotts’ vaults but had little otherwise to make them noteworthy. They were a sharp family, honed to cutting edges.

But the Bulstrode child was still rough and not full shaped. She had sharp teeth in her mouth that she kept locked behind her lips that could possibly be used to bite and pierce. But what interested the goblins was how her constant contact with the stone child was shaping her.

The escort goblin listened as Hadrian pointed to the walls and the shape and suggest what the runes in the corners might mean. She in turn offered commentary on the charms in place. He made her look where most wizards took for granted.

It was worth noting and anticipating the potential.

The third year saw another child added and the local goblin matriarch become more concerned and more excited.

These children’s magic was aligning with stone. The goblins could see how the tendrils of magic carried with their interest reached and caressed the walls.

And that was the year, Flitwick—brilliant, charming Flitwick—began sending small shards of crystal to the goblin matriarch about these very children. Flitwick saw the children dedicating themselves to their craft and thought of it as possibility. They saw a group of children who appreciated the earth beneath their feet and the stones around their shoulders. These children
seemed to value education. They did not appear to view their school years as a burden but rather as a series of opportunities.

And Flitwick, with their own abilities to see, knew something was going on with the castle. Goblins were not earth-blind like most humans. Flitwick, to their ongoing twinge of frustration, could not hear the veins in the earth sing as clearly as some of their fellows. But in exchange, they had a clearer sense of the magic in the air. They were able to translate those abilities into charms and dueling. To each according to their talents, the goblins claimed. They let the child Flitwick go to follow their path above the ground.

Those goblins knew that when their child picked up a wand, they would shut themselves off from the below-ground. The humans would never, never permit such a child to disappear back below the ground. Or, not immediately. The Goblins were patient. Children needed to learn according to their own skills in order to be a credit to their communities. If Flitwick benefitted from the air and the sun, then so be it.

But the goblins were also not displeased when the little one chose to live in a building of stone and kept a box of memory crystals with news on their wayward child. They were then doubly pleased when their child reached out with new crystals regarding the strange human they had taken note of in during visits to the vaults.

Flitwick began inscribing and sending those crystals initially on a whim. They had wanted to share their delight in how these children—one in their own flock—responded to the ground beneath their feet and the stones at their shoulders. None of the other staff, overworked and so burdened, seemed to quite appreciate the children’s interest in seeing. But then none of the other staff members could see.

With the three’s growth as a group, Flitwick didn’t just inscribe those crystals about Hadrian, for all that he was the child interested in stones. Hermione, Flitwick appreciated for her work ethic and brilliance. And Millicent was the child Flitwick particularly interested in for her own skills in charms. Besides, Millicent—for all her human face—reminded Flitwick of the goblin families he’d left behind so long ago.

It was all part of the reason Flitwick suggested and hosted an independent study for the three. Ostensibly, the course was supposed to be about applied charms. Practically, the class was about the children’s developing interests. Rarely had Flitwick arranged such a class. They considered it with the Weasley twins but the two’s penchant for destruction discouraged them.

With these three, however, there was little reason to have them in Flitwick’s Advanced Charms class. If they had interacted with the other children, the three would have elevated the group as a whole. But, with their isolation, Millicent and Hermione were too far along, the one in application and the other in theory. Hadrian, in contrast, was the kind of student who performed precisely to the level their surroundings—here Millicent and Hermione—deemed acceptable and then drifted into their own, direct interests. Raising the bar for the other two would force the last to do more as well.

So Flitwick fought for an independent study for the three and won.

And, seeing the three students privately twice a week gave them plenty of time to observe them without the distraction of a dozen and more needy students.

Those lessons gave Flitwick an easy venue for observing and charting how the children’s magical flavors shifted drastically, far beyond the normal flow of human children’s magic.
They saw the introduction of stone to the children’s blood and how the children became increasingly solid as they walked the halls. Humans tended to have that wispy, ephemeral quality to their movements. And homo sapiens could share magic but it was temporary. These children were losing those distinctive human qualities in favor of some of the marks of Being heavy with stone.

There was a foreign magic saturating their blood and changing them. It was turning their shine to a tone of red. Their magic was transforming from the light, ephemeral rainbow of light that most humans had. Flitwick could watch the three walk across the grounds and the earth lean up into them. It reminded Flitwick of watching tunnels caress the goblins that walked their paths.

And Flitwick considered the stone singers they’d heard once as a child. They thought about the melodies that called the stones around the caverns to grow and tremble with delight.

If Flitwick hadn’t had enough stone sense to see Hogwarts deep contentment with those changes, they might have been worried.

But the castle was happy and life was springing up around the three. Flitwick could see the stone Beings that crawled across the children’s bodies during their studies. Eventually the children even let them out.

And, in his excitement, Flitwick sent notes and observation to a group with whom he’d long since let ties lapse.

The goblin matriarchs added Flitwick’s crystal-missive to their files and conferred.

Chapter End Notes

A sharp note of consideration about what the point of all this is? My eventual answer is that it's supposed to be fun - isn't it? So, that's what this is. My idea of fun in the form of speculative fiction. Hmm.
The Trouble with Labels

Chapter Summary

Marble and Riddle are both gargoyles. The similarities end about there.

Chapter Notes

All mistakes are my own.

Homo sapien scholars enjoy classifying things. This is a human, that is a goblin, this is a gargoyle. They often take a further step to claim that these specific points are the characteristics of a species. In the process, however, those scholars often loose the specifics associated with the individual.

You, dearest readers, can likely see the effect of this in the Three’s gargoyles.

By the middle of sixth year, the Three had a cadre of five gargoyles. Each was a Being of stone, each had stone sense. They could speak with the ground beneath their claws. Each could move and communicate with the Castle or with their Three.

Yet, as Hermione enjoyed pointing out, to say that they were the same would be inaccurate.

Marble and Riddle were quite the same as Petrus, Ignatius, and Aquila would have been to obscure some very, very important differences. Marble, after all, for all their draconic form, seemed to believe that they were a sweet, tumbling blood drinking puppy with wings. And, unlike the others, Marble appeared not to desire human speech. They did not converse in words: they projected images to their comrades. They also cuddled and snuggled, and gambled among their family. They used wide, sweet eyes along with little chuffs and puffs of smoke to get their way.

Hadrian in particular was a common target. He was a complete sucker for Marble’s cajoling.

It was from Hadrian that Marble could often cajole a small nipped, snack outside of proscribed mealtimes. For breakfast, they bit Hermione, for dinner they sucked a few drops of blood from Millicent, and for snacks they turned those wide-eyes on Hadrian.

The Three become rather accustomed to having their thumbs pricked, to Marble curling around their necks to bite, to the sweet gargoyle cuddling in the crooks of their elbows only to sharply nip the inside of the arm.

With a bit of study on cellular development and human healing, the Three learned to reflexively close the puncture marks with a small bit of focused will.

After a few months, the process barely registered. A small hiss of breath and shake of the head to brush off the incident and it was forgotten, melded with the hundreds of other occurrences. It became routine. Hermione, whose turn came right after she’d brushed her teeth and untangled her hair, would affectionately tickle Marble’s chin and then move the beast from around her throat to
the top of her head, where they would nest in her electric curls.

Here is the point: most gargoyle do not drink blood. Petrus thought Marble’s meals were bizarre but hardly surprising. The Three had trained Marble to it after all. Ignatius had watched Marble bite Hadrian time and again before demanded to try the liquid. They spent the next several moments chuffing and huffing the taste away. According to Ignatius blood, with its small bits of magic, was gross.

In contrast, Riddle’s deviation from many perceived gargoyle standards had nothing to do with their eating. For eating, Riddle fell precisely within Hermione’s documented “norms” for gargoyle.

No, Riddle was different for reasons hardly related to blood drinking. Rather, the most significant deviation was their ability to back out of their own body.

(That ability would be why Millicent had a hard time completely trusting Riddle. It was also why the two eventually became such close friends.)

But perhaps, Riddle’s deviations were also one of the most gargoyle things about Riddle. A gargoyle, after all, reflects their progenitors and the traits written into them - meaning Riddle necessarily reflected Hermione and the-now-Voldemort.

In all likelihood, the one-who-was-now-Voldemort was Riddle’s source for their ability to shrug off their stone-form and stand as a ghostly, humanoid Being.

The group discovered that peculiar skill—much to Hermione’s fascination—within days of Riddle’s awakening. Hermione had leaned forward to picked Riddle up and Riddle had panicked. In that moment, they had experienced a desire to be lifted and cuddled. They responded with horror to their own sentiment and tried to back away. Their desire to get away had extended past the precise circumstances and into discontent with their body and confusion with the situation.

Riddle had experienced a sudden, loose floating sensation and found themselves standing behind their crumpled body. It was incredibly disconcerting.

Riddle’s sudden existence as a ghost-wraith-Being did not calm anyone in that room. Indeed, Millicent’s face blanked more than usual. Hermione and the other gargoyles looked almost apoplectic in excitement.

Riddle tried to back up further to put space between themself and the others. They should have looked behind them. Failing to do so, they backed straight into Hadrian. Hadrian’s entire body jolted and their body langue changed, weight shifting, finders curling, mouth tightening.

(For Millicent, watching her friend be possessed was one of the worst sensations she had ever experienced.)

And then Hadrian was coughing, Riddle pouring out of his mouth and Millicent was there, beside Hadrian, rubbing soothing circles on his back as the ghost-Riddle stared at them both, looking like they would be quivering if they could.

Hermione was exclaiming and the noise the other three gargoyle were creating was tremendous.

Here, Riddle’s existence defied labels. Gargoyles don’t do incorporeal projection. And ghosts cannot possess people. Wraiths can. But then wraiths don’t take the form of bipedal mammals. Ghosts of bipedal mammals do but don’t have articulated stone bodies. So what then was Riddle?

Hermione pointed out that it didn’t really matter: Riddle was Riddle and Riddle was a Being,
unique and special as they all were. Individuals, Hermione argued, needed to be understood on their own merit and not in terms of anyone else, be it the Dark Lord or herself, as a gargoyle or as a ghost-something (she paused at that last label).

As such, the ability to be a *homo* sapien-like ghost, transparent and incorporeal, would influence Hermione’s view of Riddle almost not at all. Hermione had invested her affections in Riddle as a book and then as a stone. She cared for the Being as a gargoyle. Their existence as a ghost-wraith could hardly influence that. In some corner of her mind that she would not intentionally explore for another handful of decades, Riddle was simply family. And to her, her history with this Riddle meant that she was responsible for them. According to Hermione, if you save a life you also bear some responsibility for their existence even if they also owe you a life-debt.

Later, to Millicent's quiet concerns, Hermione would shrug and point out that this was an accident. Hadrian was fine. They’d build Hadrian an anti-possession charm so that no one had to worry. Her smile turned sweet as she made her promise and Millicent felt a bubble catch in her throat.

And for Riddle, for Riddle Hermione declared that they would experiment to find out the limits of their Being so that Riddle could make the best use of themselves possible. Everyone had their strengths and weakness. No one of the was going to go to Marble for scintillating conversation but they did often look for them for a nice laugh. Marble was about embracing life as Petrus could attest.

But then Petrus enjoyed a good route of tumbling. Even Millicent couldn’t argue that there was something bizarrely cute about tiny sphinx and dragons wrestling.

Each Being was, Hermione argued, was precisely themselves and not one another.

So the group tested the limits of Riddle’s Being. They found that Riddle could not possess Hermione and Millicent much less Petrus or Ignatius. Only Hadrian.

Which raised the question for all of them: what was Hadrian?
Hadrian was not stupid. He was young and inexperienced but he was not dumb. He was aware of that difference in part because Hogwarts had—in their own way—mentioned it. Compare less than 20 years of life to a millennium of existence and neither age nor experience came close. Hence, Hadrian was young and inexperienced.

But Hogwarts also claimed that Hadrian and his coven could learn and become like the castle if they wanted.

Hadrian knew that Hogwarts was right. Across years of listening, Hadrian had in fact gained experience and knowledge. So he knew he could become more like Hogwarts in that respect: he would have experiences and eventually grow wiser.

But, among the lessons he was slowly learning, was a building awareness of the layers of meaning inherent in communication. Most people, he came to understand, rarely said things that had only one meaning.

That understanding sunk due to a series of events that happened during the beginning of his sixth year. Namely, the headmaster began trying to speak with him regularly.

In the first of those instances—in the first month of term—the headmaster sent a note calling “Harry” up to his office and implied things of apparently great import.

Hadrian had wanted to walk out, itched for the conversation to end. It was boring, excruciatingly so. He twitched under his robes and Aquila had to exert all their efforts to get him to stay outwardly calm and still until the headmaster wrapped up his speech. And then, the headmaster seemed disinclined to allow him to flee without an implied promise of frequent return.

In the aftermath of that meeting, Hadrian fled to his friends and asked Hogwarts to play the conversation across their the stones of their mouth as he narrated.

The group debated the meanings layered in the headmaster’s monologue. During that meeting, the man had made broad statements about love and evil. He’d interspersed those comments with notes about school’s wards and suggestions of apology for leaving Hadrian to grow up with his aunt. He implied he’d done it for Harry’s protection, a new form of which Harry would need after his NEWTS.

Hadrian wondered if the headmaster had been cursed to never made a clear point. The entire conversation seemed to be a tangle.

What Hermione and Millicent determined (with Petrus’ input and Riddle’s snide commentary) was that the headmaster was intimating that he suspected that Voldemort was not in fact gone as the majority of the population expected. The magical populace might not have heard from Voldemort in years but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t return. The headmaster was—apparently—concerned that Voldemort would pounce once Hadrian was permanently outside the safety of Hogwarts.

To prepare against that eventuality, the headmaster wanted to have Harry undergo special training.

Hadrian was appalled at the idea of spending more time with the man. He knew that forewarned
was forearmed and knowledge was power. But he wasn’t interested in talking with the headmaster. He didn’t trust him, actually just short of despised him, a sentiment which Riddle encouraged.

To put it simply, Hadrian didn’t want to go. He folded his arms across his chest as if to protect himself from persuasion.

Millicent and Riddle—despite their view of the headmaster—wanted him to attend. They wanted the power that came with knowledge. Besides which, if Hadrian was possibly in danger, then Millicent felt they should know. Hadrian snapped in return that if they wanted to go, they could.

Hermione sighed and prepared a Polyjuice potion so that Millicent could do just that—although she recommended that Riddle not attend.

Millicent, pulling her knowledge of stones about her, met with the headmaster wearing Hadrian’s face. She was clever, after all. Where Hadrian would have sat focused on his wish to leave, she drew the conversation where she wanted. And, in between the headmaster’s pronouncements and her sideways questions, Millicent-as-Hadrian received lessons in dueling and warding using dragon’s blood.

Going through those lessons with Hadrian’s wand ended up being a challenge Millicent thoroughly enjoyed. She had known that Hadrian adored her but it was quite something to experience the sentiment through a wand. It was clear that the wand wanted to protect her.

Millicent also enjoyed working with Hermione to turn the Polyjuice potion into lozenges to make sure she could ensure the length of the transformation. Hermione shuddered as she poured the reeking potion into the mold, muttering about such candies wreaking havoc on Millicent’s teeth if this kept up. All these sugars were hardly good for her teeth.

Millicent argued the knowledge was worth it. Whatever else the headmaster might be, he was the foremost expert on the uses of dragon’s blood. They were finding out information that they would not be able to find in any book unless the headmaster bequeathed them his research notes. Hermione snorted and acknowledged that eventuality unlikely.

Riddle, for their part, looked at the diagrammed calculations for those wards and demanded just how using dragon’s blood wasn’t blood magic. Hogwarts answered with the equivalent of a shrug. According to the castle, using any blood to do magic was blood magic.

The headmasters’ action then suggested he was alright with using dragon’s blood because it wasn’t homo sapien, implying he was not against blood magic in of itself but rather using homo sapien blood that the headmaster opposed.

Hermione suggested that perhaps that contradiction developed out of the potential uses for homo sapien blood. Hogwarts, however, pointed out that in that case hair and other body parts should fall in the same category – and yet Hermione had just brewed a perfectly legal (if controlled) Polyjuice potion. Ethically, the difference between dissecting a kelpie for its liver and draining its blood was lost on Hogwarts.

Only slightly clearer was the headmaster’s reasoning for all the lesson he wanted Hadrian to learn: the group concluded that the headmaster appeared to believe that Hadrian was inextricably tied to Voldemort’s likely return and eventual defeat. Somehow. The how was incredibly unclear.

That knowledge made Hermione and Millicent frown darkly. They respected the headmaster’s expectation that Voldemort could return. The group knew about the horcruxes even if they didn’t have access to all of them. Riddle, looking disturbed and embarrassed, suggested that if Voldemort
had followed through with his early considerations would have made seven. One—Riddle-the-
former-diary—was taken care of. What the other six might be—or if they even existed—and how
(if) they related to Hadrian was any of their guesses.

Besides, the headmaster didn’t seem to know anything about the horcruxes. In his impenetrable
speeches, the headmaster told the Hadrian-who-was-Millicent that Voldemort had been a boy in an
orphanage who was, shamefully, an angry bully who liked to hurt other people. He painted an
image of a child who had continued on a career of insolence and cruelty throughout his Hogwarts
career. His picture showed a child growing into a self-centered-likely-murderer who allowed others
to take punishment in his stead.

Millicent did not tell the headmaster that she’d already heard a very different version of this story
from Hogwarts. She refrained from mentioning that part of the child-who-had-once-been-Riddle
was currently working side-by-side with Hadrian and Hermione in Hogwarts’ mouth, trying to
understand just how the different portions of the castle had been be-spelled to move.

She didn’t tell the headmaster that part of the Riddle-who-was had become someone different. She
didn’t mention that that someone was her friend.

The headmaster didn’t know any of that.

Hadrian did.

And, in looking at the discrepancies between the headmaster and Hogwarts’ tales, Hadrian thought
about the difference in intent and implication. The choice of how to tell a story shaped its meaning,
which was then filtered through the recipients’ knowledge and perception.

It made Hadrian wonder if Hogwarts had meant more than knowledge and experience when they
had commented that Hadrian could become more like a castle.

Chapter End Notes

I think I'm going to try and play with a series of short chapters over the next couple of
weeks. Theoretically, we're meandering toward the end of all of this ... but if I split up
my intention into little chapters I don't know what that'll mean in terms of number.
That said, it should mean that I post every other week or so.
Half of this chapter did not want to be written, half was sketched ages ago and barely altered.

Some people argue that we are our pasts. Others claim we are the stories we know and repeat. Those two stances are simultaneously compatible and completely contradictory depending on meanings applied to the connections between the words.

That potential contradiction contributed to Millicent, Hermione, and Hadrian’s escorting one another along with Riddle to Little Hangleton and the subsequent rewriting of the past.

Readers should understand that the group had begun hearing stories, perhaps tall-ish tales, from the headmaster about Voldemort’s past alongside lessons in the use of dragon’s blood. Those stories came with the claim that Hadrian needed to understand Riddle in order to defeat them.

Point being, Millicent heard the headmaster’s retelling of a description he had heard some decades prior of Riddle’s past from an aged-caretaker-of-a-certain-orphanage-in-London’s spliced with the fading memories of a retired auror-now-deceased. (The convolutions of that combination made Millicent bristle with skepticism.) The loose outline of said story went along the lines of: There once was a battered woman, who had grown up to repeat the abuse she’d learned at her family’s knees. She’d ended up pregnant. Then, abandoned, she’d died with a name in her mouth.

Later, Hermione, after listening to Millicent’s recital of the headmaster’s recounting of an old caretaker’s version of Merlope’s life, agreed that the accuracy of the story was suspect. Her toes tucked under Millicent’s legs, Hermione tapped her quill against her mouth, and then suggested the group visit Merlope’s village and see what was to be seen. To Hermione’s ears, after all, it didn’t sound like the auror had asked the other Beings living there a single thing.

The group could hardly consider themselves reasonable scholars if they did not try and track down additional evidence of the truth.

They used the flexibility of a Hogsmeade weekend to leave the castle and apparated away, just as Millicent’s parents had taught them the summer before. Safely distant from Hogsmeade, the group caught a bus the rest of the way.

Upon their arrival in Little Hangleton, the group attracted immediate attention with their short robes and trousers, long hair pulled back, and ears glimmering with metal rings and stone plugs.

Most people could not see the addition of the gargoyles further adorning the Three. There was one old woman, whose mouth twitched unhappily as she glanced at the them. And there was one small child near her leg, whose eyes followed Marble’s erratic flight patterns.

The majority of the *homo sapiens*, however, did respond to the plugs in the Three’s ears even as most people did not notice Riddle sitting, stony and angry, on Millicent’s shoulder. And, in seeing those plugs, the people whose eyes caressed them felt themselves at-ease.
It would have been hard for them not to feel at-ease as, over the week prior, the three had carved and inscribed the pieces before charming them with a spell of that precise name. It was, Riddle acknowledged, rather brilliant as the three needed the people they spoke with to see them but not to particularly care.

Riddle, underneath their desire to see this place where a sort-of-mother-had-been-abused burn, found it fascinating to watch as these Being’s eyes swept across the Three’s ears and, in seeing the charmed plugs therein, activated them. The magic in the stones found purchase in that gaze and gently told the viewer that everything about the wearer was fine, just fine. Not great, not beloved, not grand, but fine.

The effect made the Beings much more content than Riddle felt.

Riddle wanted to be there, had agreed to be there, yet quailed to be there. They remembered a long-ago when a-part-of-who-they-were-now had convinced himself that his father must be a powerful Being, one who would someday come and save him. Continually sitting a corner for misbehavior, that child had wanted a father to come and save him. He knew, after all, that his mother couldn’t come as he’d been told the story of her death since he could comprehend the words.

Now, Riddle shuddered under the weight of the information they had. Part of Riddle wanted to set the town on fire, eradicating it and its possible information.

But then a bigger part shuddered in horror at the idea of destroying any knowledge whatsoever.

So, here, Riddle was torn. They had to be here in order to learn but in learning they thought they would acquire information they did not want to know. They didn’t know what their family’s past said about them.

But then Riddle was not sure how to reconcile their own Being with their heritage generally. In their present form, they were hardly *homo sapien* as the majority of their progenitors had been. This past had contributed to who they were. At the least, they would not exist if Merlope had not experienced her own horrors and die in her turn. But, in turn, Merlope had raised neither the baby she had carried nor the Riddle on Millicent’s shoulder. So, how much did this past truly matter?

And, regardless of how much they mattered or not, there was the issue that this was not the family that the Riddle-who-had-been had envisioned. This was not the powerful ancestor to help one raise their head high. This was horrible in part because of its normality.

Yet to have no past was also not pleasant. Connections—ties—are comforting. They can contribute to a sense of belonging. And, most Beings want to be a part of something.

Riddle found themselves disturbed to be wondering just how their ancestors had interacted with these streets.

Part of Riddle did not want to be wondering and did not want to be here.

Yet, Riddle was also aware that they were partly here to assess possible threats against Hadrian. It might gall to follow the headmaster’s lead but they could not leave the headmaster’s claims unexplored. After all, part of what the group did was head off threats before they could form.

Nonetheless, despite the excellent manifold reasons to be here, the discrepancy between desire to know and the longing to flee left Riddle feeling unbalanced and itchy. There was a sense of uncertainty sitting on their shoulders and they wished for this to be over.

Riddle tried to focus on their companions again.
Hermione was side-eyeing them with a slight frown on her face while Millicent was addressing someone at the side of the road. Hadrian’s eyes, meanwhile, kept drifting away from the verbal conversation in favor of the stonewall that lined the road. Riddle watched as Hadrian’s magic reached out to caress those stones. His hand twitched at his side, guiding his magic to explore the stones’ make-up. Petrus, tucked in Hadrian’s sleeve, was automatically amplifying the progress, linking into the stone in Hadrian’s jaw and left ear.

Riddle suspected the hand Hermione had on Hadrian’s robe was the tether keeping him from wandering over to the stones and listening to their tales. He’d been getting lost in that side of stones as he tuned his hearing.

As usual, Riddle found it easier to suppress their desire to rip this town to pieces if they kept their concentration on Hadrian and the strangeness of their magic.

Even so focus, however, Riddle heard the answers to Millicent’s prying questions. They learned how, once upon a time, there had been a family who lived on the hill. The entire family was rather scandalous. Some half-century and more ago, the son of the family had run off with a young girl from down the hill. Most people seemed to think that he had run away after a spat with his grandparents and taken the girl so as to not leave alone.

Whatever the reason, he'd come home a year later with his tail between his legs and with a nervous condition. The boy had never re-married and the village had been rife with speculation. But, nothing did happen until one day, after the war, the entire family had been up and murdered in their home.

The neighbor in the shack down the way had been arrested and carried off. The townsfolk speculated that he had finally discovered what had happened to his sister and gone insane with grief.

The house hadn't been sold or even properly shut up. Children would sometimes dare one another to sleep over and someone had knocked a rock through the windows. The house simply sat, increasingly an eyesore. Ms.-- had tried to buy the property at one point but didn't succeed. Evidently there was a Thomas M. Riddle, Jr. running around out there, who was paying property tax. Not that any in the town could remember ever seeing hide or hair of him.

Hermione had gotten a funny look on her face at that. She’d thanked these story-tellers and pulled her companions away toward the county office, where she took out stones with warding and privacy set into them and asked Hadrian to lay them around the building.

In that office, there was only one person behind the counter, who looked at them with surprise before calming into a feeling of ease. Hermione asked Millicent to confound them, which Millicent did without hesitation. She usually did whatever Hermione asked and then asked questions later, if ever. Riddle added to this to their tally.

Riddle then watched, anxiety cloying in their throat, as Hermione proceeded to search through a few back files, locate a birth certificate from some eighteen years prior and duplicate it. She grinned over at Hadrian and then proceeded to register Millicent Bulstrode as the bastard daughter of one Jean Granger and Thomas Riddle III (born in Brighton), son of Tom Riddle, Jr. (born in London), who was son of Tom Riddle Sr., son of Charles Riddle. She'd then repeated the process with a slightly older form, registering a brother with the name Thomas Riddle, IV.

Millicent raised her eyebrows as Riddle looked at the parchment. Riddle stared at this new text. They knew those words were not true. Yet, they had a long habit of believing written words. Here was paper evidence that they had a sister. Their eyes flicked over to Millicent.
She was looking at Hermione in fond bemusement, her eyebrow just slightly raised. Hermione responded to the unvoiced questions with “My grandmother always wanted more children.” She smiled a disarming smile and said “I can't really arrange for Riddle to inherit what is currently a muggle estate in their current form. They’re either stone or incorporeal and some of the people around here are bound to notice unless we wanted to alter memories en-masse. This will be easier.”

She then copied her back-dated certificates before filing the ‘originals’ and then required the group do a series of jumps back and forth across the country. Among other steps, she registered them all for driver's licenses and passports. Millicent turned the license over in her hand, frowning at it.

"Why," Millicent finally asked, "do you want that house?"

Hermione blushed. "It's the Riddle’s family house," she answered, her head nodding to the gargoyle sitting on Millicent's shoulder. “And we're their family. Besides, no one else is using it.” Millicent gently touched her cheek in response.

By the time Hermione permitted them to return to Hogwarts, the Three and their friends had stopped in several small registry offices, placing birth certificates for Jean Granger and a Thomas Riddle III in Brighton as well as a death certificate for the later in London. They also had two sets of school reports, immunization records, and a file for adoption. They additionally placed a will for Thomas Riddle, Jr. in a non-magical solicitor's office and added the client to their lists.

By the end of the day, according to a paper trail left in the non-magical world, Millicent had been born eighteen years prior as the younger sister to one Thomas Riddle IV. She had been given up for adoption and then taken in by the Bulstrodes of Bulstrode Park. She had done exceptionally well in school, had a driver's license, and had recently applied for a passport. She was also the sole beneficiary of the Tom Riddle, Jr. estate if her father should pre-decease her. Said stipulation set her up to inherit the Riddle and Gaunt properties in Little Whingtin when he passed.

Riddle looked at it all and wanted to believe it. They knew it was mostly fiction and yet, with the paper evidence there in front of them, they felt drawn in by this story. They wanted this strange, fictional family that had been broken to pieces upon their sister's birth. They leaned heavily into Millicent's neck and said nothing.

Hermione smiled at them both, clearly pleased and proud.

A month later, a coroner’s report conveniently appeared at the solicitors. No one at the office would remember taking on the client, but then they had had so many and their records were all in order. It took them some time to track down the beneficiary but soon enough, they found traces of Millicent Bulstrode and requested her presence. A tidy young lady, barely in her majority, would arrive with a buoyant friend at her side. The solicitor was glad of that friend as she told Millicent that her grandfather had passed. The two, slightly-bereaved women heard the will. It did not take long and then Millicent was in possession of the titles two the two properties.

Riddle sat, invisible, on her shoulder throughout the proceedings.

Returning to the town, the Three arrived charmed to be pitiable and believable. The villagers speculated on why Millicent Bulstrode had visited once before. The more vocal thought she had been wanting to see. It made sense that she would bring her friends to scope out the space before announcing her relationship and identity. It was just a shame that they hadn't told her a softer version of the story. It really must have been a shock to find out about such a sensational heritage. They felt for the girl, orphan that she was. Now, perhaps they could get her to tear down that awful Guant shack and do something about the Riddle house.
Those thoughts would, for the villagers, be among the few they spent on either the Guant or Riddle properties. Slowly, they would find that the two properties were rather unremarkable. Millicent—sweet, shy girl—tore down both places. In her evident efficiency, it almost seemed like she did it overnight. In their place she constructed a single, bland stone cottage. It wasn’t of much interest.

Eventually, they rarely remembered that there was a Riddle estate in their village at all. Only one particular old woman with a growing child seemed to think much about it at all.

And Riddle, for their part, found this new set of stories and connections much more palatable than the uncertainty of the old. Here, Hermione had created a neat set of tales to retell, ones that soothed and were true enough to be real.

Besides, even if those tales had not always been true, what was magic if not making the processes of turning the unreal true and the impossible into reality?
Chapter 21: The One in Which Hogwarts Maybe Lays an Egg

Chapter Summary

The one in which a carefully planned day becomes rushed, leading to what might be an egg. Either way, there are definitely rocks involved.

Chapter Notes

Be aware that this was a bit of an experiment that didn't go quite as far off the deep-end as I considered. It's meant to be silly. I hope that comes across.

Also, not-beta'd and my eyes are done for the day.

Hogwarts, one could claim (and Hadrian would for centuries), laid an egg in the second half of Hadrian's sixth year.

Now, castles are not widely known for laying eggs. And, in point of fact, "laying" is perhaps not an appropriate word in this context. Or maybe it is as there was an object--arguably an egg--that was laid.

Just, none of that happened or existed in the usual sense of either "egg" or "lay," particularly not when those words are in combination.

Yet, Millicent would 'ever claim that Hadrian had a point. Although she would argue that "incubate" might have been the better word for what Hogwarts did.

To understand Hadrian’s claim, Riddle's annoyance, and Millicent's counterproposal, it might be useful for the reader to step back and consider one of the ongoing concerns that has plagued many a Being for centuries: what comes first, the chicken or the egg?

Now, if one takes the question at face value without its symbolic parts and thinks about the chicken as our contemporary chickens, then the answer to the question is simple: the egg came first. As Hermione pointed out the second time Hadrian and Riddle sniped about the issue, dinosaurs laid eggs and, as one of their evolutionary precursors, dinosaurs significantly predate chickens. That technically meant eggs existed before chickens.

Hermione also pointed out that sound waves exist for a tree falling in a forest regardless of human presence in forests when trees fall, ergo it makes sound without observation.

Yet, pointing to dinosaurs as the evolutionary precursors to chickens does not actually address the point of the philosophical quandary about chicken/egg chronologies. Rather, the point of the question is to ask the listener to consider the entire structure of existence and definition of Being. The question is supposed to prompt rumination on the cyclical nature of life, which includes a chicken laying an egg from which a chicken hatches, to then lay an egg and repeat the cycle.
Hence, depending on how one interprets that question and the connections between the words, one might be able to change out the "chicken" in the phrase with any number of fowl (or Hogwarts) yet still address the core quandary at the heart of the inquiry.

As such, one could argue that neither the chicken nor the egg truly matters in the question despite being the central actors therein. Instead, the two are symbols, their meaning dependent on the ignorance and/or philosophical bent of the listener.

Hermione, dear readers, threw up her hands in disgust when Millicent argued that point rather than allowing the discussion to drop.

The point here is that, if the reader thinks about Hogwarts and eggs in the same way one thinks about the question chickens and eggs, then one could argue that Hogwarts laid an egg.

Or, Riddle maintained, another could claim that the entire notion was complete nonsense.

Both claims are potentially correct as the answer is a matter of definition and interpretation.

So that the reader may determine for themselves whether Hogwarts laid an egg (as Hadrian maintained to Riddle's frustration) this text will tell the reader the circumstance of the "laying."

And, to flagrantly bias the reader in Hadrian’s direction, the reader is informed that the word "egg" should here mean an object whose potential to grow into a Being has been ignited. For Hadrian, such an object would usually be a rock.

Riddle would point out, wings flared in angered frustration, that Hadrian's definition implied Hadrian had laid multiple eggs himself. Hadrian was rather pleased with the idea despite Millicent’s note that Hadrian had never actually “laid” them in almost any sense of the word, symbolic or not. Here too, she felt “inseminate” the better choice for verbiage.

In Hogwarts' case the insemination (or laying) process began when the company arrived back from a day at the Riddle-Granger estate (they were still trying out names for the place). Hogwarts was pleased to see the group return intact and then curious as the three homo sapiens pulled out a set of runes to set up a rather harsh, quick-and-dirty, nothing-in-or-out, containment field on their workroom floor before unloading a rather large stone (almost a boulder) from their extendable, magic-repressing bag. They were careful not to touch it.

Hogwarts, not inclined to wait for the students’ attention when it could speak directly to the gargoyles, sent an inquiry. Marble, their aura flavored in fascinated anticipation immediately set about describing what had happened, perhaps with more dramatic flair than necessary. Working themselves into something of a tizzy, their little paws kneaded the floor below them, poking needle-holes into the stone with their miniscule claws.

Given that neither Being spoke English and the entire description included multiple interjections from the other gargoyle, the conversation doesn't translate well. The reader will simply have to accept this feeble attempt. Or, the reader can skip the majority of the following. So many choices exist in life.

But if the reader does continue, they should try to diffuse their understanding of self into the ground below their feet. They should feel as the ground, stony or hard packed from feet walking up and down. Let one of your shoulder muscles cramp at the point of the path while some of your other muscles relax around it. Consciousness should sit heavy with age, while one's parts and pieces make themselves known in movement. There is a whiff of the wistful remembrance of magic and relief at the absence of the screams that once disturbed their staid existence.
Now be aware of a clearing where there is a dead tree that is actually a dilapidated shack. If not for enchantments in the floorboards, a gust of wind might have long since caused it to fall as the ground the shack is rooted in has been struggling to let go of its foundations. Someday, the ground knows, the magic in the floorboards will finally unravel. For now though, that magic is still strong enough to anchor the shack.

The arrival of glowing children at that old shack [here, Marble’s own pleasure in their work on the children was palpable], with their feet dripping lively magic, was a pleasant thing, like earthworms turning soil. The ground was happy to have them, particularly as they set about unraveling the toxic magic anchoring the old shack into the earth.

So the earth whispered the shack’s secrets and the gargoyles translated, step-by-step. The group undid the wards around the perimeter and released the undead serpent on the door.

At the earth’s advice, the children did not go in. Inside, there was a dead space. Not the kind of undead that sings with an oboe’s voice. Rather, it was the emptiness-of-space dead or the chest cavity of a corpse with no organs. No, no one went in or wanted to go in.

Instead, the majority of the remaining daylight was spent with the children sitting in a triangular pattern around the structure, slowly untangling and removing the magic prior generations of Beings half built into the battered wood.

For their part, Marble skittered through the grass around Hadrian. And, to the earth’s relief, Marble ate the bits of necrotic magic Hadrian threw their way.

Marble shared the taste, which readers might compare to a fine, aged cheese crawling with maggots. It was soft (already digested and shat out again) and wriggling (with maggot bodies) on the tongue.*

Marble basked, gallivanted and rolled, snacked and helped, and then watched in amusement as the three finished untangling the magic in the structure and the component boards collapsed in a huff of dust.

With the magic that had not been eaten spooled tidily in pre-prepared rock containers, the place was clear with the exception of one corner of the shack-that-was. In that one corner, a tell-tale heart pulsed under the collapsed floorboards.*

The children had not blocked time to deal with this extra thing. It was a mistake, a potentially dangerous one, but not one that the children could leave for another time. It would not do to leave a strong piece of magic lying about without any wards guiding people away.

Yet, the children did not plan on leaving Hogwarts again for another month. They needed to handle this now. There was a sense of urgency as the day was growing longer and light stretched from reds into blues.

The children maybe rushed slightly more than they should have. They didn’t hurry by much, just didn’t give the slow, careful consideration they usually did. They didn’t have time, not unless they wanted the headmaster to know they were gone from the castle environs.

With rapidity, a plan was agreed upon. Millicent and Hermione worked to turn the wood into compost and uncover the corner while Hadrian stood ready, wand pointed and spells on their tongue. Riddle stood at their side. They were supposed to be prepared to contain anything in that corner to take back to Hogwarts to deal with there.
Of Marble’s babies [so young, so caterpillar like in their unfinished development], Hadrian was unknowingly the worst choice for the job.

None of them had expected an interesting stone to be in a box in that corner. The box disintegrated with the rest of the wood and the ring lay exposed. The ring, for all the magic twisted through it, might not have been a problem if it hadn’t been for the stone embezzled in its center.

That rock wasn’t something Marble had seen or met before. It was old in a way that most rocks weren’t. It was not sentient but it felt like a cavern of ice and a suggestion of other places, as if it were a pocket universe unto itself.

Without stone sense, Hadrian could not have experienced the intricacies of what Marble felt. But Hadrian could understand enough to be entranced. Desire poured out of him, directing Hadrian’s attention. Marble’s baby did not really see the gold of the ring at all; just the stone.

Really, Hadrian’s attraction to the stone was as inevitable as water flowing downstream.

But ignoring one thing in favor of another does not make the former--here the gold ring--go away. The gold of the ring was in fact there despite Hadrian’s lack of interest. And into the gold someone had worked a set of malicious enchantments alongside a piece of fractured essence. That gold fairly writhed with compulsions and the promise of decay.

Hadrian’s wanting created a hook for the compulsion to latch onto and reel him in.

Focused as he was, the baby did not notice the hook and reached toward their own doom.

[Introduce a dramatic upswell in an orchestral soundtrack of grinding rocks.]

Marble moved to try and stop Hadrian even as they knew they could not reach Hadrian in time.

Just as Hadrian’s hand closed around the ring, his magic shifted and body stuttered.

Imagine, for a moment, Hadrian as a solid block of stone. Now picture a sudden, powerful jolt and the appearance of veins of crystalized mineral running through that stone (like marble).

Riddle had possessed Hadrian. And, in doing so, had dissolved the hook. The ring--still wreathed in decay--was no longer compelling. Instead, the ring sat inert in the body’s hand.

The crystal veins in the body was not so passive. The raged.

In that moment Millicent agreed. Ever watchful of Hadrian, she hated that ring. She wanted it gone. But, she did not think they could safely dispose of the thing. Unable to be rid of it meant the next best thing: containment.

Lacking a prepared vessel, she called a large stone that marked the path. Using Hadrian’s wand, Riddle tossed the ring inside.

It all happened within the span of a moment.

And then Riddle was seeping from Hadrian’s body. In Marble’s retelling, Riddle’s departure looked like glittering crystals falling like stars from a noble stone block.

Tense as the calm before the storm, the group packed up.

Now, they were all back here, in the flow of rainbow currents that was Hogwarts. Marble conveyed a great feeling of portent and potential.
Hogwarts agreed.

Like Marble, Hogwarts saw opportunity. Hogwarts looked—as much as a castle looks—up through their floor at that rock with a ring at its center. Unlike the diary from those short years prior, this stone had no sense of Being. But, for being inert, the rock held possibility.

Over the next weeks, Hogwarts considered that stone. They had the children act as their hands to redraw wards around the stone and poke and prod at it. They explored the stone from surface to heart.

And Hogwarts decided: this stone could be a hearthstone.

Decision met and discussed, Hogwarts became almost giddy with a slow, frenzied delight. Students found the new corridors and rooms opening up. The outside had the crisp feeling of winter yet inside felt like a spring cleaning.

If Hogwarts had had lungs, they would have sighed in delighted anticipation. Here was potential for a step toward relief from their loneliness.

Now, Hogwarts needed actually ignite the potential within the stone. They could have guided the children to do it, but it would have taken decades and for all their slowness, Hogwarts did not choose to be patient in this moment when they had other options.

They did concede to having Hadrian remake and shape the stone. With Petrus’ support, he worked the ring’s gold into the stone instead of sitting as a foreign piece within. To his delight, however, he was unable to break the dark stone into its components. That piece he had to draw out of the boulder.

For Hogwarts to work on the stone directly, they needed the rock to be a temporary part of themselves. Hogwarts had to have Riddle and Aquila direct the Three on placing the stone in the charms classroom precisely to channel the excess magic cast in the room into the stone.

To do so, the group spent a bizarre evening sort-of-breaking-curfew-rules (Flitwick knew and had laughingly told them not to get caught) and refitting most of the floor in the room. They had to lift the flagstones to script a colorfully complex design of runes to guide ambient and excess magic flow into the stone.

The whole pattern was shaped to teach the piece to take in magic and breathe it out again, to supplement and support, and above all protect.

But, once it was set, Hogwarts was the one to care for it while the others planned and drew potential blueprints around the idea of the hearthstone.

It was Hogwarts who coddled and spoke to it and kept it warm.

Eventually, it would be Hogwarts who’d have to let go of it.

Hadrian insisted that that stone with its growing sense of self was Hogwarts’ egg. He’d argue with Riddle over whether the entire process could be construed as “sitting” and eventually “laying.”

But really, neither actually particularly cared about the question. Both were just too stubborn to let it go. And that was why the whole conversation annoyed Hermione quite as much as it did.
In case you were wondering, which you weren't, one of my pet peeves is when video games refuse to allow me to put my characters in any of the clothing in my equipment bag but insist on a gender binary. If both child-and adult-sized people can both wear the prince's vest, why can't the other adult-sized person?
The One in Which a Decision is Sort of Made

Chapter Summary

Sometimes plans involve decisions that have to be made every day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hogwarts’ careful tending of the hearthstone prompted the group to actually think about their future, post-graduation lives as a real, soon-to-happen future rather than a fantasy “tomorrow.” They had started making loose, plans for building a library someday. They’d talked through the idea of magical architecture with Hogwarts. But here, now, they had a property and solid beginnings of a hearthstone that Hogwarts clearly intended them to use. The future was looming and tomorrow not so far after all.

Now, with clear initial post-graduate intentions, the group had to think about precisely what came next as opposed to building cloud castles. Plans had to move beyond intending to eventually be architects to actually becoming.

With that in mind, the children began to seriously lay out plans for the Riddle-Granger estate with a magical hearthstone as a first foray into architecture. They sketched and wiped-away several dusty blueprints in chalk across their workroom floor. Marble, for their part, found the whole adventure grand and purposely tracked tiny, clawed prints through the plans.

It was in the midst of a discussion of what they wanted in that home that, sitting in their workroom, Millicent turned to Riddle and asked if they planned to stay with the group after graduation. They had time to think about it, of course, but Millicent thought it would be good to have a rough idea. Hadrian frowned and Riddle saw his magic ripple cold. Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but Millicent’s light touch on her arm had her snapping her jaw shut again.

Riddle knew that the Three--Hermione mostly--had intentionally shaped several aspects of who Riddle was. Where Hadrian had mostly-unintentionally ignited Ignatius, Petrus, and Aquila, Hermione had been careful and deliberate with Riddle. She’d fed them her magic to complete them and, in so doing, guided a series of personality traits, making them inquisitive and tenacious. It wasn’t entirely different from what the group was doing with the hearthstone.

But where the hearthstone was being shaped to be a stationary home, Hermione had chosen to ensure Riddle’s capacity for independence.

Riddle had known that they could leave. Technically. The reality of the situation could have been something different. Millicent could have decided at almost any time that they were too dangerous and bind them while they slept on her pillow. Hadrian had raw power and understood enough about stone to pulverize Riddle in a fit of pique. The technical ability to leave didn’t actually mean that Riddle could.

But here, Millicent was calmly if they wanted to stay, implying that their presence was in fact their choice and that the entire group would abide by whatever Riddle decided.
They had dreamed of escaping partly just to prove to themselves that they could.

Yet, there were certainly benefits to the situation. Riddle could hardly say they wanted to miss the rather lovely flares of Hadrian’s magic when he was in a temper.

And Hadrian had been in such a temper of late.

He had been for several months, his temper boiling under the surface of his skin and scraping at his throat. In Riddle’s eyes, it was fascinating to watch the ebb and flow of his magic in response.

Of course, for Riddle, that building storm was safe. Hadrian’s ire was diffusely directed toward society and, of late, it was focused toward a certain headmaster.

Riddle couldn’t remember a time when they’d viewed the headmaster as a safe harbor even if in this existence, the headmaster had never directly offered them threat.

But then, the three mostly homo-sapiens also assiduously hid Riddle from the headmaster’s sight. Unlike the other gargoyle, the Three never took Riddle into the grand hall. And, as Hadrian researched ever more about stones, he would gift Riddle miniscule stones carved to update and replace their levels of protection. Riddle found it fascinating to work with Hadrian to integrate those pieces into their overall enchantments, carefully weaving them in so that the new additions wouldn’t contradict or corrupt what was already in place.

It would have been difficult, all said and told, for the headmaster to provide Riddle with a direct threat as the enchantments woven through Riddle’s body rendered them just about invisible to the headmaster.

After all, like Riddle, Hadrian couldn’t have truthfully said that the headmaster had ever made him feel safe or even at ease. He’d never forgotten the feelings of discomfort he’d experienced as a first and second year in the man’s presence. Even when the sensation that the headmaster was trying to split open his head had diminished, Hadrian found himself failing to appreciate the headmaster’s continued tendency to refer to him either as “Harry” or “my boy.”

But, even more that the headmaster’s possessive presumption, Hadrian resented the lessons the headmaster provided Millicent-polyjuiced-as-Hadrian.

Hadrian could appreciate that the headmaster was trying to address a probable threat. What he despised was the headmaster’s efforts to teach him defensive skills while leaving the other students to flounder through poor defense instruction. If Voldemort ever did return as the headmaster suspected, then all students needed to be able to protect themselves. Voldemort’s previous methods for disruptions and destabilization had caused significant collateral damage. If Voldemort returned, he would likely engage similar behaviors. Yet, as things stood, only those students engaging in self-study could even produce decent shields much less hope to earn their defense NEWTS.

To deflect the attention directed at them when they had no ready answer, Riddle asked Hogwarts what had happened to the position. In their particular form of communication, Hogwarts told them about a certain man arriving in the castle for an interview. He didn’t get the position but, on his way out, he slunk into a room on the seventh floor with a package hidden in his sleeves. Hermione almost laughed as they watched Hogwarts’ depiction of Voldemort pace three times the seventh-floor hall before a door appeared. Of course Voldemort was involved. On the wall, he went in and left a diadem perched next to a cupboard.

Hermione and Hadrian knew precisely what the diadem was. Hadrian could hardly spend so much time in the Eagle’s nest without noticing the statue (white marble) of Ravenclaw that graced their
common room. Hermione, in turn, had been fascinated by Hogwarts’ history even before she set
sight on the building. She’d spent ages watching Hogwarts’ depictions of their memories. And
Hermione had taken note that Hogwarts almost always depicted the two-dimensional caricature of
Helena Ravenclaw with a diadem on her brow.

Now, Hermione suspected--and Hogwarts confirmed--that Voldemort had been able to use the
diadem to influence the defense position precisely because it had been Rowena’s. As readers well
know, Ravenclaw had been the school’s original defense specialist and that diadem had pieces of
her essence in it, just like any object that frequently used and beloved would.

Hermione excitedly theorized that if Riddle and Hadrian worked together to collect the diadem,
then the group could unwind the spells affecting the position. She strongly suspected--her hair
throwing out its usual sparks and Marble rolling in the flying magic that the task would be
impossible for magicians working alone. Together, she suspected they could manage. Hadrian had
a sudden flashback to a television show Dudley had once watched involving a handful of children
with elemental powers who could summon a greater Being. He huffed out a breath of laughter.

Hermione turned her attention to Hogwarts, distracted from the question of whether Riddle was
staying.

And Hadrian, well, Hadrian was reaching a hand out to Riddle asking “Shall we?” Riddle
clambered up his arm, settled on his shoulder.

Riddle loved these moments when Hadrian was focused on them. They liked the caressing feel of
Hadrian’s magic reaching for them. They ruffled their wings with the pleasure of it.

The diadem was precisely where Hogwarts’ had shown them. Hadrian stood, Riddle on his
shoulder, looking at the thing for a moment. Riddle read the inert web of magic around it. They
could see how the thing was set to activate upon physical contact, where the beselled compulsion
would kick in, and where defenses sat. Riddle’s magical literacy wasn't advanced enough to know
what, precisely would happen. They could only tell that something would.

But what captured their focus was the concentration of spirit. It sat there, anchored uneasily on the
diadem. Riddle thought it looked rather as if the piece of Being had been hacked off and strapped
into a crude harness of magic rather than integrated into the piece. They’d seen Hadrian’s work
with the hearthstone once the strange black piece had been removed. It was elegantly done and
becoming more integrated by the day. This, this was ugly and looked unhappy, if a blob of essence
could look unhappy.

Riddle suspected they were projecting their own disgust onto the piece.

Riddle wondered if they were to work with the other gargoyles if they could untwist it, have
Hadrian and company cast the necessary spells to unravel this. It was possible that in trying, the
group might end up stripping Ravenclaw’s beautiful enchantments alongside Voldemort’s hideous
ones. Riddle thought the absence of Ravenclaw’s stunning work might be worth the end of the
horror.

But, even if the group did succeed, that piece of spirit would still sit heavy unless they did
something with it. It wasn’t sentient--it didn’t have that flicker and movement that ignited Beings
demonstrated. But, still, something does not simply become nothing.

Their mind balked at the sheer variety of possibilities of what they could do with this piece of
Being. Riddle was suddenly reminded of the cultures of living bacteria used to turn milk into
yogurt.
Riddle puffed and hissed at it.

Riddle’s noise seemed to knock Hadrian out of whatever thoughts he’d been entertaining.

He rolled his shoulders and asked a quiet "It's a horcrux then?” Riddle’s affirmative prompted a “Well then. If you will?”

Riddle hesitated. There was something awkward about being asked to possess someone. Still. Needs must. And Riddle couldn’t say that they minded.

They draped their body across Hadrian’s shoulder and then backed out of their form. Their body went limp, looking a little bit as if Hadrian had attached a large pin to his shoulder. Riddle poured themself down Hadrian’s throat and then used the body’s moved their own stone form into their pocket.

It was different taking control of Hadrian with his assent. It felt like a warm bath or a heavy jacket on a cold day: a comfortable fit. It also helped that like this, Riddle didn’t have to struggle to channel magic through the body. Instead, Riddle’s power in Hadrian’s body, this connection, felt good.

The diadem went into Hadrian’s bag without issue.

Back in the workroom, they took the bag down to Hermione, who was chalking a complex diagnostic array with Hogwarts input. Millicent looked at the diadem. "I suppose," she mused "Voldemort used it for this purpose because he was too vain to wear it?” Riddle-in-Hadrian's shoulders spasmed with silent laughter.

And then Hadrian was nudging them out.

Riddle eyes riveted on Hadrian, wondering what this all felt life for him.

But then Hermione was speaking and Riddle's need to know pulled them into the conversation. The thing was a Horcrux as Riddle had suspected. It was dark and it was designed to attract and compelling, to defend and kill. But its main purpose was the wards. Hermione had been right: Voldemort had used its connection to Ravenclaw to weave the diadem’s enchantments into the defense position.

Standing there, as a ghost, their body still in Hadrian’s pocket, they fired ideas back and forth with Hermione and thought that they liked being with this group. Riddle found know that they actually wanted to. Riddle didn’t want to leave their sister. They didn’t want to be without Hermione’s considering care. Riddle found they were less disturbed by that knowledge than they had expected. But then, the realization was hardly on par with waking up as a species one hadn’t previously known existed.

And, anyway, staying with the group now didn’t preclude leaving later. It also didn’t mean they couldn’t make trips.

Chapter End Notes

I can't seem to decide what to do with the diadem. I was thinking about a keystone.
Any thoughts?
How a Wand was Won in a Fit of Internalized Pique

Chapter Summary

It is so easy to misinterpret those we underestimate.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For most people Hadrian had, over the years, become increasingly impenetrable. As a child, He’d learned to keep his face still and controlled. Then, at Hogwarts, he’d tapped into a natural inclination toward Oculmancy, which only grew as he did in part because most people simply don’t care to know or understand what most of the information pertaining to rocks stored in his head meant.

Added to that, Hadrian’s fascination with stones and skill with transfiguration led to a phase of human experimentation at the end of his sixth year and beginning of his seventh in which he took to turning parts of his own body to stone. McGonagall was horrified and tried to make him stop but he only smiled and thanked her for teaching him so much. She felt disturbed even as she felt a flicker of pleased pride. He had, after all, been able to achieve a level of skill that enabled him to transform part of his face--usually his left ear and jaw--to stone while leaving his face mobile. Yet, the pull of the stone meant his already limited facial expressions shifted away from social norms and expectations.

The result was that people could not read him with any sort of ease who could not read his magic--as Riddle and company could--or were linked to him quite so completely as Millicent and Hermione were.

The stone-and-flesh face he wore, however, did not mean Hadrian did not feel things deeply. Hadrian felt things very, very deeply indeed. Still waters run deep as many people point out with complete inaccuracy. A puddle can, as Hermione liked to point out, be quite still.

Usually Hadrian’s stillness was a non issue. There were very few people among the majority of students at the school who tried to read Hadrian with any regularity or thought one thing or another about his emotions. As the reader knows, most of the students were just-short of incapable of even seeing any of the three friends to begin with. They had become so used to their eyes sliding away that the Three now had to use charms to get the other students to look at them.

There were exceptions among the student body, including one Luna Lovegood who had developed a trick of never looking directly at all. Instead, she spoke to them by looking near them. Hermione speculated that Luna believed they were some of her (imaginary) creatures and not human at all, which comment got Riddle thinking.

The professors, though, they could see the three students. Hermione had ensured they created explicit exceptions for in the charms and enchantments on their bracelets. It was the teachers then who tried to read the children’s faces and tried to shape their understanding. Teachers like McGonagall, who still wanted Miss Granger to reach out to other Gryffindor students and looked at Potter and Bulstrode with dissatisfaction. According to McGonagall, the two were cold and unwelcoming, not people she felt promoted healthy development. She further found the other
students complete disregard of the three highly distressing but could think of no school rule to allow her to require the students to remove those horrid, charmed bracelets. Besides which, Flitwick had, much to her dissatisfaction, declared the bracelets part of the children’s independent charms research projects.

Then there was Snape, who increasingly looked at the Three with discontent, his vow to protect Hadrian a tightening noose around his neck. For Snape, well, he had so many issues with the situation that it would likely be easier to rewrite another chapter on him entirely. It suffices here to note that he stared, spied, and plotted. As time flowed by, his vow to protect the child began to weigh on his shoulders, putting pressure on his neck and choking him. He watched even closer and felt increasingly unnerved by their stolid placidity. He could not gauge them and Flitwick seemed disinclined to share their secrets.

The now-not-so-new Defense Professor Whipswitch, the first in half a century to hold the position for a second year (and didn’t that cause whispers), found the Three flat out disturbing. Unlike the other teachers, they hadn’t watched the Three grow into what they were. Instead, they’d arrived sixth year to find three faces who seemed to regard the former-curse breaker with bemused non-shallance. Ms. Bulstrode, the professor suspected, sneered whenever she saw them. They didn’t think Mr. Potter had ever expressed emotion around them. Yet, from sixth year into seventh, the Three performed in class without problem. Suspiciously, their performances never fluctuated. They all did precisely as requested, no less but also no more. And when Professor Whipswitch inquired into what was going on with the then-sixth years, Flitwick glowed with pride, exclaiming over their brilliance. Whipswitch asked if they’d been cursed and quietly agreed with McGonagall after learning about the bracelets. No children should have been that frozen.

Hearing about the children’s obsession with stones, Whipswitch did--once--ask Mr. Potter what methods he might take to incorporate stones into his defense against the dark arts. The child had stared at them before treating them to a description of how the precise molecular structure of crystals could be used to trap specific kinds of non-corporeal entities. Whipswitch did not understand what a molecular structure was or how an observation effect could be used on electrons (whatever they were) to &hellip; somehow or another trick specific non-corporeal Beings a trap but the cold calculation on the child’s face worried them.

Regardless of what their teachers could see, the readers know that Hadrian was very, very passionate. He had his select group of things that he poured his attention and love into. And, for all the headmaster’s attempts, those things had not changed substantially in years.

Nonetheless, the headmaster did try. In meetings with the Hadrian-who-was-Millicent, the headmaster quietly pushed the importance of expanding social groups and networking. He implied heavy censure on those who tried to maintain neutrality and against those people who stood quietly by a time of conflict. He urged the boy to consider that claims of neutrality actually supported the status quo and those already in power. He emphasized the importance of acting against oppression.

He subtly disparaged those who fled instead of fought.

Millicent, listening to the quiet digs against her family and understood the points the headmaster was making alongside as he also explained the use of dragon’s blood in warding. When she shared the lessons, her friends understood those implications as well. Hadrian seethed. He found himself looking at the headmaster with increasing contempt.

Still, as Hermione, hugging Hadrian and then leaning against Millicent, argued, the headmaster’s point was a good one. Seeing oppression and doing nothing was a form of support for that oppression. The mistake, as Millicent saw it, was to imply that only the headmaster’s planned
opposition to oppression was legitimate. In fact, it confused Hermione that the headmaster seemed
to think that the system was sufficient and that it was only individuals who needed to be influenced.

So it was that the Three and Riddle, to a lesser extent Aquila as well, actually agreed with the
headmaster that an individual’s should try and act against perceived evils. They, however, felt
people should do so before the shit hit the fan. Just like all children needed an opportunity to learn
to defend themselves, the Three wanted to push equality and resource access before another war
could start rather than prepare at the expense of the community. For them, that meant building.
They had their dream library after all.

But the headmaster did not know any of that. Unaware, the headmaster kept pushing during his
lessons.

And Hadrian’s anger grew with every intimation that his friends were keeping him from his
potential. He resented the idea that these beloved people were not enough.

Perhaps if the headmaster had lauded the friends and then suggested expanding circles of friends,
the message might have been better received.

But, the headmaster didn’t and Hadrian resented the emotional harm he did his friends, however
unintentional.

Hadrian went from angry to seething.

He felt things deeply, after all.

Much to Riddle’s fascination, Hadrian felt the years of frustration build up in his throat and trickle
across his shoulders until the feeling reached his fingers.

And, one day, seventh year when Spring broke, the defense professor had a dueling championship
outside on the lawn. Attendance and participation was mandatory for all defense students.
Seven circles were laid out, one per year.

There were refreshment tables and an overwhelming festive atmosphere as children ran about,
watching the different dueling pairs.

Towards the end of the day, Hadrian stood watching as Hermione built a rather stunning illusion of
a crystal forest growing through the ring. She conjured just enough real crystal to have the other
student stumbling about the ring. She’d started the day with flash and light displays and built to
this.

The headmaster appeared at Hadrian’s side as he watched Hermione in the ring. Students swarmed
around them, bumping and jostling to see better. A fair number had glanced side-long at him with
quizzical expressions as if they couldn’t quite remember who he was. Hermione, they outright
stared at as she took down student after student.

The headmaster applauded as the trees she had called suddenly burst forth with birds, he remarked
on her talent with twinkle in his eye. Hadrian had stiffened slightly when the headmaster had
appeared and he felt the familiar anger crawl in his throat. Petrus grumbled in Hadrian’s pocket and
shared emotions linked their magic in a familiar feedback loop, heightening a very specific skill
set.

The reader will remember Hadrian’s skill at picking pockets. They will remember that Petrus and
company had been awakened in connection with certain actions and with certain affinities. And
they will remember that Hadrian had his own brand of justice.
Remembering all that, the reader will not be surprised that Hadrian’s let his hand and magic snap out in a wandless *accio* that snatched the headmaster’s wand from his sleeve. Then, from Hadrian’s hand to Petrus’, that wand disappeared into the charmed bag kept beneath Hadrian’s outer robes. It was the matter of an inhale, a twitch, and an exhale again.

Hadrian’s face did not display his anger and it did not display his nerves. He looked stony as he watched his friend win another duel. Her opponent was laughing as Hermione’s last spell transformed their outer robes into a kite that caught a gust of conjured wind, carrying them from the dueling circle.

Millicent appeared at his side when the headmaster finally moved away. Petrus slipped over to her, joining Aquila and Ignatius in her pocket. Marble in turn slithered over to Hadrian and bit the artery in his arm affectionately. Millicent nudged his shoulder and felt Hadrian’s roiling anger calm slightly even if his magic still twitched with nerves.

A half an hour later, Hermione was the seventh years’ winner and back with her friends.

Only then did Hadrian walk with his friends toward the castle, leaving the headmaster talking with the students still scattered across the lawn. A phoenix soared over the students’ heads, a glow of golden fire against the evening’s sunset.

Once inside, Hadrian took a left instead of a right and his friends smoothly followed him in that deviation from their usual path. They paused near the headmaster’s office and Hadrian opened the wall. He led the way into the empty office, Hermione hissing in shock over his actions. He could feel her curiosity building. In the middle of the office, he opened up the floor and dropped the wand inside. The group then let them through the floor entirely, leaving the wand behind and closing the floor behind them.

Hermione kept her questions in her mouth until they were safely behind the wards in their workroom.

The headmaster would cast spell after spell to try and find that wand. He found himself disturbed when spells cast to uncover his own wand brought to him his-long-unused childhood wand, its warm wood familiar under his fingers even after all these years.

And, spells to search for a specific, yew wand declared that the thing was in his office even as no amount of searching uncovered a sliver of its wood.

And Hadrian, for his part, felt a smug satisfaction roll through him when he saw the headmaster, his twisted sense of justice sated. He left Hogwarts at the end of that seventh year feeling as if he’d accomplished what he could there and promising the castle that they’d be in contact.

Chapter End Notes

I did it. I got to graduation.

I hope my implications were clear re: leaving the wand in the castle.
Sometimes endings and beginnings are the same thing.

Imagine this: You’re done. You finished your formal education. That period during which other people had carefully plotted your life is over and from here on out nothing will follow such a clear trajectory.

You feel like you’ve been cut loose. As much as you expected it--planned for this moment--it still feels weird that there is no longer an established path to follow.

You stand on the lawn of your friend’s house after a celebration of that ending. You think it feels like a funeral just as much as an achievement. You look up at stars that you could never have seen from your own parents’ house. You wonder if it’s the wizarding space built in or a spell to clear light pollution?

Your friend’s parents are proud. Your own family is happy for you, if baffled by the communities you’ve become a part of. Your friends just about glow red with happiness.

But you still feel unmoored and a little melancholy.

You know that from here on out, you are on your own. The society you are now a part of will not catch you if you stumble. In fact, most of that society would expect you to fail if they thought of you at all. No one but your friends expect you to succeed.

You are thrilled and terrified because this future is so very much more open than anything that’s happened before. There isn’t an easy structure to fall back on. No one is going to expect you to be on a train twice a year on a specific day.

You stare at the stars and think about how this leaves you open to different possibilities. You feel intimidated.

You shiver a bit at the cool night air on your face and hands but more so because of your spiraling melancholy.

You feel someone come up behind you. There is a pause and you allow your body to relax. The person steps close and puts hands on your waist, rests a chin on your shoulder, and you lean back, just lightly.

And you think that the world is full of possibilities, horrors and failures as well as excitement and new experiences. There is only a sliver of a chance that you’ll succeed at all of your goals. But there is also a strong likelihood that you’ll surpass at least some of them. It’s not like you have only one dream and each of those are open to adjustment. You’re adaptable.

There is a huff of breath across your neck that prompts a new shiver through your body and
goosebumps down your arm. You smile and lean back a little more.

You think that whatever happens, it’s important that you’ll have at least tried. And that matters. You won’t have just stood by and watched. You won’t have just been angry, you’ll have attempted to act in the best way you knew how.

Besides, you acknowledge that you are so very, very lucky. You know that you are fortune-favored because you have your friends and your family to feel proud and help.

And those things, well, those things are so very amazing.

So, you place your hands on top of your friend’s and grin at the stars. You think this next bit of your like might go alright.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was initially much longer and much more melancholy. And then I decided it sucked as such. I cut out a piece of the middle, text which I'll likely work in elsewhere. Bwahaha.

Anyhow, I thought it would be interesting to play with second-person POV here. Not sure if it works better as such or would have hit my target in third. That said, it is what it is.
The State of History

Chapter Summary

The past isn't ever, truly over.

Chapter Notes

This is very, very world-buildy. If you're looking for plot, skip this one.

This was supposed to be a very, very different chapter. Instead, most of what was supposed to be got shuffled to the next.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The history classes that took place in Hogwarts’ bones were an atrocity to the discipline. To this writer’s great sorrow, the content buried within the classes was actually good. After all, learning about the history of interspecies relations is essential for understanding contemporary society. But the presentation of history in Hogwarts when Hadrian and his friends attended classes was so bad that the value of the subject was lost upon the students. And without the packaging explaining to students why they should learn history, many didn’t.

For the politicians in the Ministry of Magic, that was--of course--part of the point of allowing a ghost to hold classes. If the children had listened to and comprehended their history classes, they might have understood how their government worked and then tried to change it to their own benefit.

Hadrian and his friends--particularly Hermione--had actually paid some attention and done some outside reading. But she had focused on the last war. As such, the group had missed the necessity of learning the longer scope of history.

Or, they did until they were out of school.

Because in the days that followed Hogwarts, the friends spread their architectural blueprints across a table in the Bulstrodes’ study. They wanted to check and recheck their plans and the placement of the hearthstone before they laid it. Once laid, after all, a hearthstone does not usually care to be moved no matter the improvement of energy flow. They sink tendrils into the land, wrapping their magic on the stones beneath them.

So Hadrian insisted they be sure before they removed their stone from its current, fiery nest in the Bulstrodes’ own, sleeping hearth.

It was at that point that Millicent’s mother looked over their plans, approval shining in her eyes and her tone sharp as she asked them if they were going to abide by the law during this process. Legally, they needed to register their property before they erected their first building. She wanted to be prepared for the possible ramifications of whatever they decided.
This, to Riddle and Hermione’s horror, they had not known. Unable to abide their own ignorance, the two insisted they roll their plans away. And, from the Bulstrodes' library, the group pulled the legal corpus of Magical Britain to spread in their plans’ place across the worktable.

Hadrian sighed as they did so, forcing himself to suppress his impatience. Marble helped by eating his flashes of annoyance. Still, he thought that this was stupid. In his frustration, he grumbled that the law was stupid. He was to soon find that some of the law was worse than stupid.

Because here is where understanding the history of a people and of a state is so vital: law in places like the British Isles--on both the magical and mundane--is grounded in precedence and historical context.

Legally, any time a citizen of Magical Britain chose to lay down roots in a new space, they had to register their intent.

Hadrian grumbled that this suggested that the state wanted to monitor them.

But Hermione and Riddle kept digging, chasing down what this meant and how it was enacted.

In order to understand the law, the group had to consume the history of the Magical British state.

Now, a state is, as the reader likely knows, a fictional beast. States exist because Beings shape the idea of them and then believe in them. Those states continue to exist because people create rules to follow, establish in-group and out-groups, and then enforce their own lines.

In the case of magical Britain, Hermione found that the state initially came into existence to protect its subject-citizens.

Long, long ago, a set of beleaguered individuals had banded together with blood on their hands and hopes in their hollow chests. They were tired. Some wanted to sit and be done. But one named Iceni had bared their teeth at the world and declared that they refused to stand by and do nothing. Instead, Iceni dreamed aloud, planted ideas, and believed.

With Iceni pushing, that group created a rudimentary state. The rules were simple: everyone was to be known so that no-one could be lost. And in knowing one another, they would protect one another.

With the security of the many, the group grew. But as they increased in number, it was no longer possible to know every individual in the group. Iceni pushed that unconnected collection of individuals to subdivide into families. They wanted to ensure that no single magical Being would drift alone and forgotten.

The group continued to increase in number and, in so doing, they expanded across space. It was no longer possible to form single, yearly meetings with every member. So they constructed an Althing,* to which each family sent a representative to speak for the whole. They trained owls to fly their messages back and forth to hear the will of the families so that the representative could speak with their families’ individual members’ voices.

The families’ sent woven tapestries with the symbols of their members to the Althing so that the representatives might not forget those who they spoke for during their absence.

The families agreed on a place. They dug into the earth and set stones above them to greet the sun that the land might bear witness to their doings. Discussions and debates grew larger and longer. They set wards around the land to protect them from prying eyes. They set a hearth stone to anchor them and each family sent a member to bled for it.

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* The Althing is a council meeting in which the representatives of the communities gather to discuss and make decisions that affect the whole.
Each drop of blood and bit of magic they let loose sent the Ministry's root deep into the earth.

It became tradition for each new addition to a family to make the journey to the Althing to bleed onto that stone and become part of the wards so that they would always have a safe place to run in times of need.

Iceni’s chosen sister, a wanderer by nature, suggested that all families name their seats so that all subject-citizens under the state’s protection know where the safe-havens across the Isles were hidden.

The building that was the Althing could not have said when they became aware. But they knew themself as they read those symbols. They recognized the people behind them when they came and integrated them into their own Being when they bled.

And they knew themself when some of those named seats found their own selves.

And there were benefits to the system. Banding together, these Beings passed knowledge between individuals and families. Together, they were more than they had been as individuals. Building on one another’s shoulders, there was a rapid increase in scholarship, magics, and arts. Iceni was finally able to wash death off of their feet and put their hands to the loom. And, finally, Iceni died.

And, as happens so frequently, the descendants of the originals forget that the choice to form a state was theirs. They begin to see the state as a given, an inevitability.

But of course it isn’t. A state only exists as long as a people will it so. A building can remain without its inhabitants for a time, but a state cannot survive at all.

If people stop believing in the state, stop following the laws, well, then a state can fail. Look at the Holy Roman Empire, which dissolved to barely a tear in 1806 when a handful of politicians signed a few documents declaring the centuries-old beast was dead. Or look to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which collapsed under its own weight a century later.

Then there are the states that fail their people more directly. People follow a state because they believe in it (or don’t care enough not to). But belief is edged. People agree to follow a state because they are getting something in return. If the state fails in its promises, then their inhabitants often revolt. Then there are violent upheavals with declarations that “enough is enough” and the thrust of a knife through the state’s neck. The blood spilled with those wounds is usually drawn from the people.

Those states, the ones that succumb to violent upheaval, are usually the ones that protect the few at the expense of the many. Those states are the ones that concentrate power in the hands of the few, hurting the many in order to support the excess of just a handful.

Take, for example, those early rules demanding each family register their seat so that the state could protect them and so that individuals could find refuge.

Three centuries later and the rule became law. A monarch and a leader tried to unite the mundane and the magical. They wanted to create a united land and they, for their brief rule, laid out laws to shape the state just so. The Althing became a Ministry and a separate Wizenot with power restricted to magical concerns, not mundane.

The two build Camelot as a fortress to protect their young government.

But a state rarely involves only two. You need consent from the governed for a successful state.
To pacify his own nobles, Arthur pasted mundane law on top of magical and declared that any new magical family needed an to receive permission from the reigning monarch to establish themselves. It would limit the number of magical voices.

But Arthur was mundane and short lived. He died at war and when the news reached Merlin, they denied the news, sobbed that Arthur would return, and vanished. Rumors circulated that Merlin encased themself in crystal to wait for Arthur’s eventual return.

There was no clear succession, which is a problem with hereditary states.

Morgana scraped together the destitute peoples. The magical heads of family crowned her queen in absentia even as she sneered at them and told them no. But they were a people at war, with invasions from across the water. She did not take the time to reshape a new state. She was too busy standing back-to-back with Nimueh, the one with a spear and the other a stave, to protect their peoples.

The two lived long, bloody lives, but they protected their people. Hogwarts remembered them just slightly, remember the two striding through their bones and complimenting Rowena on her wards.

Morgana died without naming successor. She had disliked the idea of a monarchy. She’d thought it too unequal, too prone to abuse. Instead, she’d limited her own power in favor of the Ministry. Besides, she left a strong Wizenot behind her, vested with the power to oversee the law. The two were supposed to counter-balance one another.

But a few families looked around them at those laws declaring the only new families that could form had to receive permission from the reigning monarch. And they quietly added the stipulation that only an established family in good standing could register a new property. They remembered the power of Camelot and they knew the power an unauthorized family with a magical property could have. Just look at Hogwarts, with its solid walls and strong wards.

It was best, they whispered among themselves, to prevent young upstarts from shifting power away from those who knew better. They needed to prevent another Merlin with his Camelot. They wanted to stop another Hogwarts before it could be built.

And over the centuries the British Ministry of Magic lost sight of the original reason for the state’s existence. Instead of supporting the welfare of the many, its twisted purpose allowed power to be concentrated in the hands of a few. The state was teetering on the line of acceptability. It was failing, but not completely, in its promises to protect.

There were some very legitimate reasons that Riddle had wanted to burn the state to the ground. Hadrian thought he might agree.

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* Althing (Alþingi) is an old form of Icelandic parliament, formed in the 10th century. I played fast and loose with actual history and threw the magical Althing a few centuries before the Icelandic.

Let me know if I have mistakes? My eyes aren't focussing any longer.
I think there was some comment I was going to add, but I'm too tired. I'm often too tired to say what I meant to say here. Ha.

Next day update: I remembered. See end notes.

Individual laws don't mean much if they aren't enforced. And, if they aren't, then—ignored and all but forgotten—they become dead letter.

As the group explored that aspect of the law, Riddle felt sick at the thought. For them, the concept of dead letters crept across his tongue like rotting fish. Humans may have had a comparable reaction to hear leprosy and the attendant necrosis described. Imagining dead flesh, hanging onto living limbs is rarely something people find pleasant.

And the comparison is apt: for the state, dead letter law acts a bit like flesh that dies and doesn't heal. After all, the more dead letter on the books, the more a state appears to have failed in their promises. That, in turn, can undermine belief in the state.

Perhaps not the perfect example, but in their research the group found out that within Magical Britain it was technically illegal to actively cast on another Being without their informed consent. Passive magical fields were considered fair game, meaning they were mostly within the clear. But there had hardly been a day in Hogwarts when some student hadn’t cast on another without prior warning. But, that law was quietly ignored and hadn’t been enforced for more than two centuries.

Hadrian scoffed in disgust. It was then technically unacceptable to force bodily transformations outside of the dueling ring. He was both relieved and appalled to hear it.

That was bad enough.

Worse, Hermione felt, was that many states apply the law unequally. They enforce the law, but only for some. They punish “miscreants” and “criminals,” but only from certain groups.

It was, for example, illegal within Magical Britain for children to cast magic in the hallways of Hogwarts and during the summer, ostensibly for their own protection. The reader has likely come up against that restriction before.

Yet, the Ministry’s staff only prosecuted that offense when they wanted to cut out specific individuals, usually targeting those with non-magical backgrounds. The last time someone with a
magical background had been charged with that offense had been the tiny Frankincense Wilkens, whose guardian had angered three members of the board. Those members had seen the child use magic to make their wooden duck roll across a path in their guardian’s garden. They had then filed the suit and the child’s wand had been snapped.

And here again, the difference in familiarity with the world matters. Wilkens took Frankincense to Estonia, where the child received a new wand and finished their education before moving back to Britain. The process was frustrating and life-altering but hardly world-ending.

The Ministry of Magic, then, was guilty of both carrying dead letters and unequally applying its own laws. In short, the Ministry’s participants ignored or wielded the law like a weapon to target their own, perceived enemies. One legal writer had compared the system to a lion. The Ministry was often too lazy to do anything, but when it did, it was brutal and vicious.

Hermione wanted to burn through the stupid, discriminatory law. She was rapidly losing her belief in the state’s efficacy. She seethed, asked why they should adhere to unjust laws.

Part of Hermione wanted to thumb her nose at the Ministry and refuse to follow their rules. Obeying the state served to support it, after all.

Her hair threw sparks that fizzled as they thrashed against the protection spell Millicent had automatically cast over their books.

Millicent’s mother happened to be there for that particular display. She watched her daughter’s friend with amusement. Far from dismay, these demonstrations of magical power were part of the reason she had never raised any concerns over her daughter’s continued and growing investment in Granger.

Indeed, Bulstrode looked at her daughter’s group of Three with distinct approval. Millicent had—as Bulstrodes did—chosen well in her companions. They would not have been Bulstrode’s own choices but her daughter had a different skill set than she did. These companions suited her. They were intelligent and motivated.

And in that, they suited Bulstrode as well. They’d forced her to alter her plans for the future but Bulstrode was flexible. She well knew that inflexibility ended in catastrophe. Only look at the fools spouting about a golden age who know sat in Azkaban.

But for all that her was pleased with the group, her daughter and her friends were still young. They didn’t quite see the rather tangled web generations of bigotry had spun. But that was part of the point of parents and guardians; to be a node in a network of experience.

Bulstrode rapped her cup on the table, drawing the group’s attention. She found it slightly unnerving how the gargoyle’s stone heads would turn and state with those unblinking eyes.

“You have,” she told the group, “a series of choices. The core matter at hand is whether or not to form some form of family unit and register your planned magical estate in accordance with the law or not.

“If you choose not to register, to thumb your nose at the Ministry, you would need to carefully establish wards to mask the magic you are funneling into your land. I am very aware that you know how.

“But, if you are found out, the Ministry would have the legal right to strip you of your land. Whether they do would depend on the politics of the moment. Depending on the minister and
whoever is whispering in their ear, you might be exiled from other parts of magical Britain. They might declare you an enemy of Magical Britain and lean into their treaties with the sovereign Goblin state and demand your exclusion, which would limit your access to your resources. Perhaps the minister would feel threatened and send aurors to arrest you all. The consequences of your response to that would likely result in your imprisonment or the deaths of dozens if you chose to resist,” Bulstrode watched the dismay in Hermione’s face.

“Or,” she continued,” you could decide to follow the law and register.

“Unlike some, you are privileged with options. Millicent could register the estate as a Bulstrode property - although it would then technically belong to me. Alternatively, I could take Hermione into our house and she could register as a younger Bulstrode. She would lose her own right to her family name but the property would be established as an auxiliary property. In the Bulstrode name but not under direct control. Or, possibly, Hadrian could declare his family a formal ally of the Bulstrodes and register with our backing to form a new Potter estate. But, you two,” Bulstrode nodded at Millicent and Hermione, “would have to join Hadrian’s family.

“Of course,” Bulstrode informed the company, her voice like sandstone, “registration would also mean that the state knew where your property was. They could, theoretically, send inspectors to check your wards or raid your home if there are reports of illegal artifacts. But they would not legally have the right to strip you of your land.” Bulstrode paused there.

The entire group of eight exchanged glances. Hermione’s hair hadn’t stopped sparkling, but there went Bulstrode’s daughter’s hand to her shoulder. Bulstrode kept her smile inside. Only a fool would miss where that was going.

“As you weigh your decisions,” Bulstrode continued after a moment, “consider this: you have as a group mostly flown under the attention of the Ministry. You shaped your classmates in such a way that they barely remember you exist. That same work does not apply to anyone who has been outside of Hogwarts all these years.

“Furthermore, from what I gather, Dumbledore is invested in your group because of Hadrian. That means he will track you. He is not likely to let you slip away,” Bulstrode noted with interest that Hadrian twitched at that and Hermione’s face pinched. She looked even more furious.

Bulstrode liked her. She could listen when angry, which was a trait Bulstrode could respect.

Millicent looked her mother in the eye, “What would you do, mother, if you were us?” she asked.

“I am not you,” Bulstrode snapped back, her lips tilting in the same smile Hadrian usually saw on Millicent’s face, “But I would play a long game. I would register and decide what my goals for the state were. You say you want to change things, you want to burn the whole institution to the ground if I understand Riddle right,” Bulstrode looked at the Being. They were unrepentant.

“But we have seen where that goes before. Going that route, you will see casualties of war whether you want them or not because those currently holding the Ministry’s reins will not go quietly.

“And rebuilding is not easy. You’d still have to decide what should take the Ministry’s place unless your goal is anarchy and I highly doubt that.

“So I would register and I would figure out what I needed to do to achieve my goals, be they changes to Hogwarts’s curriculum or something more encompassing.” Bulstrode lifted her cup and watched as the children—her children, she thought—turned to each other again, their voices low in consideration. She stood and left them to it.
Bulstrode remembered when she had made similar discoveries. Her goal, after Hogwarts, had been to live. These children lived in a very different world and they would have to make their own decisions about whether to trim dead letters off the law or if they wanted to try and enact significant changes to the judicial system. But, they would hardly be able to do it all alone and she looked forward to seeing what kind of merry games they led her into.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your wonderful kudos and comments. They've been very appreciated.

I would be interested in finding out if you want more world building. Or, should I just say all-right-then and move on without the discussion of the very short discussion of the goblin's and such?

Also - I hope you're all safe and comfortable.
Chapter Summary

Language is difficult to translate, particularly when it comes to words like "family."

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your responses about adding in goblin-centered world building. Ya'll said yes, so here it is. It's actually more than I planned. I keep writing chapters and then cutting them in two because they are more than I intend.

Keep in mind that "pebbles" in this story and goblin children.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 28 : The Clan as Family

Family is a fascinating concept. The inclusion of the in and out, how much which layer of identity matters—be it blood or culture—depends on the specific society. The rules or connections are rarely written in stone.

Well, rarely written in stone among *homo sapiens*. There are other groups that frequently write their family connections and alliances in stone.

Readers will be unsurprised to learn that the goblins employ that particular practice.

But then goblins also don’t have families in the same way homo sapiens do. Indeed, goblins don’t even quite have the word for family in Gobbledigook. The goblins are not, after all, homo sapiens and should not be assumed to hold the same standards or practices.

Despite their connections with Flitwick, Hadrian, Hermione, Millicent, Riddle and company only learned about those details their first year out of Hogwarts after going to the goblins in the Gringott’s Clan for advice about their planned work and their issues with families.

Flitwick suggested it in part because, over the past year, they had been considering sending the children to become acquainted with the Clan. But one did not do that for no clear reason. But now there was a solid reason for the children to go.

To make it even better, it was a reason that would interest the Clan.

After all, goblins did not just have a different understanding of family than homo sapiens but had fought wars over it.

The reader possibly knows—it is better known now than it was in Hadrian’s childhood—that goblin communities (at least those on the British Isles) have a word they prefer to translate into English as “clan.” The word they choose to translate as “family” specifically means those related closely enough by blood that the Beings in question shouldn’t fuck on account of twisted power
imbalances and definitely shouldn’t procreate because of possible genetic twising.

More often than not, goblins used their word “family” to inform someone that any affection held was entirely platonic and never had a chance of changing.

Readers will not be able to comprehend the full extent of that meaning without seeing the word used properly in action in order to form a relationship with it.

Toward that end, take the famous and beloved adventure epic (sung as a quintuple) *Beyond the Flows of Lava there was a Monster with Teeth*. Notoriously, in that stunning epic Fangs’nClaws fights what they clearly believe is a romantic axe battle alongside Swordswallow. When well-choreographed, the rhythmic bashing of the axes compliments the lyrics, creating the impression of a truly amorous scene (many homo sapiens might compare the effect to lilting violins). Given that the act is written from Fangs’nClaws’ perspective, that is precisely how the listener should understand it.

But, as the last enemy is slaughtered and Fangs’nClaws turns to Swordswallow, the latter declares “you’re like family to me.” Even knowing it’s coming; the audience almost always gasps. To then hear *that* phrase is to know, no matter how frenzied the battle, any chance of a romantic entanglement is lost.

One does not form amorous relationships with family. The reader should also note that people do not become family by forming physical entanglements. “Family” is a genetic connection and perhaps a feeling of affection stemming from probable proximity.

“Clan,” in contrast, carries the weight in Gobbledigook that “Family” does for some in English. And “clan” is a term not to be used frivolously or dismissively. To say “you’re like Clan” is to declare you’d like to nominate that Being for acceptance into your Clan. To declare “you could never be clan” is to inform the listener that you would rather not encounter them again in this life.

In contrast to acknowledge that someone *is* clan is to remind that Being that you labor together towards mutual benefits and overall improved quality of life. And that, that is to imply a tight bond of affection and mutual dependence for survival. That is to say you care.

Some homo sapiens use “family” to mean such things. “Family” for magical Britain, however, seems to imply obligation more than affection and blood more than connection. To say “you’re a Black,” for example, was to tell a Being that they were obligated to hold to specific values in line with the family and regardless of one’s own feelings. To say “you’re a Black” was to demand contribution to their blood-group above all others and behave in particular ways regardless of specific skills.

Now, “Clan” had some of that obligation regarding contribution. Clan participation, after all, was centered around labor and group participation.

In fact, homo sapiens readers might understand clans as “working groups.” Because, as its basic level and stripped of the emotional components, a clan is composed of a group of Beings laboring for the benefit of the whole and thereby the individual. A happy ecosystem is a healthy ecosystem, crèche leaders liked to inform their charges.

But here again, the reader must be careful in considering the implications of the phrase in the one language versus the other. “Working group” in English, after all, implies a much more limited reality than the word in Gobbledygook conveys. In particular, the English phrase just doesn’t have the emotional weight or imply the extent of coverage.
Goblin’s valued labor; they were proud of their work.

Here again, homo sapiens might better comprehend the meaning of “Clan” and its relation to labor by seeing the term in action.

Take then, for example, Spear-in-Heart. They were a goblin of the Clan Gringotts. When Hadrian Potter graduated from Hogwarts, Spear-in-Heart served the Clan as the Potter family account manager, consulted on the Hermione Granger account, and did rotations as scout second-class. They worked to the best of their ability and their labor honored their Clan. That year, they also happened to be celebrating their seventh year Housing with Ironwheel, with whom they were proud to labor directly alongside.

Indeed, seven years prior, Ironwheel had touched Spear-in-Heart’s claws and said “I would labor alongside you,” which had been paramount to declaring undying adoration. Spear-in-Heart could not have thought of a more apt phrase for expression passion. In fact, part of the reason the epic involving Swordswallow had such resonance was precisely because listening to the clashing axes, the audience expected a line about labor. There were countless songs in which the dual heroes battled side-by-side and then sang those words with heaving, breathlessness before biting one another affectionately.

Such a line conveyed that the work you did, from washing up to sharpening a spear, was for the mutual benefit of the group and best-done side-by-side for the rest of your lives.

Nonetheless, despite the romance of the moment, Spear-in-Heart had demanded they wait until the privacy of a bedded-room before they permitted Ironwheel to bite them.

Theirs was a truly passionate Housing with all that implies. And that passionate housing had, some years prior, resulted in work with the Clan’s medi-goblins and family counselors to produce a shiny little pebble, with lovely pointed ears.

Note, reader, that the Spear-in-Heart and Ironwheel were in the same Clan and Housing together, but were not married. Goblins neither marry nor, in choosing to cohabitate, become family.

Spear-in-Heart and Ironwheel were, however, both family to their pebble, who was not yet Clan and—as such—had no employment and had not taken on a name. The two Clansgoblins’ called their pebble Beryl in affection and sent them dutifully to creche that they might grow in Clan potential. But their name would wait until the day they declared themselves for the clan or didn’t.

If the little seven-year old pebble called Beryl did declare themselves a part of Clan Gringotts, then they would be joining a community of thousands of goblins, each of whom had specific tasks in accordance with their skills and interest. These included account managers like Spear-in-Heart with their gifts for seeing to the heart of a Being, cooks with their mushroom-magic, as well as sorters and pickers with their skills for patience and detail.

Spear-in-Heart rather suspected that their pebble-called-Beryl would declare for the clan and choose to join the medical profession as a roller. From a young age, it had been clear their pebble was differently abled than many of their peers. Reading was mostly beyond them but they excelled at singing simple songs and enjoyed rolling bandages with those tunes patted neatly inside. Whatever they chose, they could join the Clan in their capacity and contribute to their ability.

Spear-in-Heart was so very proud of them. Thinking of them working with their caretaker and the rest of their creche often had Spear-in-Hearts baring their teeth in happy pleasure while they cared for the Potter accounts and dug deeper into that family’s history.
Even if Spear-in-Heart’s pebble had been an entirely different pebble, that was one job that they never would have taken: Potter family account manager. They could have chosen to become a different account manager, certainly. It would even have been a possible boon if they could have taken a related account as any knowledge gleaned from growing-up so close to the Potter account would have been well used. But inheriting a position rarely went well as the worker often became too narrow-sighted. Each goblin had to earn their place.

Spear-in-Heart had earned the position by excelling in history and accounting in creche. They had learned about the past alongside balancing equations and the magic of accounting.

Back in creche, Spear-in-Heart had learned about the horrors of the changing definition of “family” in the above after the homo sapiens Morgana had died. They studied about the homo sapiens whittling away at their own ranks. They had heard about how the homo sapiens had tried to claim ownership of the below just as it had of the above and further claimed that the goblins—without their own families—could have no seat in such a government. The goblins told the homo sapiens that they could choke on their limited world views and fought a war to keep the homo sapiens out of their business.

Neither side won that war. But most conflicts do not end in unconditional surrender. Over the course of two wars, the goblins won the right to limit homo sapiens’ access to the underground. And the humans limited goblins access to the above. Both species agreed to select a single site to function as a between. The Goblins nominated Gringotts and established a new Clan to serve it. Gringotts had watched and looked over the two species interactions faithfully for centuries.

The homo sapiens had chosen their then-state-building. But then homo sapiens had murdered that building during the third clan-family war for being too open to the goblins.

Spear-in-Heart’d learned all that in creche. Back then, they’d sung the pasts of the young foot-soldiers and then apprentice-goblins.

By the time Hadrian graduated, Spear-in-Heart had been singing the Potter-family part in the conflict for twenty-years.

It had been so odd, initially, singing for the homo sapiens instead of against them.

But they earned and learned their part, just like everyone else did.

When they’d declared for the Clan—they had personally never thought to do otherwise—they had chosen to specialize in interspecies relations with an emphasis on homo sapiens. Then, after years of hard work, they apprenticed to the then-Potter account manager. They had become acquainted with Fleamont and Dorothea Potter, who had appeared yearly to look over their books. They had met with Lily and James Potter during their marriage negotiations. Neither had come again.

They had never met any of the other individuals, like Charlus. But that was back when the Potter family did their accounts as a family and not as individuals and Charlus had never had a reason to go to the Bank personally.

Nonetheless, as was their job, Spear-in-Heart could sing any of their family member’s individual songs and woven the entire group together into a complex tapestry going back to Morgana and beyond.

Spear-in-Heart’s pebble sang the part of the stones along with all of the other creche pebbles. Stone songs were the first pebbles learned and sweetest lullabies creche guardians could sing. They were true as the ground between one’s feet and the earth above one’s head and benefited from
being true instead of a point of view.

Stones have neither clans nor families after all.

Hadrian had not learned stone songs as a child. He had not learned any songs particularly until he went to primary school. Those songs had been about washing hands, body parts, and love. Hadrian had understood the first two sets and had mostly been depressed by the latter. But then, unlike Spear-in-Heart and their pebble, Hadrian did not actually have family around them in either the homo sapiens or goblin sense of the term.

He also had not had a clan. And, lacking a clan, he had not learned stone songs. Back then, he hadn’t transfigured his ear and jaw.

But, during his first foray into the below after graduating Hogwarts, with his now altered ear, he certainly heard them. And he could hear Flitwick’s crystal-of-association pin into them, adding another note to the harmony.

The group had received that crystal along with Flitwick’s advice to visit Gringotts at the end of their second bi-weekly tea with Flitwick after leaving Hogwarts. There were very few Beings the three once-homo sapiens had specific affection for rather than a general goodwill. Millicent had not thought it wise to lose contact with one of the few they cared for and had, after walking out of Hogwarts’ bones, had sent Flitwick a quite-proper invitation requesting their presence at a bi-weekly tea in the library at Bulstrode Park.

When Flitwick flooed to Bulstrode Park for tea, the group told Flitwick about their frustrations with delays and attempts to decide how to approach the issue. They had been in the habit, after all, of working with Flitwick in independent studies and receiving excellent advice. It didn’t truly occur to them to refrain now.

Flitwick buzzed in excitement in their chair and felt that the half-decade of exploratory groundwork they had been laying with those messaged crystals were going to strike a vein of ore.

Flitwick all but trilled at the potential as they encoded their passed over a crystal-of-association and advised the children on how to comport themselves in the Clan’s halls and among the Clan managers and managers.

The following day, the children took themselves to Gringotts and presented the crystal at the teller’s window just as Flitwick had told them. The goblin there checked the crystal, ran their fingers along its edges and listened to its humming. They nodded and then led the children away.

It is, perhaps, of interest to the readers to note that Flitwick’s statement of association carried that weight it did specifically—as Flitwick suspected—because of their history of reporting on these very children. There had been so many years of separation, of trying to be more above-grounder than goblin, that ten years prior that same teller would have looked at the crystal with suspicion. Now, now, there was almost a decade’s worth of clear connection.

That day, the children were granted an audience with the advocates but given no promises, just as Flitwick told them to expect.

The children made their case. Flitwick had told them to be blunt and true, not to scrape or prevaricate. After all, the Gringotts’ clan took the sharp stance on give and take. Lies were debts that needed recompense.

But even as he’d warned them, Flitwick hadn’t worried. These children were very good at telling
truths, even being straightforward, when they felt it served their interests.

With that warning stinging their ears, the children remembered to be blunt. And—with Millicent as their spokesperson—they laid out their goals and resources as they understood them.

Millicent explained their plans to work as architects, their plot of land, and their desire to build a seat. She laid out what she understood about homo sapiens’ magical law and the group’s frustrations with that law. They understood why a property should be registered with a state, that such a concentration of that power would necessarily be a threat. And they didn’t have an issue being family—they already were in their own opinions—but they did mind the inequalities inherent in the system and stipulated subservience.

If the goblin’s had recommendations, they would hear them.

Hadrian, meanwhile, became thoroughly distracted by the walls and floors. He hadn’t expected to hear the room sing at him.

The advocates and account managers listened to the children and watched their companions with fascination. The managers had been reading Flitwick’s reports on the children but seeing the Three with their red sheen alongside their gargoyle companions was simply fascinating to behold while the resonance between them a thing of beauty.

The Clan would likely have agreed to work with the children for a chance to study them.

But it did not do to jump into things. One needed to be study of thought, purpose, and song.

So it was that Spear-in-Heart’s mouth pulled back from their sharp teeth in a grin and they told the children to return in two weeks. They needed to call a Gathering of the Relevant and debate just what family meant to the above-grounders.

Whatever happened, Spear-in-Hear knew that there would be interesting verses to add to their songs.

Chapter End Notes

The goal here is to make goblins quite similar to homo sapiens in comparison to buildings but still very much not the same. I hope I succeeded.

Just realized I forgot to take my plants out of their bath. Ha.
Truth and Precedent

Chapter Summary

The one in which a Gringotts' Clan Gathering of the Relevant consider how to handle Hadrian's requests.

Chapter Notes

I can't remember if I wrote up what a Gathering is in a published chapter and I didn't feel like checking.

If I didn't post the explanation, it's a group of the clan members relevant to a client's request. They meet to discuss the legalities, contracts, and histories associated with the issue to make their recommendations air tight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Most Beings have a very specific, circumscribed understanding of reality. In part because of that limitation, “truth” is--in its turn--contextual and very subjective.

That is particularly the case in situations involving truths dependent on the meaning of words used by hundreds of thousands of Beings across tens of generations.

Take, for example, the concept of “family.” Many homo sapiens will argue that the concept is clear. It’s something many of them believe they recognize instinctively. They might acknowledge that there can be “found families,” but most think that family is family.

Spear-in-Heart, for example, well remembered when Lily Potter carried a tiny Hadrian into Gringotts for the first time and presented her family. She’d looked exhausted and proud. She did not in any way doubt that the child she distinctly remembered pushing out of her body after they had fed on her for nine month was family.

Here, the goblins actually agreed. Based on their understanding of family, Hadrian was Lily's family.

But Spear-in-Heart eyed the child and didn't feel comfortable acknowledging him as part of the homo sapien Potter family until the family parchment was stamped with Lily's signature.

Because, based on centuries of precedent, it had become clear to the goblins that homo sapien families were more about contracts and perception than they were about blood.

Tale again the Potter family. Hadrian had now found family and legal family but not direct, blood-line family under magical law. So he had a large family and no family simultaneously.

And that are-they-aren't-they was part of the quagmire that the children currently found themselves in. The group didn’t have the familial status and attendant rights to build a magical structure as
they pleased specifically because they weren’t a recognized family. They needed to figure out how to become one.

What the children hadn't realized in approaching the Gringotts Clan was just how ideal the selection of advocates was. Because, as the Ministry well acknowledged, the Gringotts Clan did not tolerate falsehoods. And, in not accepting falsehoods they were more aware that the 28 established magical families were prepared to admit, just how malleable the concept was.

Part of that Clan perspective was on account of their stance on the entire idea of truth. They knew that soapy, ephemeral nature of truth; they were familiar with its delicacy.

Knowing this, Gringotts’ creche masters taught pebbles small truths to lean into and brace them against. After all, the Clan Historians still sang about the nightmarish-illusions some magical homo sapiens cast during the last up-world wars. Children like the pebble-called-Beryl were trained to remember little bits of information like the nature of a stone’s song. Almost as soon as they could speak, pebbles learned that a silent stone was not a stone.

Those pebbles also learned that there were very few other truths with such a rock-solid grounding.

If the definition of a word changes depending on the moment, location, and speaker, then it is not tied to truth.

Which brings the reader back to the British homo sapien concept of “family.”

The Gringotts’ clan had long made a business of understanding their clients’ particular uses of the word. One could hardly have family account managers without knowing what a “family” was.

And, theoretically, the British Ministry of Magic and Wizengamot members knew that. Made up predominantly of people tied in some capacity to the Ministries’ 28 acknowledged families, those members knew that the families had established account managers who oversaw their finances. And as much as most of those individuals often looked down their noses at goblins, they trusted those very individuals to know their business, keep their contracts, and treat them honestly.

The Bulstrode family certainly did. The family had a long history of expressing appreciation for Gringotts’ work.

But what those members--including the Bulstrodes--by and large failed to realize was that the Gringotts’ clan viewed the entire idea of “family” as a bizarre legal fiction, particularly when it came to the established 28.

Which was why prospective family account managers had to take entire classes on the subject as part of their masteries.

Spear-in-Heart remembered those halcyon days of theoretical debates fondly.

Spear-in-Heart had those debates very much in mind as they had listened to the children’s requests. They thought of them again as they joined the subsequent Gathering of the Relevant to discuss the situation and consider what could be done.

Now the Gathering members were aware that Hadrian's group did not particularly view themselves as family at all. They were a working group, bound and connected, but not necessarily family. Within goblin definitions they were almost a clan. Really, they were only missing a clan stone.

But family? Much less established-28 family?
The Gathering considered and thought they could be family.

The Bulstrode account manager had, after all, noted how Hermione had smiled at Millicent while Millicent’s body had angled, just slightly, toward Hermione. They had paid attention when Hermione’s hand had brushed against Millicent’s arm and Millicent’s fingers had reached up to touch the back of her hand in turn. The two Beings had only to sign a contract to declare themselves spouses, which would—according to the Ministry of Magic—make them family.

There was no reason not to outside their own preference. The Bulstrode account manager knew that there were no contracts within the Bulstrode family to dictate or even suggest that Millicent could not contractually bind herself to the other. The apprentice who oversaw Hermione's individual account confirmed that there was nothing on her side either.

And Hadrian Potter, he was a small contract away from being part of the Bulstrode’s family.

It had been years since the Millicent’s mother had swept into the Gringotts’ foyer and requested, sharply and with hopes that blood would stain the floors, to see the very account manager who now participated in the Gathering. Millicent’s mother had sat on the offered stool and put down the foundations of the claim, pointing out that all of Hadrian’s guardians had failed in their legal duties. She had bared her teeth appropriately and demanded papers for fosterage. And she had been granted her rights.

The Bulstrode family had, after all, sheltered Hadrian and provided succor when none of his legally established family members had been able or willing to. The Bulstrode family had the right to claim him.

But Millicent’s mother had not adopted Hadrian and so, under the Ministry of Magic’s law, they were not family.

So the three used-to-be-homo-sapiens were not legally family but each had the potential to be Bulstrodes and establish a hall for the Bulstrodes. Given the number of branches and subsidiaries to the family, that had the potential to raise issues.

But the principal of the thing meant that the group wanted to gnash their teeth at the system. The children did not think it fair that people like Granger barely had a chance of ever establishing their own home and they did not want their first building to become part of the Bulstrode estate and have the associated limitations.

Yet the Ministry of Magic’s law did state that only members of the 28 established families with a minimum of three members in good standing could build.

And here is where the idea of truth, already so tentative, becomes very, very subjective.

From their course work and subsequent experience, Spear-in-Heart knew the magical British homo sapien legal definition of family was loosely based on precedence. It focused on a network of parchment documents and verbal confirmation relating to parents and progeny, cousins and individuals once removed. But there was also a long history of the core families controlling the Wizengamot members including or rejecting whoever they felt like as long as there was some thread of reason and no overwhelming outcry against the action.

Take, for example, the family Malfoy. That family repudiated a full third of the children born into the family for being dark haired or magically limited. Only recently, the Malfoy daughter Cleo had been born with two strikes as she had black hair and no indication of a magical core. When the child was three, the head of Malfoy--acting as the family--had repudiated the child. The head had
then wiped Cleo’s younger brother’s memories of her and sent her away. And, having declared that the
daughter was not family, the family head did not keep track of her. She was not a Malfoy and
ergo did not matter.

Yet, that family head also assumed that Gringotts would alert him if Cleo ever did exhibit evidence
of magic. The Clan was supposed to track her So that she could be in instated as family should a
reason arise.

And Gringotts did track her. The Malfoy family account manager could have told relevant
inquirers all about Cleo’s life. They knew precisely what Cleo did over the subsequent years when
she went on to college to study history and pre-law. Later--well after the now of this story--when
Cleo enrolled in law school, Gringotts would provide a scholarship from the Malfoy accounts as a
Malfoy family head had--generations before--set up a trust to provide some educational support
for children cut off from the family with an additional note that no subsequent head was supposed
to be information about that stipulation. That Malfoy family head was on record as claiming they
shouldn't leave family out in the cold even if they were no longer family.

Partly because she graduated without debt, Cleo would be able to become a human rights lawyer
specializing in children’s rights.

And throughout it all, Cleo would wonder at her own sanity as she kept seeing things that other
people around her didn’t.

When Cleo finally went into that bizarre pub--the Leaky Cauldron--she ended up being drawn into
the magical world and employed by the Lovegood Ministry as an advocate for the rights of the child
within Magical Britain.

She would never know one Draco Malfoy, with whom she occasionally socialized and bore no
particular opinion, was her older brother. The Malfoy family account manager would never tell her.
She wasn’t part of the Malfoy family and--based on family contracts--did not have the right to
know. But the account manager knew and their successor would keep lose track of Cleo's
descendants as well. Her magical children would be recorded in the Ministry as being first
generation.

Conversely, the Black’s for all their emphasis on “purity” frequently brought children in when
their numbers were in danger of dwindling. Some family heads simply claimed orphaned children
as “found,” declaring that blood called to blood. Certain, celibate uncles developed reputations for
having affairs.

Another method the Black family occasionally employed was to happen to have twins when
prenatal checks had only identified one child. Some half century past, for example, the Black head
of house had been pregnant. The process had been difficult as the head of house’s legal spouse had
a low sperm count. The head of house did not care to repeat the process of copulating multiple
times in the hope of having a second child. They thought and they considered. They spoke to the
Gringotts’ Clan about options. Then, the head of family just so happened to suddenly decide, at the
tail end of their pregnancy, that they needed to take a vacation at the sea. Their chosen spot just so
happened to be in the same hamlet as a young foundling with evidence of a magical core.

And the day that the Black head-of-house gave birth, the family sent out the announcement that
they were happy to welcome the twins Orion and Sirius into their care. That same day, the
foundling just happened to vanish.

In short, for the Ministry of Magic, “family” were simply those the 28 acknowledged with
contractual backing.
For the Goblins, this precedent meant that Hadrian and company just needed to demonstrate a set semi-reasonable, unobjectionable claims with paperwork to back them up.

To make matters actually doable, the children had clear access to two family names in addition to Bulstrode.

The Gathering considered the Potter name. The benefit there was that the children had clear access to it and Hadrian was already the acknowledged family head.

But the family did not have three clear members in good standing according to the Ministry.

According to Gringotts Clan views, Hadrian already had four children who all had clan potential. After all, they thought, they worked, and they contributed to the group. But the Ministry was hardly like to acknowledge the progeny.

Hadrian could, then, have married Riddle and adopted Hermione but Millicent was unobtainable precisely because of the foster age.

It would have been awkward, but doable.

And, in addition to all that, the Potter family had some ties to the Blacks, which could have made things tricky.

That left the Gaunt name.

The Gaunt’s had cut ties with most of the other magical families generations prior. The Gaunt family account manager, if asked, could have told the entitled parties that the family had initially cut ties in a fit of anger. One of their members had decided to procreate with a troll in an attempt to birth a magically resistant warrior. The less said about the endeavor the better, in the Gaunt family manager’s opinion. It was one of the more troubling parts of the account to learn, in part because of the baffling numbers of flowers involved.

Suffice to say, most of the other recognized magical families raised a collective fuss. The Gaunt family had banded together and told the others to bite themselves.

The result was a family with very, very few contracts with other families and almost no obligations. They also had greater internal flexibility about whether family needed to be homo sapien.

To make the family even more desirable, there were no currently recognized Gaunts.

To the Gringotts Clan's great pleasure, Hermione also had copies of non-magical paperwork declaring Riddle was the descendent of Thomas Riddle and Merlope Gaunt. All they had to do was provide the magical signature of authentication as the Ministry of Magic’s law recognized relationships recorded in the non-magical world when imprinted with a magical vow.

Then, once Riddle had verified that they had descended from two, they could claim the name as the only known living descendant who had also worked the Gaunt land. The right of blood and earth was a powerful one with the British Ministry.

Once those documents had been filed and posted with the space for contestation, it would be possible for Riddle to use the same documents they used to claim the Gaunt name to acknowledge Hermione’s relationship to him as a cousin.

Hermione had an excellent Hogwarts’ record and an acknowledged relationship with the
Bulstrodes. Based on those two points of evidence, she could be certified as having a good standing.

Once their relationship was established, the children could choose to either bind Hermione and Millicent directly or they could file a kinship report between Riddle and Millicent based on that same non-magical legal documentation.

Finally, the group could have Millicent claim Hadrian as a brother based on their upbringing and shared past ancestry.

And, if all went well, the group would then be a legal family with an established name and four members in good standing. It would just take a year of legal work due to the requisite waiting periods.

The Gathering was pleased with their solution and the honesty of the handling.

Chapter End Notes

I hope these claims re: truth and why the Gringotts Clan views their own work as honest made sense. I rewrote part of this so many times I can't track it any longer.
Over the long course of her life, Millicent never fell in love. And, throughout her centuries of existence, she would claim that that was fine. She didn’t particularly like strong, sudden emotions. Such emotions made her feel unsettled and reminded her all too much of dementors on trains when everything was shaking and cold.

So, during her school years, Millicent didn’t envy Pansy her ups and downs, her ecstatic ecstasy or her tears. She never personally agreed with Pansy’s exuberant exclamations claiming “I’m in love. This is what living is about” as she’d throw herself back onto her bed and stare into her canopy.

No, Millicent never fell in love and never wanted to.

But then, Millicent spent most of her life in a long, easy slide into a solid love that became part of the essential fabric of her sense of Being.

And even then, that entanglement didn’t happen unawares. There was no “it all took place so gradually that I couldn’t say when.” Instead, her slide was accompanied by a full understanding of what was happening almost every step of the way.

Indeed, Millicent was twelve when she looked at one Hermione Granger, sparking across the library table in enthused delight at some academic discovery and thought ‘I could love her.’

Millicent found that she liked the idea.

But Millicent also thought it wasn’t particularly important or pressing. Frankly, she knew she was all of twelve years old and she didn’t expect the feeling to last. She liked her growing friendship enough not to think she should spend it on a temporary feeling. So she didn’t say anything, not then.

But she did consciously choose to enjoy the feeling while it lingered. She liked the sweetness it left on her tongue and how it drew her awareness to her fingers and her toes. The sentiment, that nascent-love, left her body feeling like it was a floating piece of pumice.

It was nice.

And, to her personal surprise, it lasted.
Yet, while Millicent’s love mattered, it wasn’t particularly important. There are other things to occupy her conscious attention as she worked on her charms and innovations. That was where she brimmed with delight.

But even then, a successful experiment had her eyes searching immediately for Hermione and her work felt more satisfying for the company.

After sustained years of moments just like that, Millicent thought it was safe to acknowledge that loved this person who shared her worktable. But still, she didn’t spend much time considering it. Millicent didn’t need to think about loving Hermione to do so. She just did.

Millicent did spend a few minutes here and an hour wondering why she loved Hermione and Hadrian so differently. She could look at Hadrian and love him in the way that goblins talked about family. In contrast, when Hermione would touch her arm or their fingers brushed, Millicent would feel her body light up like a sun beam had hit her after a morning spent in the dungeons.

It was lovely, being in love.

But still, Millicent didn’t actually mention anything. She didn’t say a word until the evening the group received the Gringotts’ advocates’ suggested plans and contracts with their suggestion that Millicent and Hermione could espouse one another to simplify part of the process. They had listened to the advocates’ proposals and had taken their notes. Now, they were supposed to be determining their preferred course of actions. After hours of discussion, Hadrian had taken himself off to bed and Riddle vanished who-knew-where, presumable to sulk and think.

It was then, as Hermione gathered her notes to go off and sleep, that Millicent spoke. They were as alone as they almost ever were with gargoyles cavorting and snoring around them. Given what she wanted to say, Millicent had thought to give Hermione some privacy to respond as she wanted without unnecessary pressure.

So, Millicent waited until Hermione was latching her satchel and standing. It was then that she said Hermione’s name and, once Hermione had met her yes, that she declared “I love you. I have for years. I thought you should know so that you can take it into account as we plan.”

For all that Millicent had tried to soften the news, it was not something Hermione had been prepared to hear. The strength of her surprise overwhelmed the charms Millicent habitually stitched into Hermione’s robes to pervert precisely that occurrence.

Millicent helped the flustered Hermione extinguish her clothes and told her “You don’t have to say anything about it now or ever. But let me know if you do want to speak about it.” Millicent watched Hermione for a moment, looked at Hermione’s flushed cheeks and shocked eyes. She smiled in her small way and bid Hermione a good night. “We will,” she said, “see one another for breakfast. Sleep well.”

Millicent walked at her steady pace out of the workroom and toward her bedroom. She thought to herself that it was rather interesting how fast her heart was beating.

Hermione didn’t wait until breakfast to respond. Instead, Millicent had barely slowed her heart enough to sleep when her wards started chiming and then Hermione was climbing into her bed and pressing her face into her neck and clutching her hands. Millicent could barely make out Hermione’s smothered words about “Doing this, we should do this.”

For Hermione, there was no slow, slide into love. Unlike Millicent, she hadn’t spent the previous years contemplating love.
Instead, for Hermione love was conscious choice to throw oneself off a precipice one was already teetering on the edge of. The freefall was exhilarating but terrifying all the same.

Chapter End Notes

These last few days have been. Well, what they've been. This chapter was supposed to come in a spot that was not this one. But, I thought we could all use something that has enough sugar to be a dessert.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Sometimes plans fall to pieces.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One can prepare and plan for the future. And that is often a good thing. Planning allows one to protect oneself and achieve one's goals. Precise, rigid planning, however, is often like lining up kneazles. It's an all-around stupid idea to expect those kneazels to stay put. And it's in general poor life planning to expect everything to follow one's plans.

Two groups hit up against that issue with long term planning shortly after the Riddle family signed an official Agreement with the Gringotts' Clan. More precisely, it was after Hermione nervously fell into a relationship with Millicent that kept her looking at Millicent in shocked, pleased surprise and then Riddle possessed Hadrian to put their bloody signature on the necessary forms to make the claim on the Gaunt name.

For that step there were only a few contestations, none of which held water even if they necessitated the provision of further proof for Riddle’s claim.

For that necessity the Gringotts Clan had been prepared. They instructed Riddle to possess Hadrian, set up heavy glamors on Hadrian’s body to look like Riddle’s shade did, and then had them swear a statement on their magic that they were who they claimed. The advocates submitted the memory of the oath to the Ministry of Magic alongside snide comments about Riddle’s supposed paranoia.

The associated Ministry officials and soon much of Magical Britain--those who bothered caring--soon believed that the new Gaunt was a paranoid bastard obsessed with a name of little value either socially or economically. It’s not as if the name came with much of an inheritance beyond a small plot of land in a non-magical village.

There were those, however, associated with the Wizegemot and other governmental bodies who saw the new Gaunt as a voice they might potentially have to contend with. The name might not have economic weight or social capital but it did have the right to a seat in government. That seat was why a handful of people demanded proof of claim at all.

But even then, those who cared did not press hard. Their concerns were dampened by the youth’s refusal to come out into society and their reliance on goblins to handle their affairs. All of this, to most of those who might have raised more of a fuss, suggested a youth following in the disturbed footsteps of their Gaunt forbearers. And that lineage had shunned interactions with the magical world. Might, according to that family, made right and that family had viewed all others as weak.

Leaning into their assumptions of the family based on frayed memories of stereotypes and pleased with the lack of evidence that the young Riddle planned to even enter politics, most fell back into old habits of sneering at the name. Besides, the start of the Malfoy-Greengrass courtship had a much clearer potential to upset the political balance of the British Magical world. The courtship
might be designed to last for years, but the very fact the Malfoy family could consider aligning itself directly with the Greengrass suggested a change in the Malfoy family politics, which could carry significant ramifications.

Sufficiently distracted, most people who might’ve cared failed to notice the tiny notice that subsequently hung for the legally mandated two weeks on the Gringotts’ announcement board stating that one Riddle acknowledged and claimed a certain Granger as their official cousin. With little other information, most people just didn’t pay the announcement any mind. Neither of those names carried particular interest and most who saw it had no sense of who either of the cousin’s might be.

There were four people it is important to note for the purposes of this account who did notice and whose lives it changed almost immediately. Among them was Theodore Nott.

Nott happened to be in Gringotts working with their account manager during those two weeks the notice was hanging. For years, Nott had been developing a plan to undermine their father’s control of the family. They had despised the man since their mother’s death a decade before and, now that they were out of Hogwarts, they were finally able to put their plan into play.

But now there was this notice on the board and Nott could not decide how much weight to give it. Something about it felt important and they stood, looking at it and considering why it seemed to matter.

Nott was not an individual who forgot names and they well knew it was a Riddle who had claimed the Gaunt name only two months prior. They remembered their father sneering over the dinner table and declaiming the Gaunt family for miserable wretches. This new Gaunt would be no different.

Here, however, was evidence that this Gaunt was not the same as their forbearers. After all, as Nott well knew from their first year together, Granger was not born to a magical family (although this put that into question). Yet Nott had also noticed that--outside of her first year when she’d encountered a troll and the incident in the dueling ring--she was almost impossible to remember. It still unnerved Nott that until she so handily beat them in the dueling ring, they had forgotten she was a classmate. That disturbance prompted the strength of their memory now.

Which all meant that an unknown Riddle had claimed the Gaunt name--a name famed for its hatred of the non-magical--and then claimed one of the most powerful individuals to graduate from Hogwarts as family. Might makes right indeed.

Nott briefly wondered if they should demand proof of relation. There was something about this all that reeked of plotting and conspiracy.

Then there was Lovegood standing next to him. They stiffened at her proximity, at the way her magic curled around them and tugged at their edges. They were annoyed they hadn’t noticed her approach. But then she smiled at them, the blue stars painted across her face glowing brighter with the curl of her lips. Nott wondered if gazing at her at that moment was similar to floating in an enchanted dream.

“Do you feel the tremors too?” she asked, her eyes flicking to the notice Nott’d been considering.

Nott considered Lovegood, in her teal robes with their radish design. Unlike Granger, this classmate they remembered well. She had been hard to overlook in the higher-level runes and arithmancy classes sixth- and seventh-year students shared. Nott had noticed her every class session in which she’d seemed able to look at a problem and see the complete picture. She’d
constantly seemed to know the end but often been unsure of the steps in between. It made her a terrible teacher but a wonderful partner.

“I think,” Nott answered lowly, “that I feel them but don’t know how to read them yet.” They were rarely so honest with anyone. But Lovegood was looking at Nott like they were a dream and they had known for years if she saw more than most. They didn’t want her to look away now. They wanted to know what she saw.

Her smile brightened and her attention focused directly on Nott. They thought they might be looking at a supernova. “Does that mean,” she asked, holding out her arm for them to take, “that you’re finally ready to have tea?”

Nott allowed themselves to nod in return and felt their carefully considered plans for their future shake down to their foundations. They didn’t know what yet, but somehow Riddle as Gaunt claiming Granger as family had changed their life. Nott suspected, given Lovegood was involved somehow, that the changes would be good things.

The headmaster did not agree with Nott’s conclusion that the announcement portended anything good. In fact, for the headmaster, the notice suggested disaster.

The first notice of a Riddle claiming the Gaunt name had disturbed but interested the headmaster. He had believed that perhaps, at long last, Tom Riddle was making his move. He began to try and reach out and find out more. Viewing the goblin’s memory of the young Riddle, looking precisely the same as he had decades before only confirmed his beliefs.

Precisely for that reason, when Snape had alerted the headmaster to issue, the Gringotts’ notice of kinship scared the headmaster. Granger, as he well knew, was close to Harry. He had thought that, of Harry’s two friends, Granger was safe and even beneficial as a first-generation magical placed as a lioness. She would temper the harsh influence Bulstrode was likely to exert. She would remind Harry of the world outside of the Magical.

It had never occurred to him to look into Granger's range of cousins or check her for a connection to Riddle. To have missed something so potentially essential to the game was unnerving.

It suggested that Riddle had an established connection to Potter. It raised the possibility that Riddle’d been biding his time and waiting to use Harry. The headmaster suspected, now, that perhaps Riddle had been the one to push Granger to approach Harry those years ago. The new perspective was horrifying.

It raised the question of what to do. Harry was still a child of prophecy and likely still redeemable. The headmaster chose to investigate. He needed a better sense of the playing field.

He considered pressing Flitwick but their relationship had become strained over Harry. Nonetheless, he’d gently pushed the question of Granger's relations over dinner and received one of Flitwick’s laughing smiles and an agreement that Flitwick wasn’t surprised that Dumbledore hadn't known. Flitwick had then turned to Minerva and asked her if she ever spoke with her charges about their non-magical relations. Minerva did not.

The headmaster had a cold lump in his stomach.

So the headmaster sent Snape to do reconnaissance and observe. Snape had been loyal for years. He’d sworn to protect the boy and he’d been Bulstrode's head of house. He would hardly fail now.

But Snape had not argued and then obeyed as usual. No, he’d paused at the order and looked at the
headmaster. For a moment, the headmaster thought he would drop his shields and his mask. Instead, Snape’d very seriously asked "You've considered the ramifications of this?"

His expression suggested he’d knew the headmaster had but didn't think he'd reached the right conclusion. The headmaster answered that of course he knew but the ends justified the situation. If Harry was compromised they needed to act. Snape’s expression had snapped shut and he sneered, suggesting that the headmaster should sit down and come clean with Potter.

And then he’d tendered his resignation.

For the headmaster, that moment felt like his plans had crumbled and, somehow along the line, he’d gravely miscalculated.

Chapter End Notes

I hope everyone is staying safe and keeping themselves occupied.

I meant to add in a paragraph to something else about the headmaster and then wrote extra and thought I might as well get it out there.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The politics of food consumption are many and varied. For most homo sapiens, consuming victuals—be it food or drink—with another human is a way to establish and then demonstrate trust and care. It showcases friendship. Or it can highlight disdain and lay out distance.

Hadrian would never possess the political genius Riddle did. But, over the years, he did pick up a few lessons at Millicent’s parents’ elbows about insulting a person with a cup of tea. Millicent’s father, after all, made sure to teach them basic decorum how not to do so, which often necessarily teaches how to do so. That said, Hadrian wasn’t particularly adept at doing it himself. After all, usually surrounded by his friends, he had every confidence that they would take care of it for him. He much preferred to observe and let his attention drift away toward rocks than to ensure the appropriate contents of the cookie plate and turn of cup handles.

But, all in all, Hadrian appreciated the use of tea as a weapon if contact could not be avoided altogether. If no one could find you, he pointed out, then did not have to defend. Riddle would try arguing time and again that sometimes it was impossible to hide. Sometimes, they claimed, a good offense was often the best defense.

Hadrian would agree but maintain that rather than dueling like Hermione, he’d much rather try his luck with tea. He just felt that tea was a safer option to attack with than jumping straight to curses to bind the tongue or rip out one’s magical core. Sure, he could transfigure an opponent into stone without much thought, but he just didn’t feel that was an ideal option. A battle won was not a war won as he would point out in his arguments with Riddle. Besides, to show one was strong was to invite retaliation or competition. One only had to turn to tales like that old story Millicent’s father had told them about the Deathly Hallows to see the potential catastrophes associated with public displays of strength. To appear to be the “best” or “unbeatable” was almost asking for people to try and beat you.

So Hadrian had little desire to be seen as the “best” or as “powerful.” Indeed, he had little desire to be seen outside his small circle at all.

Which was part of the reason the headmaster showing up in Little Hangleton while the friends were refueling their energy with sustenance from the local chippy was so very disturbing. There was nothing yet on the property except plants to worry about. They hadn’t set the hearthstone or begun to truly build. All they were doing was establishing a slightly more extensive net of relatively standard wards around their property: discouraging trespassers, casting an illusion of manicured lawns, and encouraging wildlife. Hermione was adamant that if they weren’t going to go much with the surface of the property, then they should allow the land to function as a reserve of sorts. The stars knew the Isles needed more of them.

Hadrian was vaguely pleased with the idea and Millicent was thrilled to have a reason to experiment with a few animal-related charms.

That was the point of discussion when they saw the headmaster stride down the street and stop next to their table. The group was not pleased. The headmaster did not, they felt, count as local wildlife.

The old headmaster would have told someone in his confidence—of whom there were few—that
three, varied expressions of bland dispassion was disheartening.

Behind his stone walls, Hadrian was not suffering a lack of enthusiasm but a pinging sense of horror. Hadrian would later tell Riddle that that was the moment he truly understood Millicent’s mother’s claim that Beings like the headmaster would meddle. With Riddle curled on his chest, he would depict his relief that they had gone to the goblins for assistance with their endeavors.

Absorbed in his own tumbling fears, Hadrian did not return the headmaster’s greetings. Millicent, experiencing her own sense of disquiet, chose to return the headmaster’s attack by greeting him but neglecting to ask him to sit. And Hermione, ever attuned to her companions’ emotions, only tilted her head in blandly polite greeting, preferring to act as Millicent’s second.

The headmaster did not take the hint.

Instead, he chose to pull up his own chair and make congenial inquiries into the day.

Millicent dryly answered the headmaster's questions. She was the one, after all, who had spent dozens of evenings in his company while wearing Hadrian’s face. She had the best idea of how far she could push.

How were they? Well, thank you. Were they enjoying the weather? The weather was satisfactory. How was the local chippy? Millicent believed they passed their safety inspections regularly. Hermione must be pleased to have her family recognized. Family is a precious commodity.

And then the headmaster’s eyes lifted to where Riddle sat on Hadrian’s shoulder. He peered through the light charms redirecting and suggesting people look elsewhere. He asked, his twinkle in place, who this charming fellow was.

Hadrian boiled. He desperately wanted to not be there. He was frozen in uncertainly but his immobility was such a standard that only Hermione and Millicent could have felt he violent tumult of his emotions declaring that he did not care for the sensation of being seen by someone outside of his circle.

Hadrian felt immensely grateful that Millicent had the conversation in hand.

Riddle carefully did not freeze, did not respond, did not shift their behavior as the headmaster looked at them. They wanted to hiss and spit. The charms they wore discouraged sight and prevented the local village inhabitants from noticing Riddle or the other gargoyles when they visited the village. They had known that someone could look through the illusion and charms if they tried. They hadn’t expected anyone to know to try.

The headmaster’s gaze felt like an attack. He had not meant it as such, not in the least. The question had been one intended to invite confidence and stroke egos.

As their long histories of miscommunications went, this one fit the regular pattern. Not that any of them understood that.

The headmaster simply did not comprehend that the children viewed him as a direct threat to their peace. From his perspective, Harry was a boy he’d tutored in defense measures. The two might not have developed familial ties the headmaster wished, but he believed they had months of working side-by-side. He didn’t know that Hadrian hadn’t attended those meetings. He didn’t know that Hadrian despised him for offering them.

And, for all his time spent observing the group, the headmaster did not imagine that the Riddle he feared had any connection to the small gargoyle on Hadrian’s shoulder.
With his question the question was trying to express appreciation for their work. He wanted to build on the relationship he thought they already partly had in order to find out who the Riddle claiming the Gaunt name could be. He was almost desperate to know what he’d overlooked. The combination of curiosity and fear ate at him.

But it did not occur to the headmaster that the Riddle he feared was the Being on Hadrian’s shoulder.

Millicent twitched the wand in her fingers and vanished the remnants of their food from their paper cones. She stood, outwardly calm as a marble mountainside, and declared they needed to return to their work. Perhaps the headmaster could visit for tea on Saturday at the Bulstrode estate? She turned from the table her group was positioned around, threw her paper wrapper in the nearby bin, and began to walk away. Hadrian and Hermione followed without pause.

The headmaster did not take the dismissal. Instead, he stepped alongside them as they moved through the town’s streets. He offered to look over their ward work.

Hadrian’s heart tried to beat out of his chest at the idea. He did not want the headmaster anywhere close to their wards. He felt Millicent’s rising tension and knew she felt the same. He didn't need Riddle's stiff form on his shoulder to know that they bristled at the idea.

Millicent, stopped and turned toward the headmaster. She stepped between Hadrian and the headmaster. Much as she had over and again in her first two years to her Slytherin colleagues, she stated blandly, her expression stone, that the group was busy at the moment and too much in a hurry to invite a guest along at that time. Millicent snapped out that if he really needed to speak with them, then he could visit on Saturday for tea.

Her statement didn’t have quite the same effect on the headmaster that it had had on her Slytherin classmates.

The reprimand was sharp and Hermione wanted to laugh with the discomfort of it. She was not sure if implying Hogwarts’ headmaster was unwanted was politic. But to move this battle to a field of their time and choosing was safer than taking him to the Gaunt land.

And really, the old headmaster had no business dismissing their own attempts at courtesy.

To the group’s disappointment, the headmaster actually came.

And early at that.

Still, for all their hopes that the headmaster would leave them be, they were relieved to let Millicent’s parents handle the situation.

Millicent’s parents were, after all, consummate politicians.

The two keyed the house to have the public floo take the headmaster into the green parlor, with its furniture charmed for ease.

Millicent had spent hours in that room as a small child, trying to understand those charms.

And now the headmaster sat in a chair upholstered in grey silk woven to pull the occupant slowly into a sense of relaxed languor, as if one had drunk a glass of port while watching a sunset.

Her parents greeted the headmaster, her father offering a bright smile and her mother a grim nod. They offered him tea with sharp, anise cookies.
The conversation went forward in zigging zags. Millicent’s father would complement something, her mother would qualify it and then question.

By the end of the conversation, Millicent’s parents had suggested in a round-about-way that the children had succeeded in school despite the headmaster as he was too overwhelmed with competing responsibilities to actually fulfill his duties. They’d implied that he failed to care about the majority of his students and instead maintained elitist practices designed to allow the majority to flounder. They helpfully suggested that perhaps the headmaster should take a sabbatical to concentrate on himself for a time.

They did it all while implying he was a welcome guest, keeping his cup full, and offering him cookies the majority of the magical Britain knew he detested.

Chapter End Notes

Man. This chapter might be rougher than I intended. It's been a week of family ups and downs.

This chapter initially had a long section on shoes of all things ... which might end up in the next chapter as a thing. I think it might. I'll see if the next chapter remains the next chapter. I keep rearranging things.
First Impressions

Chapter Summary

Sometimes first impressions don't go well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

First impressions can shape the entire course of two people’s interactions. Sometimes that first impression can be planned and controlled. More often than not, however, first impressions are influenced by little things other people have mentioned over the years and ingrained assumptions as well as clothes, nails, and facial expressions. And all of those things taken together guide Beings down paths they didn’t intend.

But that’s not the only way first impressions work. Two Beings, for example, can pass one another in the foyer at Gringotts fifteen times before they actually say something in greeting. When they start directly communicating beyond the barest flick of acknowledgement, the two often can’t remember when they first met just that the other person was “around.” And that extended version of first impression can have benefits - it allows the person to be more than one outfit, more than one facial expression.

Other first impressions end up being a combination of the two.

Hadrian and Sirius’ first impressions of one another after Hadrian was grown were unfortunate. Unfortunately, that was usually the case for Hadrian when re-meeting the people who’d known him in his infancy.

Unlike Lupin, however, any first meeting with Sirius was almost definitely going to go badly because in this case any first impression was going to be shaped by prior knowledge.

Hadrian, as readers well know, first heard of Sirius was his godfather from Millicent’s parents. When the mad man broke out of prison, Millicent’s mother told Hadrian who the man supposedly was to him. She showed him the pictures in the paper and in the family’s photograph collections. He saw images of a man with wild black hair and grey eyes.

And Hadrian heard stories of a man with a long history of hurting other people—his own brother included—for his own amusement. Millicent’s parents were not prone to exaggerations or lies within their own family. When Bulstrode head of family told Hadrian the history of Sirius Black as she knew it, her voice was flat, bland, and cutting. She informed Hadrian with few frills that his godfather had hunted down and attacked one of her classmates again and again. She informed Hadrian that Black and Potter with their two other friends had tricked and pranked her younger classmates and then laughed when the smaller children cried. Cast in such a light, the hunt and murder of one of his long-time friends appeared as a culmination of years of barely-unchecked, cruel behavior.

Even told blandly, the stories were not kind. Millicent’s mum had been raised with her many siblings with the strict understanding that family did not hurt family. As such, she looked with contempt on the elder Black brother's treatment of the younger. She had not thought much of Sirius
before Regulus had begun his tenure at Hogwarts during her last. But noting Regulus’ stricken look as his brother scowled upon Regulus’ sorting, she had been disgusted. But then she had graduated and, a few short years later, taken new husband along with her siblings and gone abroad. She did not know what happened to either of the two brothers in the interim. But she did hear when Regulus went missing. He was one of the many disappearances and deaths among her acquaintances, her colleagues, and her friends.

And then she heard about how one, small baby--almost the same age as the small child her husband carried around the house--had defeated the Dark Lord. She also heard about how Black, the Lestranges, and handful of others had carried out a series of strikes against different, small groups across the Isles that same night.

All this, she passed down to Hadrian that horrible year with the Dementors. No one offered Hadrian a counter narrative.

So this, this was the picture Hadrian already had of Sirius when he finally, knowingly first saw him trapped in a cage of wood and stone, snarling at Hermione.

It was not the best of first impressions.

Hadrian had gone to great lengths to see his friends protected. He did not feel kindly towards a Being who so clearly threatened harm.

Not that Hermione was in any danger. As readers will remember, she was an excellent duelist. She had learned the rudiments of the craft from Millicent’s father. He, once Millicent’s mother had given permission, was all too pleased to find one of Millicent’s friends might be interested. For herself, Millicent was content with proficiency. Hadrian was in turn willing to practice defensive spell work but shirked learning how to efficiently apply cutting hexes to a living body.

Hermione, in contrast, enjoyed dueling. She found the forms of the body and its movements fascinating. She liked being able to take control of a situation. She practiced her wand movements at Millicent’s father’s behest.

And then, when Flitwick found out about her interest, he was happy to encourage her and occasionally even tutored her. Dueling was not Hermione’s primary passion, but it was enough of an interest for her to continue.

The Gringotts Clan’s discovery of her interests while teaching Hadrian stone warding (for a fee) led to lessons in sword work. Wards, however strong, could potentially be breached. It was best to have at least one warrior (better for them all … but not everyone was suited) to defend their almost-Clan.

Hermione was not particularly battle tested as the Goblins would inform her, but in lessons and a formal dueling arena, she was a quick thinker and a fast draw with either a sword or a wand.

This all matters because the level of defensive protections Hermione wore combined with her skill at offense were what assuaged Hadrian’s fluttering worry over Hermione going out alone. He could not have stopped her if he had tried—and would not have tried except for with words—but her own competency halted even those when Hermione told her two friends that she planned to do teas in the village with her parents.

Hadrian only asked she always take at least one of the gargoyle.

So it was that once a week Hermione took herself off with at least Petrus to meet her parents.
After all, given the magical saturation on the estate, they could hardly visit Hermione’s home. The village was as close as they could come to visiting Hermione.

So it was that Hermione, passing through the wards and walking into town, happened to notice an emaciated black dog crouched in some bushes off the side of the road.

Hermione, descent being as she was, called the local council to pick up the stray. They came, they tranquilized the dog, and they left.

Hermione did not give the situation much more of a thought other than to internally wish the dog the best. Tea with her parents was lovely.

But two weeks later, Hermione saw the dog again.

This time, the dog was somewhat better hidden but still watching. That behavior was much too calculated for a dog to be anything less than magic. Petrus confirmed her suspicions.

Hermione considered the issue. She told Millicent about the encounter and the two went to the Ministry to check Animagus registers for black dogs.

There wasn’t anyone registered.

The next week the dog was there again, staring, watching. Hermione decided she was going to have to switch up her habits to make herself less predictable.

Her new patterns made it clear that the dog was trying to move through their wards. The entire group began tracking the dog.

Perhaps the change in patterns made the dog uncomfortable.

Whatever the reason, the next time the dog saw Hermione, they lunged toward her.

Hermione had her wand pointed at him and three spells cast before he could reach her.

Hermione’s spells called village and earth to her aid. After as much time as the children had spent walking and the amount of their own blood they’d let soak the earth, the town had no qualms responding to the child’s call. Within moments, the dog was encased in a cage of stone and vines.

In another moment, the cage was just on the other side of the wards. The dog growled at Hermione as Millicent and Hadrian appeared in small pops at her side.

And then, suddenly, there was a man in that cage instead of a dog. There was a man who looked like the pictures Hadrian had seen of the godfather who had been cruel to smaller children and killed a friend. He had drool at the corner of his mouth, torn robes, and was reaching toward Hadrian, fingers stopped by the edge of the cage.

The gaunt, wild looking human, proclaimed that he just wanted to speak with Harry. Harry had to know that it wasn’t his fault. But he was Hadrian’s godfather and wanted to get to know him. He wasn’t sure if Harry knew that.

That first impression was not particularly positive.
This was supposed to be twice the length with Sirus' view as well. I decided to cut it in half because I couldn't get quite the right flow. Sirus' view will likely be posted over the next week. I think.

Side note for your amusement - some of my closest friends are people I can't remember meeting. I have a terrible memory for names and high social anxiety, which sometimes results in knowing people for a long time before I actually remember them. Ha.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

There are a whole, five or so sentences in here that are a response to someone's comment. I am too sleepy to look the name up right now - but my thanks to that wonderful person.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The dog was not well. He had once killed a rat who had been his friend. The act had fractured his already broken Being. He had. He had escaped from a prison that had eaten part of him. Since then, his thoughts rarely seemed to quite line up and he couldn’t seem to handle any sort of consideration. To even try made him feel lost.

But he could fixate with a single-minded, dogged attention. He could hold an image, a smell, and thing in his head and focus to the exclusion of almost anything else.

It had felt good, at first, to fixate on the rat. Even in prison, he’d spent ages thinking about that rat, imagining killing that rat over and again. The rat had been safely dead and he’d felt a broken, sobbing satisfaction and he curled up in his cell.

But then the rat had been alive and he knew he had to kill it. It had been dead and was now alive and needed to be dead again.

So he hunted it and he killed it. He sobbed over its corpse and vomited in the corner.

He didn’t have the words, but if he had he would have claimed that he felt himself break, splinter, and crack even as he’d given a woofing howl of triumph.

And then the sense of horrific triumph faded into confusion because the rat was dead and he felt sick and there was no other clarity and no other focus. There wasn’t clearly anything.

And he didn’t.

And what.

The dog wandered away from there because there were dementors and he knew, even with all the other confusion that he did not want to be near dementors. That part he could grasp.

And the rat was dead. He’d killed the rat. The rat had been. And he. He didn’t want to think about any of that.

Unable and unwilling to think through what he had done, the dog wandered aimlessly. They got the idea that they were cold as they slept curled in a bush and shivered. So he’d walked toward warm places.

He ran on some beaches and tried to catch birds. But he couldn’t seem to settle. Now that he wasn’t fixated on the rat, now that he wasn’t cold, he tried to look around him. He tried to think.

It hurt.
He felt a restless tug under his skin. And, eventually, he found the thought that he wanted to go home.

He didn’t know it, but part of that desire was the siren call of his family magic drawing him back. If he had known, he’d likely have ignored the song.

He started walking and he found an image of a house of wood and a warm hearth.

Focused again, his steps were unerring.

He found the home that he sought and the house opened to him. He cringed on the doorstep, feeling wary. Had his thoughts ordered themselves, he might have realized he hated this house. But for all the hatred, the feeling of family magic pulling on him and the thick wards that recognized him drew him inside.

The Black House sighed to have a second occupant after so many years. It sent splinters under the dog’s feet to make him bleed and replenish those wavering wards.

The dog found he remembered the house better than almost anything else in years.

It was safe in that house, with its shrieking portraits and angry elf that the dog became a human.

It was there that his thoughts began to find fragments or order and he began to think of family.

It was then that he finally remembered James. He remembered James and he spent days trying to sink back into himself as a dog and forget.

He didn’t forget.

And eventually he found the memory that James had had a child.

He wandered the house during the day, trying to think of more. He found that if he didn’t think to hard but just let himself meander, sometimes he ended up in helpful rooms that jogged his memory. If he hadn’t known better, he’d have followed a stray thought that the house seemed to be guiding him.

But there was a room with a tapestry that he happened across when a door creaked at just the right moment. And on the tapestry, he found himself.

He found himself and a line declaring that one Sirius Black was a godfather to Hadrian Potter. Sirius remembered then that his friend had been James Potter. He started thinking about his friend’s child. He started fixating. He didn’t consider the fact this was a child he’d abandoned twice.

They went looking for their godson.

He couldn’t find his godson, not for years. The act of searching forced him to pull himself together in bits and pieces.

He started looking for clues and searching for information. The house’s elf snapped and snarled at him along the way but he didn’t listen to their screeching.

Finally, once he started reading the news again, he found mention of his friend’s child.

Harry was evidently developing some property with his beloved school chums. There was a picture
of the boy from his days at Hogwarts.

Black could only remember bits and pieces of Harry from his visit to Hogwarts. He could remember that Harry was rarely outside. He’d been hard to find then too.

But that was then. Now, he had a clue. He followed the paper’s speculations and waited. He watched as the group of three and a few flying creatures started coming around. He watched as they moved in sync.

He didn’t know what to think of the boy. He looked somewhat like James. One could see the coloring and the structure of bones. But aside from those bones, Harry did not resemble James almost at all.

James had been practical, sensible. He had loved flying and wore simple, well-made robes. He’d flirted with the prettiest girl in school.

Harry wore jewelry and embroidered boots. His robes appeared to have gems scattered artistically around the hems and at his cuffs. Sirius thought he could see stone plugs in his ears.

He growled to himself, unsure of why his friend’s child looked like a Sirius’ bedecked cousins, who were sparkling stones at their throats and jewels on their fingers.

Sirius had been a very intelligent young man. Happenstance, circumstance, and choice had conspired to had stripped him of a clarity of mind.

If he had possessed his old faculties, he might have guessed that each one of those sparkling gems and that silver thread in Hadrian’s books had a purpose.

Even then, Sirius couldn’t have known that Hadrian had developed a taste for pretty stones and liked having them about.

He couldn’t have known how Hermione had laughed and then complimented Hadrian on his pretty, steeel-toed, knee high boots the first time she had seen them.

He couldn’t have known that Hadrian had initially designed those eye-catching boots to compensate for his altered density. Messing with your own density, after all, can cause issues with precious things like balance.

Hadrian had found that out the day after he'd first transfigured his jaw and his ear. That say, he’d managed to trip over his own feel and fall hard.

He’d ended up cracking his skull and having Hermione heal him while scolding him for reckless behavior. Hadrian, she claimed, needed to understand that no matter how much he loved stones he was not one. Or, not entirely one.

That concern had translated into boots spelled for stability. Eventually, he'd also had to augment his spine and neck muscles to bear the weight as well.

But, the stones in the shoes, those were because Hadrian just liked stones. He did figure he could bespell them later. But, for now, he thought they were rather lovely.

Sirius did not know all that. What he did know was that this did not seem like the boy who used to laugh gaily when his father tossed him up in the air. It was not the child who smiled brightly at his mother.
Still, this supposedly was James’ Harry. Black wanted to get him alone.

But the boy rarely came out on his own. He rarely came beyond those thick wards at all.

Sirius decided to capture the girl who went out alone. He would use her to lure Harry out of the wards. If he could talk to him he would be able to explain everything.

He ended up in a cage instead.

Chapter End Notes

Here, I'm leaning strongly into the idea that murder is bad. Based on that premise, I'm building out with the idea that murder within this world cracks your Being. For Sirius, being around joy-sucking Beings did a number on him and then murdering Peter breaks him for a long while.
Murphy's Law

Chapter Summary

Sometimes things don't go as planned but that doesn't mean they go wrong.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Some people claim that what can go wrong will go wrong. A homo sapien called Murphy once argued that very vehemently. And many, many people have believed it.

Yet, even as the statement is not entirely wrong it is also not entirely right. It is not entirely right in part because the belief suggests that there is actually a diametrically opposed dichotomy of “right” and “wrong,” which in most situations is simply not the case.

And when Beings believe that there is a right and wrong, they can be blindsided by things progressing along just fine.

Riddle found that to be true when it came to awakening Gaunt.

Because of the complexity of the process, the initial design for the building on the Granger-Gaunt estate (finally, Riddle huffed, they settled on a name) included the hearth and a hall. It was to be an initial core that the group could expand off of the hearthstone’s assistance.

To lay their hearthstone and raise their hall, however, required a month of preparation after they finally finished their five years of planning. Using the stone-songs they learned from the goblins together with their own arrays they’d begun developing at Hogwarts, they tied that together with wards and charmed enchantments to first lay the stone and then raise that simple hall around it as its initial room.

Riddle was half convinced this could not work. Something would go wrong.

Nonetheless, Riddle shared the group’s sense of baited expectation the day of as all eight family members scurried to set their large arrays and tried to warm up their vocal cords. Woe betide them if they failed to resonate properly with the stones below them or anyone’s voices cracked in the middle of their work.

Despite the intricacies of their work, everything actually came together and Riddle watched as the stones they called shifted below their feet and ran together into a solid structure. It was fascinating to watch the supports for the roof form. Riddle could feel Hadrian’s delight and had to force their attention from zeroing in on him.

Riddle kept to their part despite the itching in their claws urging them to go over to Hadrian.

The song finished and the magic they’d been pouring in the array around the building snapped into the hearth stone.

The feeling of a sigh that flushed through the building had made the group shiver. Riddle leapt, using their wings for balance, from their place in now-drained array into the empty space to a
window ledge and watched as the glowing, magical concentration from the hearth stone reached out and connected to the magic laid into the hall from floor to roof.

Riddle felt it when the magic connected around them and the building saw them. The gaze concentrated on them and Riddle could feel the Building’s hum of recognition. The fascinated sense of knowing curled into a protective caress.

Riddle glanced out, eyes following the lines of Hadrian’s protections from Building to the edge of the property. Gaunt was reaching along them, magic inching down as they felt the extent of themselves. The wards flashed when Gaunt connected and the planned dome sprang into place above them.

Riddle shivered at the intensity of it. The fact that the entire plan seemed like it was coming together left Riddle feeling decidedly off-kilter.

Riddle would soon feel even more off-kilter as they actually got to know Gaunt.

Riddle would eventually meet dozens and then hundreds of Buildings. But the year the family woke Gaunt, they were only the second Building Riddle had met.

Still, Riddle had not expected Gaunt to be very similar to Hogwarts. They could not be Hogwarts as the Gaunt was neither castle nor school. They would not be Hogwarts as they weren’t being slowly drawn to awareness but rather snapped into it. They could not be overly similar with part of Voldemort in their core.

No, Riddle was sure Gaunt would not be like Hogwarts.

Beyond that, Riddle hadn’t actually put much active thought into who Gaunt might become. Gaunt would be protective and defensive because Hogwarts and created them to be that. Beyond, that, who knew?

Despite Riddle’s lack of expectations, Gaunt still managed to turn them inside-out in part due to their interpretation of protection.

Hogwarts had, after all, designed Gaunt to protect their inhabitants. The family had, in turn, designed the Hall and the property wards with that goal in mind. There would be no animagi crossing their boundaries. There wouldn’t be any dementors or otherwise.

But that was not the all of the Building. Gaunt’s protection was not limited to general observation or control of the wards surrounding the and woven through the property.

Riddle found, however, that regardless of what Hogwarts planned for Gaunt or what Gaunt thought of Voldemort, there was a part of Gaunt Riddle suspected was inherited from Voldemort.

Gaunt liked pretty things. Riddle pictured Gaunt as a crow or a dragon and Gaunt preened at the comparison.

Granted, the expression of Gaunt’s love of pretty things came out as a form of protection. Gaunt wanted their family to feel comfortable. They wanted them to feel safe.

Gaunt, in a word, coddled.

That coddling took the expression of Gaunt wanting their hall--and later their rooms--to look and feel just right. They spent ages working with each member of the family to develop charms and select furniture to ensure the flow of energy and magic, to get light just right and balance colors for
Toward that end, Gaunt held long conversations with Millicent about charms for curtains. They discussed balance and symmetry. They talked about emotional development. They pulled Hermione in for considerations of universal design and optics. When Hermione brought home soft, cotton bedding, Gaunt cooed over the weave and then insisted they re-dry it as the green wasn’t quite the right shade to complement the minerals in their walls.

Gaunt adored their people. Marble became a playmate in strange versions of hide-and-seek involving specks of magic-infused-dust. Millicent became a consult for charms and Hadrian for discussing the particular composition for their bits of stone.

Riddle, though, Gaunt claimed Riddle as a particular confidant. Part of that decision clearly stemmed from Riddle’s ability to understand Gaunt unfettered. Millicent and Hermione needed one of the gargoyle to translate whenever Gaunt wanted to convey more than an impression. Hadrian understood generally but not the nuance. Stone was simply not Hadrian’s first language no matter how he loved it. Riddle spoke stone as part of their Being.

Added to that, Gaunt claimed Riddle resonated more with them more than any of the others. Hadrian hummed nicely as well, but in the end felt more like Millicent, Hermione, and Marble.

But Riddle, Riddle resonated at a distinctly complementary frequency. Gaunt wanted to know why.

It led to Riddle attempting to explain their histories as stretched out across the hearth stone and shaped their communication.

Lying there, Riddle gave Gaunt the story of the child-who-had-been-human, part of whom became a book and another part a ring. The rest, or part of the rest, was theoretically lurking somewhere as a Being called Voldemort.

The book, Riddle showed Gaunt, had been cursed and then slept until Hogwarts cut that tie to Voldemort and Hermione rounded out their edges. When they woke, they were a gargoyle-who-was-also-a-wraith. They had, Riddle explained, initially found that existence troubling.

Riddle had to pause in their tale as Gaunt expressed concern for their wellbeing. Riddle explained that they had moved past that. Mostly. Now, they found their own existence enjoyable.

It had helped, Riddle confided, that they had learned to manipulate magic from the Gringotts Clan when the family had requested and received permission to pay for lessons in stone-magic.

Though, Riddle acknowledged, it had stung their ego to realize they hadn’t even considered their ability to touch magic meant they could also weave it. They weren’t limited to nudging or eating. They would figure out a way for Gaunt to do the same.

At Gaunt’s prompting Riddle also acknowledged that a large part of their contentedness stemmed from family.

Because they had that now. They had family. They had more family than the once-homo sapien part of them had ever truly imagined possible. They had a progenitor and friend in Hermione and Hogwarts, they had a sibling in Millicent, cousins were a word that worked for Hadrian’s brood.

And then there was Gaunt, with their windows and high ceiling, who was now part of the family as well. Gaunt’s presence fluffed, pleased, at the feeling of being wanted.

Part of Gaunt, Riddle explained, had once been the band of a ring that had, for a time at least,
belonged to the Gaunt family. Voldemort, who by that time had ceased being Riddle, had somehow cut off a portion of themselves--likely through murder--and put it in the ring. They had abandoned the ring with a curse. The family had found them and, as Hermione had filled in Riddle’s edges, Hogwarts had done a similar thing for Gaunt.

Neither of them, Riddle noted, had fulfilled the purposes Voldemort had planned for them, whatever those might have been.

Gaunt expressed confusion as to why either of them should care if they had. Gaunt did not remember Voldemort in the slightest and from Riddle’s explanation, the man sounds like they had abandoned their worth. Voldemort sounded precisely like the kind of being Gaunt would use the wards to keep out.

When Riddle suggested that some people cared what their ancestors thought of them, Gaunt huffed at the notion.

Gaunt didn’t need to care what Voldemort may or may not have thought of them. They did, however, very much care about their inhabitants. They cared particularly what Riddle thought of them.

They were going to protect them and make sure they were surround by pretty things. Riddle hummed, agreeing. That was what Hogwarts had planned for Gaunt. Even if Gaunt’s version of protection was nowhere near what Riddle had expected.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter became something other than what I intended. The next chapter might be what this one was supposed to be, but now I'm thinking about pulling out some text I once wrote and next inserted because of some of your delightful comments. That said, who knows when that chapter will come out as I'm moving this coming week and don't know if I'll have the energy to write. Gah. My hopes that this chapter works and my best wishes to all of you. Thank you for your amazing ongoing support.
Community is important. Most Beings want to feel like they’re a part of something, some group. And, frequently, people are placed in communities automatically. They belong to a group through no action or choice of their own.

That can be a boon. That can mean inclusion and embrace.

It can also mean attempted compulsion and unlooked for responsibilities.

Hadrian had that in mind as he entered House Black for the first time accompanied by the majority of family. Petrus perched protectively on his shoulder and Aquila flying around his head. He had his bracelets--only grown in complication and coverage since Gaunt woke up--set along his arms.

Still, even with all of those protections, Hadrian could feel something--the house he suspected--scrabbling at him. It felt like Black was trying to sink hooks into him. The sensation was desperate and grabbing. He thought it might be trying to claim him.

He tried to reach for the House Black, to speak to them. But, even with his relatively fluency in stone, he couldn’t understand the house. He looked to Aquila on his shoulder, who twitched a negative. They could see movement in the webs of magic all around them, but these were different patterns than Hogwarts of Gaunt used.

Hadrian looked around himself in that entryway, considered the silk wallpaper and the wood floor and ceiling. This house, Hadrian thought, touching the wall lightly, was not built of stone. He hadn’t precisely considered that possibility before.

Aquila shook themself on Hadrian’s shoulder. Black’s magic was reading for Hadrian, exploring his shielding and looking for a gap in the thick layers of spell work that surrounded him. It was unnerving.

Gaunt, Aquila suggested, might have been onto something.

Gaunt hadn’t wanted the group to visit this house. They had tried to talk Hadrian out of coming. Gaunt had argued strenuously that strange houses were likely to be dangerous.

Hadrian suspected that Riddle had egged them on. Riddle, whose wings had flared angrily at the
entire idea of Hadrian coming to the Black house.

That same Riddle was now using their claws to crawl along the wall and leaving pinprick holes in the silk wallpaper. Hadrian got the feeling it was intentional, particularly with the way Riddle was snipping little bits of magic here and there to prevent the possibility of an easy repair.

Hadrian felt more exacerbated by his growing knowledge of wall treatments than he did in response toward Black. He had assumed Gaunt would be interested in their expansion … but had not considered their interest in their Body would extend toward aesthetics. Aesthetics were, for Hadrian, a matter of utilitarian purpose. He might sparkle as he walked - but there was a point to it all. Gaunt felt utility was important, but the aesthetics were too.

The family had learned all about silk wallpaper over the past month. They’d learned about plaster, tapestries, and household charms as well as all sorts of ways to ensure a stone hall could be warm and comforting.

Hadrian preferred raw walls, smoothed with the magic his family had used to sing those stones from the ground. He liked the grains and minerals that made up those stones.

But Hadrian’s love of stone didn’t help him here.

The House Black had a core of wood and wattle. When the House Black had been built, London had barely been a town. A century and more later, when the House had come to Being, the population had barely reached 15,000. But Black, with their paranoid family adding layer after layer of protection had survived centuries of turbulence. They had watched their family grow and decline again and sheltered them in their warm wood walls. They had ensured that the smoke from the hearth had sailed smoothly through the smoke louvres.

And then the great fire had burned through the city and Black’s neighbors had gone up in flames while Black stood proud and secure.

But Antares had looked about them, read the stars, and thought to make the family money. They failed to understand that the House they had been raised in was a Being unto themselves. They didn’t understand that they were forcing a sapient Being into a shape they did not want to inhabit.

But perhaps here Black was somewhat lucky. Antares, unlike so many of their contemporaries possessed with a bug for renovation, did not destroy Black and erect another building in their place.

Antares did not care to undo and redo all of the spells centuries worth of family had laid into those wood walls. Antares built around the House Black instead. They surrounded Black with a row of brick and wood houses.

Black hated the changes, felt claustrophobic and contained. Angry, they failed to absorb the new editions. Perhaps they couldn’t have. The people who moved into them cast no magic and stripped the area of much of its natural magic as they built sidewalks and paved the roads.

Still, there were Blacks in the House’s walls, who they tried desperately to protect and shelter.

Or, there were until there weren’t. Walpurga had wandered Black’s bones determined to let the family die with them. They had spent days in front of the family tapestry muttering about unworthy Beings. The House Black disagreed. When Walpurga died, the House tried to convince Kreature to take up the mantle, but they had refused to be Black; claimed they couldn’t be Black.

Still, the House knew there were some Blacks outside their walls. They would have collapsed inward if there hadn’t been. Black could even reach out in the weak trails of magic toward them. It
took years, however, for the House to finally set its hooks in the only one that ran free without protection. Their relief overwhelmed their disgust to think that one of theirs was so weak, so exposed, that they had been susceptible to the House’s influence.

But then they had lost little Sirius when he had tried for Hadrian. The House Black had had only a limited claim and no pull on that one. The child’s name might be on the family tapestry, but they had never bled in the House Black.

Now the child was in Black walls and the House still couldn’t claim them.

Hadrian couldn’t understand them and had too many protections for Black to reach through. Black could tell that Hadrian could feel them as he walked through the entryway. Yet he couldn’t tell what they wanted, just feel the claw-like attempts to grab and hold.

Black was furious, so angry. Their wrath stretched the walls and their hall portrait woke to sneer at the children in Black’s foyer and make demands.

Perhaps that had been a misstep.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at the portrait and wondered under her breath if this was supposed to be a house guardian. She paused there, the thought striking with a sudden surety that if Gaunt heard about this, they would want a house guardian. She looked to Riddle, poised above the portrait, wings extended for balance. They were staring at her and she just knew they were going to tattle. She glanced at Hadrian, wondering if she could get him to reign Riddle and Gaunt in. Riddle tended to do what Hadrian wanted.

Millicent valiantly did not roll her eyes and stepped into her role of spokesperson. She tried, briefly, to be polite. She greeted the portrait on behalf of the family Granger-Gaunt.

She didn’t get much further than that before the portrait was screaming at upstarts and slandering the Gaunt name.

From Hadrian’s hair, Aquila suggested a series of runes to cut the vitriol. If the portrait spoke, their voice would still carry but the louder they screamed the lower the volume. Millicent glanced at Hermione and then tossed Riddle a piece of magic.

Riddle caught it, shaped it, and with Ignatius wove into the patterns of the portrait’s magic.

The house elf who appeared as they worked almost destroyed their efforts when Riddle’s claw slid in surprise at Kreature’s sudden appearance.

Neither the elf nor the house seemed to be doing well. It was hardly, Hermione would point out when they were all safely back in Gaunt, a surprise given the isolation of their past years. She’d been reading Dudley’s psychology textbooks and considering implications for the magical world and cross-species relevance.

From what they could ascertain as they walked through the House, only Sirius had spent any time here and he’d barely lived here so much as squatted in his own home.

Black gave off an air of humiliated anger as they looked at the bedroom Sirius had clearly slept in, if the black fur on the bed was any evidence. Millicent sneezed at the dust that covered almost everything.

Hadrian began carving runes along the floor boards to contain the dust, automatically linking them with spells to draw out anger and stress. He’d etched in the chains he’d used and updated so many
times at the Dursleys, they were almost automatic.

He wondered how the Dursleys were. The last time he’d seen them, Dudley was applying for masters programs to lead him toward a job as a school counselor. He had apologized to Hadrian again for his behavior, his words laced with comments on psychological development. Hermione had been fascinated and insisted on purchasing all of the books Dudley had been reading for his classes.

Sirius. Sirius hadn’t done that: apologized or reached for more. He’d raved in his cage about how he just had to explain. Hadrian had nodded and begun to listen while Millicent cast the security spell to request an auror team. They’d shown up, quietly, as Sirius had rambled on about how he hadn’t been the one to betray James. He just hadn’t. He’d never do that. James was his brother. His family. And Harry was his godson, did Harry know that? He’d argued that someone named Pettigrew had been responsible. But now that Pettigrew was gone Hadrian and Sirius could be family.

He’d stared at Hadrian expectantly. Hadrian had looked at the aurors, who’d cast a stunning spell on the “dangerous criminal” and bound him. Hermione had frowned at their behavior, finding the excessive force distasteful. Her mother had warned her time and again about abuses of power.

Hermione found, to her fascination, that she now had a limited amount of power. Hadrian, personally, felt they needed to focus on their own goals. They had enough to do and all of these side projects were getting in their way. He wanted society to change--yes--but they had their plan. Couldn’t they just … follow it?

Riddle had sided with Hermione. They argued that the group--as an established family--needed to start raising their complaints. They’d claimed the privileges associated with the position and needed to also acknowledge associated responsibilities.

Hadrian agreed to support the complaints--but Riddle had to be the one to do it. Hadrian didn’t want to be the one to go in public. He found himself horrified at the idea.

Hermione, with Millicent and a Riddle-possessing Hadrian at her side, filed a complaint and demanded, in her role as the Gaunt family representative, that her foster brother’s godfather be given a psychiatric evaluation and placed in hospital rather than sent back to prison.

Curiously, during the process, the family had encountered Luna Lovegood and Theodore Nott. Hadrian wouldn’t have thought that would matter. But, somehow the two had become. Luna was Luna, as ever, making sideways comments that made one think. He was never sure if he understood what she meant, but he always came away from the conversations with thoughts he hadn’t had before. Hadrian respected Luna but did not understand her or her desire to be seen.

This time, Luna somehow convinced Hermione and a Riddle-possessing-Hadrian to have tea with her and Nott.

Hadrian, focused in the background of his body on building his mental wall, had vaguely noted that Riddle seemed fascinated by their discussion. He could feel Riddle’s attention focused and twitching.

Hadrian had enjoyed the feeling of Riddle’s buzzing thoughts while he worked.

The outcome of the conversation evidently involved Luna agreeing that something needed to be done about their society’s infrastructure and organization. Hermione’s impassioned points combined with Riddle knowledge of the background of the current systems appeared to fall on
fertile ground.

Sirius was sent to hospital instead of back to Azkaban. Hadrian wasn’t entirely sure how although he was positive Riddle could have explained.

Hadrian, however, had focused back on his research.

He hadn’t thought that there would be ramifications to Hermione’s demands.

After weeks during Hadrian hadn’t thought much about Sirius--focused as he was on laying a certain hearthstone--Hadrian had received a visit from an incredibly obsequious advocate declaring him the Black family regent as Sirius’s heir apparent. Sirius in prison could hold his position. Sirius in hospital couldn’t.

Hadrian did not want to be Head of the Family Black.

Hadrian demanded they meet with the Gringotts’ representation.

The Gringotts’ representatives examined the situation. They found that homo sapien law dictated that as Head of Family Potter, Hadrian could not actually inherit status as Head of Family Black unless he rescinded his prior claims. And, if he did not, he could not sit in the Black seat in the Wizengamot as no one person could legally hold two seats. Wizengamot law demanded that a person actually be physically present in their seat to use it. Hadrian could, unless he preferred the seat remain vacant, appoint a representative from within the Black Family.

He did, however, have access to all the Black properties until such a time as Sirius left the hospital or died and the position passed to Hadrian’s Black heir.

Gaunt did not want them to go to some other family’s House. They grumped and groused at the possible dangers. Riddle agreed.

Hermione’s eyes shone at the possibility of a library and Millicent wanted to explore another house. Hadrian agreed at the importance and wanted this duty to be done. It was fascinating, yes. He agreed that they should take advantage.

He also wanted the weight of the responsibility gone.

Which had led the group here, working their way through the House Black in order to find the family tapestry while Kreater wailed along behind them.

Kreatcher, to Hadrian’s confusion, seemed to both hate them and be desperate for them to stay. Once he appeared, he bewailed their presence, became angrily embarrassed every time Hadrian knelt to carve rules in the floor boards or Millicent repaired a wall.

Kreature sobbed in the corner when they finally found the Family Room with its resplendent tapestry. They faced the wall when Hadrian carved the usual runes across the bottom of the wall and Millicent repaired the tapestry’s self-repairing charms. Evidently someone had cut them.

Black was an old family home. They wanted, in their way, for their people to be safe and had tried to protect them. There was only so much protecting one could do, however, when a family sinks themselves into worshipping destruction. The House had agonized over their people’s choices. They had taken their people’s blood and strengthened the wards. They had reinforced the House lines and created barriers against the unwanted.

But for all that Black could try and protect their people, they could not cast cleaning charms or fix
broken panels. They could assist and guide, but not act alone. Not for that.

Not when Walpurga declared in front of the tapestry that if this was the remains of her family, then she would see the entire thing crumble with her.

But now there was Hadrian who had rejected being labeled Black but was nonetheless cleaning and repairing nonetheless.

The House Black grabbed that magic and spread it, guided it through the walls and into the nooks of every room Hadrian and his friends cast in.

It meant that Millicent’s attempts to fix the tapestry took with little effort. And, in repairing it, that magic began to fill in certain holes, particularly with Petrus and Ignatius guiding the weft threads back to their places.

Black thrilled to see the names whole again. All of those names that different Head of Family had repudiated were now filling in and fixing themselves.

The Granger-Gaunt Family had little idea of what they’d done.

They did appreciate the tapestry’s lines and patterns.

It was somehow nice, Hadrian thought, to see all those connections and implications of ties. Both his own and Millicent’s names were there, branched away from the main trunk.

Still, in considering the piece, Hadrian frowned at the tapestry. It was clearly held together by magic, its metallic, silken, and woolen threads stayed bright because of those enchantments. He appreciated the craft involved.

But, Hadrian thought, it seemed like an inordinate amount of work for something that could be simply said more clearly on stone. He reached up and traced his parents’ names, noting the complexity of the tiny, magically woven stitches. The thick Potter branch had branches shooting to meet the Black and Hadrian’s twig was hopelessly tangled between his parents’ and the Black.

It was, he thought, a convoluted mess.

Still, he was here to find out who was eligible so that he wouldn’t have to bear the responsibility of being Black. Someone else must want to.

Millicent pointed to the tapestry, to a name that shone golden with life. “Andromeda” connected directly to a husband and a daughter. She connected to Sirius and Narcissa. According to Millicent, she had likely been blasted off for marrying out of the established magical families.

Hadrian thought that she sounded like a possible interim head for the Family. If it worked out, Hadrian could focus on other things.

Andromeda, it turned out, was very interested in the position. Andromeda’s grin was almost feral when they told her she could have the run of the name.

Hadrian was relieved. He might be related to this family, but they weren’t his.

Chapter End Notes
Was I right about the shape of it?
Power in a Copy

Chapter Summary

Andromeda thinks power exists either in the air between people or in people's minds.

Hermione wants to copy all the books.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It is hard to hand over control, to relinquish power.

Hermione and Andromeda found that to be particularly true in relation to things like the Black Library.

The Granger-Gaunt Family may have needed to cede control of the Black family seat in the Wizengamot. Hadrian might have wanted a different Head of the Black Family. But, Hermione felt her voice become distinctly whiny, did they really have to relinquish control of the library?

The family’s advocates in Gringotts pointed out that, legally, they did not. In fact, as regent, Hadrian did not have the right to relinquish his role in the family - just his duties. He could appoint a proxy and alternate family head, but he could not actually step back.

It followed that as long as Hadrian was regent--and he couldn’t not be regent--he had full access to all of the family properties.

In short, Andromeda did not have the legal power to bar Hadrian even if she had wanted to.

Andromeda was a very, very intelligent woman who had grown up with lessons in political manipulation expediency. She, unlike her cousin Sirius, was very good at it. Those lessons and her talent contributed to the many reasons she had never been removed from the family regardless of what Walpurga may have done to the tapestry.

Consequently, no matter how much the Gaunt trio might suggest that it was Andromeda’s choice whether to allow them continued access to the House Black, she viewed the inquiry as a performance of courtesy rather than a real question.

And, glancing at Millicent, Andromeda could tell that Millicent knew it even if Hermione seemed genuine. For Andromeda, the intersection of her own goals and her knowledge of her own, tenuous position as acting Head meant that she was hardly going to deny the request of the close friend of the person who could strip her of that power in a moment.

Millicent had--in fact--told Hermione precisely that before Hermione had approached Andromeda on the matter at all.

Riddle had muttered that they should have thought the issue through before they had invited Andromeda to take up as interim Head and given her access to the Black House.

Riddle was angry that he hadn’t thought of it.
They should have. Any one member of the group should have. But they were distracted by their
own plans and the immediacy of Gaunt’s needs. There were simply other things they were focused
on and they hadn’t considered the Family Library suddenly under their fingers.

Now they were forced to deal with the uncomfortable fall out of having the right to something
without the direct access.

Nonetheless, Hermione had insisted that they give Andromeda the choice.

Hermione claimed it couldn’t hurt to ask and Riddle laughed.

Oh, it could. It could.

There was no way Andromeda was going to alienate a group of children who held control of her
direct access to power.

Asking implied choice where there was none. Yet, it also suggested respect and courtesy. To ask
was better than to take without the note of warning.

Hermione didn’t want to let go of that access and simply walk away. Millicent, her fingers
brushing down Hermione’s arm and curling around the hem of Hermione’s sleeve, had supposed it
better to negotiate terms than make a unilateral demand.

Besides, Millicent was also aware that not to ask could also cause harm.

There was also no way Andromeda was going to limit her access to the children. This was a group
of politically powerful children. Hadrian and Hermione had seats in the Wizengamot already.
Millicent theoretically had one waiting, but Andromeda could see the way that wind was likely to
blow. The Bulstrode Head would, in all probability, select a different, more suitable heir to take the
seat after her own demise. Andromeda suspected that Millicent would fill the Potter seat.

Still for a group of children only a few years from Hogwarts, having a direct control and influence
on four seats in government was a significant portion of power. Andromeda had been a civil servant
for years and had dreamed of having a seat. She wanted to play the game and have more direct
control. She’d been working back room and negotiating deals for years to work toward her aims
and what she saw as social improvement. And, all too often, she’d seen years of work set back
because a piece of legislation would have stepped on some individual member of the
Wizengamot’s toes.

Andromeda was all for containing the Ministry’s power--any state’s power--but not at the whims
of personal interest.

So, no, Andromeda wasn’t going to alienate a group of people with multiple seats. Even if she lost
control of the Black seat, she didn’t want that. They looked like they could become a strong power
block and she wanted them to look favorably in her direction be she part of the Ministry or part of
the Wizengamot.

Besides which, Andromeda liked the three and their gargoyle. She found the children genuinely
likeable if completely bizarre. They seemed to have a sense of social responsibility and almost no
desire to actually act on it. But then she barely knew them. Perhaps they ran deeper than she
suspected.

Spending time with them would only improve her knowledge of them and their aims.

Adding to which, the three were still young enough to be influenced.
If Andromeda were to cede access to the House Black, they might owe Andromeda later.

So when Hermione asked to have continued access to the Black Library, she was gracious and welcoming even if there was a twinge of annoyance at the encroachment.

During the first visit, Andromeda wished she had tried harder to limit their visits and what they could do. She had thought the children wanted to study, perhaps wanted the books on wards.

She found, during that first meeting, that Hermione planned to copy the entire library.

Andromeda had to swallow the upswell in horrified denial that sat acidic on her tongue. It burned her stomach as it went down.

Hermione didn’t notice, vibrating with excitement.

Unlike Andromeda, who was so weighed down with frustrated experience, Hermione was in that magical, temporary moment when it feels like all dreams are possible. She along with the rest of the family were high on their success with Gaunt. They were flush with the knowledge that their dream was theoretically feasible. And, somehow, they had more political capital than they had imagined possible.

But there were two main things missing that they could not simply work their way through alone: land and books.

The later, bizarrely, was the harder of the two.

Books the group could not simply magic into existence. They could have written a few books and duplicated them. But, the value of the library was in its encompassing, collaborative knowledge. The children needed books written by other people.

In considering the issue, the group felt they had clear access to two libraries: Hogwarts and Bulstrode. Millicent’s mother was not likely to stop her children from copying the family library - particularly if other families did too. Hogwarts, in their turn, would support the effort particularly now that Gaunt was communicating with the Castle.

And then there was the Black Library. The children hadn’t thought to address the possibility of copying the library before contacting Andromeda. As Riddle pointed out, they should have.

They really should have.

Yet even if they had, they weren’t ready. They didn’t have the right enchantments and spells set up for such an undertaking. They hadn’t expected to need to consider it yet.

But, here and now they had the right to copy the famed library in its entirety.

No matter how much the idea horrified Andromeda: that such a horde of knowledge could come into someone else’s hands.

But there, Andromeda forced herself to swallow the bile in her mouth.

She thought the House might be influencing her with how much the idea of handing over the books bothered her. She felt herself wanting to protect the Blacks. She felt herself wanting to horde.

Yet. Andromeda firmly believed that knowledge was power and access to as well as possession of that knowledge made the difference between failure and control. As such, this would undoubtedly
affect future Black generation’s access to power. It would limit and curtail. But it would also give power—if the Granger-Gaunt were successful—to a wider range of people.

Having a library like this to access while she had striven in the Ministry’s ranks would have made her work fuller. It would have made the entire society richer.

Because it wasn’t just about having access to power, it was also about using it.

And so many people in the Black family had barely set foot in the library, choosing other forms of power instead.

The point, Andromeda thought, was that power was about the space between people and the relative perception of position. A king could only rule if people followed and a state tried to protect itself.

But then Andromeda well knew the allure of perceived power. She'd watched it consume Bella: the desire to demonstrate that she was strong enough, that no one could defeat her. Children in abusive school environments often measure power based on the expressed forms of those around them. Bella had been pushed around. Bella had decided to show that no one could do it again. She bit back and found that her classmates praised her for it.

Bella had smugly crowed when they suggested Andromeda didn't have Bella's backbone.

Bella fell deep into the allure of curses. She felt powerful when her curse slashed an unnecessarily complex pattern in her practice partner's arm. She preened when one of the Lestrange brothers called her vicious. Voldemort had promised to help her on that path.

Andromeda hadn’t understood why a group of privileged individuals with control of government wanted to rule through chaos and authoritarian control. It didn't seem conducive to the kind of power they claimed to want. Instead, their aim seemed to be an unfettered ability to commit violence whenever they wanted.

That, to Andromeda, seemed like a poor goal. She did not want to live in a society in which she had to constantly fear.

And clever Bella who could read the stars and brew a near perfect potion didn’t care about that. She wanted to show how viciously powerful she was.

Andromeda had found it pathetic. Bella could hurt someone with little thought in creative ways. But, her ego was fragile. And she seemed to have lost a capacity to do much beyond destroy. She couldn’t seem to feel good unless someone else suffered.

So now, more than a decade after her sister had been sent to Azkaban, Andromeda forced herself to give up exclusive access to the Black Library.

So Hermione had the run of the library. She had her access. And she began the process of copying the entire thing.

Shared power, Andromeda supposed and she smiled sharply at Hermione over tea.

Chapter End Notes
If I manage and don't distract myself, next chapter should have a bit more conflict than usual. We'll see.
Despair and lockets

Chapter Summary

Fear can be reasonable unreasonable.

Chapter Notes

Short chapter. I didn't have time to finish polishing the last half - so next post.

The shattered assumption that one understands the world around them well enough and realization that a certain measure of safety is an illusion often hurts. The crushed, delicate belief leaves behind sharp residue that cuts and stings.

The resulting sensation of instability where the world had appeared stable can throw one’s entire sense of understanding and belief system into question.

That happened for the group—to Riddle in particular—as Hermione and Millicent copied the Black Library and Hadrian communed with the ground beneath his feet in the safety of Gaunt’s growing warren of cellars.

It happened when Riddle had felt content and safe with his family warded and charmed.

Hadrian’s many fears had calmed. He still took ample precautions, still expected his family too, but he was no long so paranoid as to let them out of his sight.

Hermione, Millicent, and Riddle didn’t disagree with Hadrian’s fears, but Riddle was the only one of the three who came close to understanding the extent of Hadrian’s expectation of many Beings intention to harm, malicious (the Dursleys and Sirius) or not (Hagrid and the Weasley twins).

Hermione and Millicent, for all their acceptance and agreement that they needed to protect themselves, had simply not lived through the extent of the mental and physical abuses that the other two had. Hermione saw the world as a violent, dangerous place—she still lived with leaking magic from her own misadventures—but not with the intent Hadrian and Riddle believed it to have. Millicent knew it was violent and dangerous, but expected social and political dangers.

Each of the three had their strengths and ended up protecting one another.

But Riddle—perched on the side of a curio cabinet where he had noticed a strange catch in the ambient magic—suddenly did not feel that the protections and their strengths were enough. What they did feel was the malevolent pressure of the magic emanating from that locket. They could see how the locket captured auras to pull and twist.

Riddle could see the locket’s charms reaching for them.

Riddle knew that the locket could not directly harm them. They could read the locket’s magic bindings well enough to tell the limits of its abilities.
Yet, still, Riddle felt helpless in the face of what that locket represented.

Riddle, of course, could not use a wand without possessing Hadrian. They had learned to create magic by reweaving the magic around them, but it was a slower, careful process. It was not given to rapid protection or easy use. Their magic took time and was beautifully nuanced by the end.

Here, now, those limitations felt pressing.

Here, now, was a thing that threatened Riddle’s family that they had not expected.

It made the lurking curiosity about Voldemort and what had happened after the split more present. It made it more dangerous.

Riddle had thought that the third Horcrux would be the last. They had expected that when they had put the diadem in a rock along the ward lines of the Gaunt estate and cut its connections outward that the Voldemort’s last tether would be gone. They had expected that Voldemort’s possible threat was mostly over.

Yet, there, in front of them, was another.

All of Riddle’s suppressed fears of their own past and possible futures felt present and heavy as Riddle perched on that cabinet and looked at the locket with its stylized ‘S.’

Millicent, who responded to his call, came beside him and looked at the thing. “It doesn’t end, does it?” she asked. Riddle felt the echo of their own concerns.

“There are more than just three,” they acknowledged, floating out of their body to speak with the impression of a homo sapien tongue. Millicent plucked up their body and placed it in her pocket reflexively.

“How many do you think he made?” she asked them.

Riddle felt like the world was turning in jerks.

Step one: Riddle hovered near the locket. It sat inert but for the snagging swirl of magic around it.

Step two: Riddle began to shift the surround strands of magic and Millicent obligingly cast a basic protection charm for him to manipulate.

The world kept flicking forward, bit by bit.

Millicent tapped the fifth bead in on her bracelets. It turned rose, flashed teal, and then faded into its usual, flecked blue.

Hermione was on her way.

Riddle’s stasis bubble began taking definite shape.

Millicent looked at the locket and did not reach to touch it. She recognized the interpretation of the blocky crest after living with it for seven years.

Hermione joined them saw where their gazes held and frowned. “Can I hope,” she said, “That that is simply a nasty, cursed object?” her voice didn’t suggest she actually held that hope.

Riddle suggested she could hope what she wanted but that was another of Voldemort’s horcrux. They paused, and added that it wasn’t sentient. It wasn’t as they had been.
Hermione asked the same question Riddle had about numbers. But none of them had an answer. There were several magic numbers. There were arguments that because of the irreal concept of the number to begin with, that all numbers were actually magic and the belief about the number mattered more than the number itself.

Millicent had no idea what number Voldemort might consider particularly magical. Hermione glanced, hesitant, toward Riddle.

The boy who was part of Riddle’s past had not put much thought into it. This Riddle would have—had—expected the number to be three.

That answer was no help as it was clear, standing here, staring at that locket, that Voldemort had made more than three horcruxes: a diary, a ring, a diadem, and now a locket.

“He’s really a potential danger to Hadrian, isn’t he?” Hermione said slowly, stepping further back from the thing and then pressing her body closer to Millicent’s.

Riddle’s shoulders twitched, their manifested shade so easily reflecting their emotions. They found it harder to hide their thoughts in this form. And here, now, they didn’t like the idea of any danger for Hadrian.

Still, Riddle didn’t think Hadrian was in immediate danger. Not with the protections the group had been constructing for so many years. Not sitting behind Gaunt’s wards as he currently was. But “He could be, mostly through collateral damage,” they said. And they considered, “It’s possible,” they pointed out, “That they might find out some of what you are. Or what we are.” The words sat heavy in the air between them.

Millicent nodded. “By most accounts, Voldemort was into torture and abuse by then end. So anything he would do wouldn’t be kind,” she looked down the hall and at the other curio in the cabinet around them. “If he is able to do anything at all.”

There was a chance, when we only knew about three, that that was the end of it. Now that there are four, we know that Voldemort is still around in some capacity. And if he is around, then he is a threat to Hadrian. Possibly not much of one, possibly barely one. But when has our family ever considered a potential threat a negligible concern?”

Still, Riddle did not like the twisted, sense of insecure fear that seemed to have lodged in their center.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

The one in which a whole bunch of connected threads are highlighted.

Chapter Notes

Be warned that this chapter is discussion of some theoretical points for a bit and then heavy plot leaning into those points. These are all points that the group is supposed to be considering - but I'm not sure if I made that clear.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A state, according to some of the very basic definitions, is an entity that claims a monopoly on the right to violence. To control that monopoly, there are rules and structures that dictate who can and cannot inflict violence upon one another under particular circumstances.

Within many states, that guidance is supposed to mean everyone can live safely and without fear of violence perpetrated on them.

The reader knows that many states do not actually limit violence to that degree, no matter the accords, laws, and recommendations formed across the 19th to the 22th century.

It will also not surprise the reader to be reminded that many Beings don't adhere to even local rules when they are in place. The idea that we all give up a little (such as the right to punch someone) to get something (the right not to fear being punched) is difficult for many individuals to grasp. Besides which, many Beings believe that rules are not for them but for others.

People like Bellatrix or Sirius were such individuals. They wanted to be exceptional.

Those beliefs in exceptionalism is part of the reason a state is supposed to take punitive measures against those who break the rules. There is supposed to be discipline - although many states have moved from punishment to repayment, after which the formerly guilty is supposed to have paid their social debt.

Having grown up in such a system, Hermione was shocked and horrified to realize that the Magical state had not moved in that direction, but continued to take the view that someone who broke the rules in a way that did not benefit the ruling families needed to be permanently punished. Azkaban was, after all, not only about incarceration but expected to permanently disable prisoners.

Hadrian was...unsurprised...to learn that.

So (particularly in Magical Britain but also beyond) between unequal implementation of most rules and the compounded failure to adhere, many people do not trust the state to protect them. They take their own protection upon themselves. In doing so, they become vigilantes or terrorists. The line is often a matter of goals and publicity. A terrorist is, after all, simply someone who uses
terror to incite awareness usually with the goal of driving political change.

The reader knows that Hadrian was the former: a vigilante of sorts. He had developed his own ethos in response to these very issues of safety and protection: with a keen sense of justice shaped by the school system and its talk of human rights combined with a preference for security.

Upon entering Hogwarts, Hadrian had already lost any expectation that the Magical state would protect him or--later--his family and went to some extremes to feel safe. Most children do not spend almost the entirety of a school year weaving enchantments into stone to wear.

Hadrian’s measures were, however, largely defensive. He did (semi-unintentionally engaging in the very exceptionalist thinking he deplored) try to even the scales with his own brand of justice. He was acting as a vigilante with an extremely limited purview and careful lines of right and wrong. That was why Hermione was willing to look the other way.

Still, most of Hadrian’s acts in spaces where the state refused--or couldn’t--focused on protection.

Voldemort, in contrast, had chosen terror. He had chosen to brutally destroy and torment anyone and anything that stood in his way. Toward the end, that behavior had not been solely directed at enemies.

Hadrian could have--particularly with Millicent, Hermione, and the gargoyle at his side--done the same and likely to greater effect. Had it occurred to him to want to, Hadrian could have torn magical Britain to pieces. Those gargoyle were, with their abilities to see and manipulate magic directly, something of an override to mundane concerns with more complex spells. Where most homo sapiens would have had to research and cast at a guess (resulting in a large number of explosions before desired results were achieved), this group could determine in advance whether their spells would do what they wanted. With Petrus and company able to let the group know the various magical paths they were building and where any hitches might be, the company was able to cut down significantly into the time for experimentation.

Hermione was, on rare occasions, slightly disappointed thereby. A part of her enjoyed explosions--they connected pleasantly with the magic inside of her.

Those same skills meant that the group could have entered almost any warded homo sapien space. The gargoyle could see magic and could see a ward. Their growing skills meant that they could also cut them and--if they wanted--also eat them.

Combined with their understanding of stone, the group could have even--as the Gringotts Clan worried even when Hadrian was a small child--broken into Gringotts.

In short, even seeing a corner of their potential for political power, Andromeda was right in her guesses that the three held a ridiculous potential for sheer destruction. She just didn’t realize (and never would) how right she was.

Here is where early experience and interests become so central to a person’s choices: Hadrian and his friends had early developed a sense of values that did not lend itself to perpetuating mass abuse. Just because one could, does not mean one should.

Robinhood did not seek to be king and a rock stands strong but does not conquer.

Hadrian’s beliefs mixed with his particular skills and proclivities until he became a Being who wore protective bangles and beads even while living behind a double fortress of stone instead of a person who wanted to burn the state in order to avenge perceived abuses.
Yet, Hadrian might not plan to tear down the state, but he didn’t trust it either.

Here, the reader knows this.

Tucked behind those mental and physical walls, Hadrian felt mostly safe and content.

But the world does intrude. Most Beings can’t actually isolate themselves even if they try. To exist, most must engage.

There are, of course, speculations that phoenix do exist outside those requirements, but any clarity of proof is lacking.

Besides which, Hadrian and his Clan were not phoenix. They may have worked together to develop a Clan stone within Gaunt’s walls that included a decorative image of one - but having a representative carving of a phoenix is a far cry from being one.

So Hadrian could not actually fully isolate himself even if he had wanted to. He had to engage because he had to eat and possessed desires that did not include becoming a mushroom no matter how much he liked dirt.

Besides which, Hadrian did not actually want to fully disengage. He might constantly be disappointed, but complete isolation was not his goal.

Again, the reader knows all this.

The reader has also likely understood that the headmaster’s years of warnings about the coming rise of Voldemort were not something that Hadrian had ever fully grasped as a serious threat. They were too vague, too shrouded in secrets, too mired in an old man’s secrets that were then used as excuses to--in Hadrian’s opinion--further warp society while reifying long-standing prejudice and inequality.

So Hadrian had … not quite dismissed … but neglected to appreciate that just because the headmaster was paranoid, didn’t mean he wasn’t also partly right. A broken clock can be right twice a day and the headmaster was far from broken.

Nonetheless, for all those years of warning, thoughts of the headmaster were only fleeting when Millicent, Hermione, and Riddle dropped unwrapped a particular locket on the carved, ritual stone table worked through with sundry protections ready to be activated with a twitch of gargoyle’s claw.

Instead, the entire Clan debated what they could and should do about the Voldemort-issue. This situation had a problematic level of potential danger directed toward Hadrian and--by association--the rest of them too. They needed to consider the situation.

To make matters worse, if they didn’t know how many Horcrux there could be, then there was little they could do to conclusively end the problem.

Gaunt’s answer was that none of them should leave the wards ever again. They would grow a nice vegetable garden and perhaps raise some rabbits.

They had just carved a Clan stone and begun the process for recognition as Clan status with the Goblin groups. Gaunt was not going to lose any of their members and time soon. Riddle had promised that it was unlikely Gaunt would lose a member for centuries, if then.

Millicent patted Gaunt’s walls in comfort while Hermione vehemently vetoed that solution. She
liked her parents and they could not come here. There was too much magic saturating the walls. She had, herself, become too potent to spend long with them in closed spaces.

She would not be cut off unless absolutely necessary.

The rabbit idea was maybe a good one, but wouldn’t work here. Hermione didn’t eat meat. She might be able to kill, but she didn’t want to.

Besides which, Millicent pointed out, there was no evidence that Voldemort was ever going to do anything - just that he could. It was a hypothetical danger with a very real possibility for horrific violence. They needed to do something about it, but that didn’t mean they needed to lock down. They could not destroy their own lives on a possibility.

Hermione, for the briefest of moments, put the idea of going to the Ministry on the table. It would be more effective and efficient if they could go to the Aurors and pass the problem over to professionals. They had more eyes and experience with these kinds of things.

Wouldn’t, she suggested, the Aurors take them seriously if they handed over the Horcrux and explained the situation.

Millicent frowned, considering, but then pointed out that the Aurors had never done much of anything regarding Voldemort and their group. Besides which, it was clear that many of the recognized families had supported Voldemort. They could, theoretically, use this piece to call them back. And, even if they didn’t, the potential fallout from announcing Voldemort wasn’t gone wouldn’t likely encourage copycat behavior from people who still supported his espoused ideologies.

None of them trusted the state to reign that behavior in.

Besides which, no single member of the group believed they could count on the state to take adequate steps or protect them even if they would have been so inclined.

Riddle speculated Hermione that the state might avenge Hadrian or Millicent after it failed to protect them … but Hermione would likely be overlooked and Riddle didn't count as a Being in the Homo sapien world.

So some avenged and none protected.

They all agreed: even here, they had to protect themselves.

For Millicent, Hermione, and Hadrian, that meant contingency plans: what to do if.

Riddle wanted them to be more proactive. They wanted the group to track Voldemort down.

“And do what?” Millicent had asked seriously. Options were important. “Even if we could find him, what would we possibly do with Voldemort if we did?” Could they, she asked, turn Voldemort over to a state, which was home to people who had supported Voldemort and some who had espoused his ideologies? The state had not taken adequate measures to decrease those sentiments.

And, Hermione had added, “It’s not like we kill.” For her, that was a necessary point. There were days her own power terrified her. Her own enjoyment of dueling, of explosions, of controlled violence had encouraged her to be very, very away of what she could do if she were not careful.
Hadrian agreed. But where Millicent, Hermione, and Riddle debated as Gaunt fretted, he sat back with the rest of Gargoyle and mostly listened.

And, Hadrian watched Riddle, usually out of the corner of his eye.

Hadrian had become more aware of Riddle over the past year. He had become a point of fascination for Hadrian. They were brilliant and passionate, which his other friends were as well. But Riddle had a tendency to be more aggressive in their interests than the rest. Their desire to engage in the world instead of hide away was intriguing. Every now and again, Hadrian found himself thinking that Riddle was attractive. It was a thought he didn’t feel ready to consider and tucked it back and away for a later day. A maybe-someday contemplation when there was less going on. If that ever happened.

But here and now, Hadrian still observed.

Hadrian watched Riddle’s reactions to the group’s decision to take the issue seriously but also slowly, to take indirect action. Voldemort was, after all, not their primary project. Voldemort’s existence might loom insidiously, but as a potential threat that could be explored but not hurried. It wasn’t as pressing as Luna’s circumspect pushing or Andromeda’s blunt demands. Besides which, they were not going to allow themselves to become the headmaster and focus on this problem to the exclusion of others.

It wasn’t as if they currently had a way to track Voldemort or find any other Horcrux anyhow.

But Hadrian knew—could see—how it bothered Riddle. The layered potential and uncertainty overwhelmed and strained. This threat triggered something Riddle feared and didn’t let go.

Hadrian flashed to one of those childhood books that had shaped them and thought that, for Riddle, this fear was like the terrors of the grey ones who could steal your time and then potentially snatch you.*

Regardless, even if time-traveling turtles actually existed, they were unlikely to help here. Voldemort was not actually a grey one.

Still, the watching meant that Hadrian was not as surprised or horrified as Millicent and Hermione the day, more than a year later, when Riddle placed a smooth, rounded, quartz crystal on their table, something smoking on the inside, swirling in what seemed like agitation.

For the first and one of the only times in Hadrian’s life, he heard Millicent raise her voice in anger and watched as her magical aura visibly consolidated around her like a red storm cloud. All of their magic had turned red.

“Riddle,” she seethed, her voice sharp, “what have you done?” She castigated them, arguing that this violated the Clan’s core values.

Because, inside that quartz ball, was the very conscious wraith of Voldemort.

Riddle had not been content to sit and wait with protective measures like the rest of the group. They had consciously refused to follow the headmaster’s model.

Instead, Riddle had taken the locket from the stone the group had enclosed it in. They had taken Voldemort’s anchors in the locket and transferred them to their own body. They’d followed that tie to St. Mungo’s.

Until those moments, Hadrian might have had the ability to tear their world apart, but he had not
deeply considered it. He had also failed to fully understand a few essential points about the *homo sapien* magical world and a gargoyle’s place within it.

Hadrian knew that *homo sapiens* by and large did not consider gargoyle Beings. He knew that. He was also aware that most *homo sapiens* did not ward specifically against gargoyle. Even if many *homo sapiens* had considered it, gargoyle frequently had protective, defensive purposes that meant they did not leave their land or people. For most, there would not be much of a reason to work in calculations about gargoyle into the myriad other complex concerns needed to create solid wards.

There were many, many reasons older wards tended to be stronger if they survived.

And general wards do not particularly work well against Beings of stone. There was nothing about them to set off any alarms: no heartbeat, no breath.

Riddle had used that to their advantage. They had crawled straight into St. Mungo’s and along the walls with their usual notice-me-not charms activated. Neither Being nor spell had registered their presence.

Riddle had followed the tether to its end, where they found a man with two faces shut in a sunny room. One of those faces had looked sweetly befuddled. That face had asked, blearily, to seemingly no-one at all, if there was tea. Riddle did not recognize them. Riddle had never met Quirrell.

The other face Riddle did recognize, if only by impression. That face hissed under their turban and Riddle shuddered underneath their protective web of spells. That face’s ongoing, muttered calls for death were as vivid as they were unpleasant.

Riddle had doubted, as they would tell the rest, under Millicent’s furious gaze, this particular patient would be as loosely secured if the hospital staff had understood the muttered demands for harm. As it was, the constant hissing and rage one part of the patient exuded was the reason for their relative isolation. Or so claimed the patient’s record.

Millicent would take decades to fully move past what Riddle did next.

“Next” being reductive. What Riddle did took more than a year to carry out.

Across the year, the Being that was slightly less than half of Quirrell knew that there were times that they were poked and then, strangely, times they were crawled on. They felt that the crawling was new but as usual they couldn’t quite seem to think it through. They didn’t try. They had, over the years, slowly learned that it didn’t work.

Still, there are some things one is aware of without thinking about. The part of Quirrell that was still Quirrell definitely knew that the raging anger that hissed at them was getting darker … but also looser. They couldn’t track the changes or comprehend what was going on but somehow the constant flush of rage that had underpinned his existence for so long was diminishing.

It did not occur to Quirrell that they could--even should--have told their caretakers about it. For Quirrell, caretakers were simply tea bearers.

Still, even unable to comprehend what was happening, they found themself smiling once in a while. Quirrell didn’t know that they were, but the expression sat on their face, startling those tea-bearing caregivers the first time it happened.

Based on the case records, Riddle knew that the caregivers were both concerned to see the second face dwindling. They had thought Quirrell’s conditions might be an expression of Jeckell/Hyde
syndrome, brought on in cases were by people foolishly attempting to force certain traits likely bravery to the fore.

But Jeckell/Hyde syndrome does not suddenly vanish after more than a decade. The sudden onset with no discernible changes to the patient’s other half was startling.

It made them question their diagnosis, particularly when the second face and the associated anger completely vanished.

They tried to find contributing factors.

They failed. Over the course of that baffling year, it did not occur to the hospital staff to look for a ritual circle woven entirely from ambient magic under the bed. Even if they’d thought to look, they’d have needed some very specific spells to see it. Homo sapiens, as readers know, do not have a natural knack for seeing magic.

The hospital staff would never know what Riddle did; how they had carefully unstitched the unnatural addition to Quirrell’s Being while weaving a net around the body to ensnare Voldemort’s wraith and forcibly funnel it into an amethyst marble.

They would never know that Riddle had placed that amethyst into a tiny, bottomless bag around their neck, eaten their net, and left with Voldemort in their pocket.

Riddle hadn’t killed Voldemort, no, but their actions would lead to the worst fight the Clan ever weathered.

With that amethyst in front of her, for once Millicent would be the one leaking emotions while Hermione stared in frozen horror. She’d thrown up when she’d first seen it and realized what it was.

Hadrian, Hadrian hadn’t moved yet. He stared at the roiling, curling thing, feeling the echoing emptiness of shock.

Millicent voice shook, “We do not,” she said, “choose to take revenge. We do not enact vengeance. In particular, we do not torture others.”

“He did it to me,” Riddle had hissed, letting the anger well and boil. “He put me in a book and other pieces of himself in other objects. He seems to think it’s fine to shove pieces of himself into inanimate objects. What possible objection could he have to someone doing it to him?”

It was one of the few times when Hadrian would hear Riddle be entirely illogical.

“An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind,” Millicent had gritted back. “We do not do this not because we don’t have the skill but because of what it makes us. We do not do this.

“We do not do this,” she snarled, “because we do not have the right to manipulate others against their will. We do not have the right to take justice into our own hands. We are not him,” she pointed at the stone.

“We do this,” she said, “and we start moving toward taking over society. We should not be in charge.”

In a terrible voice that thundered on, Millicent laying out parts of what they all knew and had long-since they’d laid Gaunt’s wards really--been avoiding discussing. They hadn’t been ready. It had, Hadrian noted in that numb void inside him, clearly been weighing on Millicent’s mind.
But now, here, Millicent pointed out that if things continued as they were, the group would effectively be immortal. They were eventually going to lose their connections to and understanding of mortality. According to Millicent that meant they could, theoretically, advise, but they should never lead. It meant that they had to be particularly careful whenever they interacted with the world outside of Gaunt—and they needed to start now before they lost any sense of proportion.

“Riddle, we cannot be this,” Millicent said, she said gesturing to the table and the sleeping stone. Now, at the end of her flood of words, she sounded tired, exhausted, disappointed.

Riddle bristled. They despised that sound and hated the knowledge that Hermione was feeling so distraught she couldn’t cry and the magic she usually leaked was building around her like a bomb. They hated that Hadrian was so conflicted that his body wasn’t engaging in the usual, constant filtering of input from the stones around him. Hadrian looked isolated and inert.

Riddle tried defending himself, their own shaky arguments crumbling in the face of uniform opposition. “Voldemort had who knows how many Horcruxes” they pointed out, “We don’t know what they all were. His vessel was a human who was deteriorating. He would have gotten out. Someone had to do something”

“But that wasn’t,” Millicent replied, “for you to decide. It wasn’t for you to determine the course of justice. It wasn’t even for us as a group. Besides which, he wouldn’t have deteriorated tomorrow either. We would have had time to find an alternative.”

“Voldemort,” Hadrian finally added slowly, “killed my parents. He killed hundreds of people and incited people to violence.” He paused, “he had to be contained.” Riddle opened their mouth to speak but Hadrian kept going, “But not by us, not like this. We should not be responsible for his life or his death.”

“Who, then,” Riddle snapped.

That, that question was harder to answer. Theoretically, that is part of the point of a state’s monopoly on violence: to protect people from the need to be violent, the need to meet out individual justice. But here the state had failed and not one of the Beings part of the Granger-Gaunt Clan felt like they could take Voldemort to the Ministry.

They took them to the Goblins instead.

Chapter End Notes

*Reference to Momo (Ende). I haven’t read it in years, but the grey men who steal time-flowers sort of stick in the memory once they’re there. And, I liked the turtle.

Alright. I think I brought in most of what I meant to. I hope you all caught the threads I think I wove into the early chapters. Not all of them, some of them still need to be flushed out.

I'm curious what you all think of the balance of discussion and plot.
There are lines between knowing, accepting, and understanding. Those lines are far from clear. They are, in fact, frequently seemingly invisible.

It’s not uncommon, after all, for a Being to fail to understand the full ramifications of something they know. Hogwarts, for example, knew what they were doing when they suggested the children learn about architecture and encouraged them to nurture the development of multiple Beings—including Marble—beyond Hadrian’s initial gargoyle trio. But knowing what they were doing, even accepting the likely outcomes, didn’t mean they fully understood the ramifications for the homo sapiens involved.

Which begs the question, did Hogwarts know what they were doing after all? Or, does any Being?

The other parties directly involved in Hogwarts schemes definitely didn’t initially. They only began to understand what Hogwarts had done years--decades really--later.

Millicent and Riddle began developing a better understanding of Hogwarts’ manipulations before their colleagues. That mutual knowledge was part of the reason Millicent was so very angry with Riddle’s step toward extra-judicial justice.

Not that the rest of the group hadn’t known anything about Hogwarts’ actions. During that explosive fight, Millicent’s declarations about their longevity and the implications for their ongoing behavior were not in any way an actual surprise. But Hadrian had for years chosen not to think about the stakes involved in favor of other interests. Hermione, for her part, had absolutely not accepted what she knew and chosen to look away. Both had chosen to be willfully ignorant, if for different reasons.

Or, they had partly known, understood, and accepted, but not entirely and then mostly by not addressing. Most readers, for example, probably have a basic understanding of history but have likely chosen to willfully ignore that past with specific exceptions like this one. There are simply too many things going on. There are too many shiny ideas to catch the attention. One cannot do and read everything.

Besides--for Hadrian and Hermione--relative immortality was something they could discuss later. They had the time.

Because, for all of their not understanding, the group had partly known since they laid Gaunt’s wards.

They’d known because, as they’d walked the land and laid their stones, they’d also fed the land and nascent wards their blood.

For months, the trio had carved runes into stone, cut lines on their palm, and bled. One would carve, one would cut, and one would heal while the gargoyle directed the flow and patterns of magic. It was an effective pattern for work and bound them to tightly as a unit.

But, weeks in, Hermione had told Millicent not to heal her. Hermione then cut her hand, bled, and just looked at her palm.
Millicent waited, her wand held securely in her fingers, ready to cast that healing spell. It felt like it was supposed to trip off her tongue. But, then, looking at Hermione’s hand, the words dissolved.

Hadrian quirked his eye and Hermione dispelled the remaining flecks of blood and raised her hand. It was clean.

Riddle very visibly didn’t say a word, their body going stock still with the effort. Hadrian was momentarily distracted by a surge of fondness.

"I didn’t cast epksy" Millicent stated, snapping Hadrian back to the situation. Hadrian looked at them for a moment, thoughts darted through possible meanings.

Millicent took the ritual knife, said their words, cut her hand, and bled on the stone. She held her palm up.

It was clean. There was no mark, no wound. No evidence of being cut.

Millicent cast a quick spell to sterilize the knife and handed it to Hadrian. He too said the words and made the ritual cut. Blood dripped on the stones. He vanished the rest from his hand immediately. The group watched as the already-closing cut finished healing.

Hadrian breathed in and out again.

"How long, do you think?" He asked, flexing his fingers and thinking about the play of the muscles, the layers of skin. Hadrian couldn’t remember the last time he’d been hurt and not cast a healing spell almost immediately.

It was more Hermione’s field than his, but he knew some. He thought it was unusual not even to feel a pull from newly knit skin.

"We've always cast the spells to heal before," Millicent noted, considering.

"Why'd you notice now?" Hadrian looked at Millicent who looked at Hermione. Hermione's smile was wry.

"I stubbed my toe on my way over," Hadrian glanced down at her feet. They were her usual feet, brown and unblemished against the grass. Although, Hadrian frankly did not usually pay much attention to Hermione’s feet. Still, there were no scabs, no bruising. "I felt the tear of skin and I felt the flair of pain. But then there was nothing. So I wondered," she shrugged. "We were going to bleed today anyhow. I just wanted to know."

The group looked down at the ritual stones, the gargoyles had done their parts well. The blood dripped onto them had already been guided into place and was starting to set.

"Any ideas of how this will affect our wards?" Hadrian asked, peering at the clean stone, the runes filled with crystalized blood reminded him of a curious, red amber.

"There isn't any evidence that it will," Millicent paused. She retracted that, suggesting that there was evidence—that red amber Hadrian was already staring at—that the wards were taking faster than they likely should. She had thought it was the gargoyle. But, maybe.

Millicent bent down and peered at the ward stone. "I'd been thinking that the combination of the seven of us was just powerful," she noted. Maybe, she suggested, there was more to all of this. They could look into this.
To her surprise, the other two had dissented.

Hadrian had shrugged and pointed out that they already had a lot on their plates. He didn’t want another delay with more voice lessons from the Gringotts’ Clan. He was happy that they could incorporate stone songs into their wards, but now he wanted to finish this building. It had already taken years longer than he’d initially expected.

Hermione, for her part, had looked pensive, which in turn had unnerved Millicent.

Millicent had let it drop.

So they knew. They even sort of understood, but they didn’t really accept.

Except for Riddle. Riddle recognized the bare-bones of what was happening and gleefully accepted it. After all, it made their own immortality much more palatable. They weren’t going to lose these friends.

Still, for not accepting, the knowledge affected their choices. Knowing, for example, that their group was going to be around for a long while was part of what prompted the family to carve a Clan Stone and register as such.

To a one, the group felt that ongoing contracts with the goblin clans were going to be safer than many of those with homo sapien groups.

To a one, the idea of a family tapestry seemed too fragile.

Besides, there was the whisper of a thought that their family might never change in size.

But, on a more consciously active level, Hermione very, very much was not ready for an answer to most of those possibilities. Part of her unusual resistance to knowledge was because she’d paid attention to homo sapien biology along with their studies of forms and figures. She knew better than the others just how far they were deviating from the realm of “normal.”

Added to that, were the issue of her parents: those wonderful, beloved family members who hadn’t been able to touch her since the summer after first year without some level of pain.

At first it had been small. When she’d first cracked after the troll, her sparks would nip like fire in a great.

But then, as her Hogwarts career went on and then she graduated, it got to the point that even hugging her caused a mild sunburn.

Hermione’d had to completely cleanse the room that’d once been hers in their home because entering it gave them migraines and accompanying spots in their vision.

After she was done, she’d avoided stepping foot in their home again.

They couldn’t visit her home either. And, after Gaunt woke up, her parents couldn’t meet them. The wards pressed angrily against their skin the one time they’d even come close.

Hermione hadn’t been surprised.

It was why they met in town. It was why they saw each other only once a week.

So, Hermione knew. But for time she also refused to accept the situation, even as she adjusted her life around it.
Hermione chose instead to tell herself that the spells she’d started to cast around herself to create a clean void around her body when her parents were near was just because she was magic.

Still, she wanted to think that her parents were magic too. Because wasn’t love a form of magic? And they were so full of love. They were like the embodiment of affection and good cheer. She loved them. So, there must be magic.

To an extent, Hermione’s willful ignorance didn’t matter, not really. It didn’t change what was going on even if it did influence her behavior. Her parents were, after all, full of love and therefore magic. But it wasn’t the same kind of magic in Hermione’s body. The different magics weren’t even compatible.

No matter how much Hermione wished, her touch still singed her parents.

Hermione was going to address the issue tomorrow.

Readers may sympathize with Hermione’s desperate desire to avoid accepting that her parents were mortal and would die well before she would.

Still, in the dark, safely in her bed, Hermione whispered quietly into Millicent’s neck "Something is happening to us." Millicent had held her closer.

People understand the world around them differently in the dark than they do in the daylight.

Millicent understood that this was a darkness understanding, not a daylight. She took them as such: a confession and a command. She’d begun to study forms of longevity, known methods for automatic healing and slowed aging. That took her through unicorn’s blood and philosopher’s stones.

But she didn’t say anything to Hermione. And when Riddle had eyed her reading choices, she stated blandly that alchemy was beginning to interest her.

Hermione just smiled gratefully.

Clan shares burdens after all. They carry one another’s weight.

So it was that--for a time--Millicent and Riddle alone thought about and discussed the fact that the three homo sapiens were healing. For a time, they were the only ones who addressed the possibility that the whole group might be immortal.

Hermione and Hadrian were content to wait to talk about that tomorrow.

But, the thing is, tomorrow does come. It’s just relabeled when it does.

In this instance, that inevitability hit hard.

Most of us fall back on patterns when we are stressed, knowledge we have thought about so many times that there are ruts in our minds.

Millicent had studied the issue and considered it to the point that there were ruts in her mind. She had thought about the political environment that they were becoming increasingly embroiled in. She had considered the long game Luna was playing and the more immediate agenda Andromeda was pushing. She contemplated the Bulstrode seat her mother held alongside the Gaunt and Potter seats Hermione and Hadrian filled.
And she asked herself what it would mean for two or three people to hold that kind of power--or more--for centuries. She did not like what she envisioned.

To hold that kind of power would mean giving up on their current future goals. If, after all, they wanted society to change, to be more equitable, then they could not have that much direct control. Their hands should not drive the fates of so many others. They were too different already and would likely drift further. They would not be peers.

Millicent didn’t think the group would want that kind of power over other people anyhow. They had enough power in themselves.

Still, she had reframed her value system in terms of what she saw as their likely future.

Riddle and Gaunt were the only one she directly discussed the issue with.

With the rest, she raised her considerations in oblique ways. “What would it mean if …”

She’d thought Riddle agreed with her. She thought that there was a, perhaps not clear, but a line one didn’t step on without careful contemplation.

Or perhaps she’d never had such a present fear that she was willing to go against her own principles to remove it.

Riddle’s violation of what Millicent had thought were shared principals left Millicent reeling and flowing back into those ruts she’d been developing. She snapped out parts of the discussions she’d already begun having with Riddle and Gaunt.

And with that, tomorrow became today.

A week later had Millicent laying out the research she’d conducted for Hadrian and Hermione. She’d pull out visual representations of their magic and Marble’s.

Marble perked at their name, wandered over from their patch of sunlight only to be distracted by the ball of magic Hermione reflexively tossed their way. The group paused to watch Marble tumble over themselves.

Millicent shook her head and returned to her diagrams and charts. She didn’t have casts of their magic imprints before all of this. But, given their different heritage--much less Marble--they were not supposed to overlap as much as they did.

It could not be a coincidence.

Millicent’s current theory related to the fact that Marble had been a unique red stone.

They had--at Hogwarts’ suggestion--fed Marble their blood to raise them. They’d continued feeding Marble after they’d awaken.

And then, after Marble awoke, the feeding was more reciprocative. Mable's fangs dug into their skin and left bits of pieces behind.

"So what is Marble?" Hermione asked. "What is in us?"

Not so much a question of what was in them, Millicent responded, but what they’d become. Hadrian wasn’t wrong about the blood - but Millicent suspected their entire bodies had been recoded.
"What stone," Hermione asked, head in her hands, "red stone," Hadrian interjected, "has healing properties?" Hermione finished. She tried to cap her emotions, stop thinking that this meant there was no way she would ever be safe for her parents again. Millicent wrapping her arms around her.

It was Riddle who answered, Riddle who had read with Millicent over her shoulder and now hovered wraithlike near Hadrian's, "The philosopher's stone. It is probable that you all went and turned the philosopher's stone into a sapient Being."

Hermione’s voice was muffled through her hands, “Did Hogwarts know, you think? Did Hogwarts mean to change what we were?”

"Hogwarts doesn't want to be alone," Riddle replied. Hermione looked over at them through her fingers. "They want us to build. We are building. But you all are in your mid-twenties and we’re working our way through how to do this and how to do it well with minimal outside assistance. It'll take time to really get this together."

Gaunt made a noise of protest. They thought they were rather amazing. They just needed time to develop a nice horde of beautiful rooms. One shouldn’t rush these things. Rushing led to the catastrophe in the breakfast nook. Petrus shook their head in sad agreement.

Yes, yes, Riddle agreed. It would indeed take years. That was the point. It would also be years before they finished building a clear, safe way for Gaunt and Hogwarts to communicate as well. Most Buildings developed those paths over the long process of waking.

Hadrian murmured that this wasn’t the time, but he’d an idea for that. It involved stone birds and the kind of crystals Gringotts used for communication. They could have Flitwick by to discuss the possibility?

Millicent huffed a sigh. She pointed out that Hogwarts decidedly wanted them to be architects. It’s what Hogwarts trained them for. But she wondered if Hogwarts had also more from them. If Hogwarts wanted them to build, but also wanted children who wouldn’t die.

Riddle returned to their stone form and learned into Hadrian.

"But what," Hermione asked, "does this mean for us?"

Hadrian sat on the ground and pet the border stone absently, Marble bounded over and lay across his knee. He tickled their chin.


"We're aging," Hadrian pointed out, looking at Hermione's face. She still looked the same as she had at 18. But she was only 25 and they were magical.

Hermione's lips pressed together as she thought "We're developing. But I don't think it's clear yet if we're aging. I think we'd have to study the regenerative cues of our cells." Indicating the scrolls spread across the table, she had an inkling that they’d stop aging eventually and just start … renewing … instead.

They would learn in the following years that they were indeed effectively immortal. Hermione’s guesses about their aging would prove true.

Eventually, Hogwarts would confirm that Marble had been a philosopher’s stone. And--precisely as Hogwarts had intended--feeding Marble their blood had keyed Marble to them.
Then, in feeding on their blood directly, Marble’s small fangs had injected them with bits of themselves. And, because Marble’s Being was partly constructed from their own, the children’s bodies had recognized and accepted Marble’s bits as part of themselves.

What happened next was something Hermione tried to explain using the example of a viral infection. The bits of Marble entering their blood stream had infected the original cells, rewritten them, and then replicated. After decades of duplication, their bodies were now just about entirely rewritten. At that point, even without Marble, their own cells would continue to reproduce the changed status.

Effectively, the Three now were homo sapien versions of the philosopher’s stone.

But, their blood and their concentrated magic, was now poison to most other people. As Hermione would eventually explain using another analogy, it was a bit like different blood types. If one had O-type blood, one could function as a universal donor. If one had AB, then they could only donate to other people with AB without potential lethal consequences. For them, it was as if they were an even more particular blood type, with only three homo sapiens and one gargoyle in possession. Their blood was potentially lethal to anyone who was not them.

Still, even as they began to accept all of that, it would take a long time for the group to understand it.

Chapter End Notes

Two days ago a beeping started blaring every 1.5 seconds from the lobby of the apartment building I live in. The beeping very clearly emanated from a maintenance box of some sort. It very helpfully has a nice, flashing red life with "Error" as a clear label.
I've had music and other sounds playing non-stop to try and cover it and a bar of tense muscles across my shoulders.

I hope this chapter makes sense, because my concentration has been shot.

End Notes

This story will likely poke at the idea of individuality and the right to self in contrast to the right to protection.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!